Translating the Verbal to the Visual

Susanna Kelly Engbers
Kendall College of Art and Design of Ferris State University

"But I'm a visual learner!" Most composition instructors hear this claim more and more frequently these days from our students. What the claim exactly entails is nebulous. Clearly, however, we're all increasingly surrounded by texts that are, if not exclusively, then predominantly, visual—advertisements, photographs, television, film, magazine covers, and the like. And the "texts" associated with social media often privilege the visual over the verbal— e.g., an evocative photograph with either minimal or no verbal language accompanying it.

More and more, then, many composition instructors find ourselves incorporating visual texts into our curricula. To ignore visual texts in the composition classroom, increasingly, seems like an oversight. This is certainly the case for me; I teach at a college of art and design. (According to the National Association of Schools of Art and Design, nearly 300 schools are accredited as such.) One way in which I've approached this task is by developing an assignment that helps students to consider the relationship between verbal and visual argument.

The Assignment

This assignment usually comes at or near the end of the semester, after we've devoted a good amount of class time to analyzing and writing about various visual arguments, such as advertisements, photographs, and film documentaries, so the students have had opportunities to

consider the ways in which visual arguments work and the way concepts such as ethical, emotional, and logical appeals can function in them. For example, we might discuss the ways in which the usual of a hand-held camera can augment a filmmaker's ethical appeal or the ways in which music functions to sway viewers' emotions in rhetorically advantageous ways.

In brief, the assignment is to write a traditional, research-based persuasive essay on a given issue. Students are instructed to consider all the usual features of a successful argument—their own character as manifest in the essay (i.e., their ethos), likely counterarguments, and so on. The essay goes through a process of drafting and review with their peers and me. Then I ask them to make their argument visual, relying primarily on images and secondarily (if necessary) on words. They may choose from a variety of visual media, depending on their background and training. For example, they may make a PowerPoint presentation, a poster, a digital animation, a webpage, or something else of their choosing. The only requirement is that the argument be self-standing, requiring no oral interpretation or other intervention from the author. Most frequently, I ask them to direct the visual to their peers and devote a class period (or two) to the viewing and discussion of the final draft visuals. A key part of the assignment is the verbal statement that students have to submit to me; in this verbal statement they describe their visual product, analyze its rhetorical strategies, and discuss any limitations imposed—or opportunities presented—by the visual format. They submit this statement to me rather than displaying it alongside their visuals so that their peers' evaluation of the visuals' effectiveness is unaffected by the verbal elaboration.

Considering the Visual Translation

The assignment for the visual argument asks students to consider all possible visual elements of the argument, including the relative size of images included in the visual, the size the visual itself, the selection of images and words, font selection, and the arrangement of elements to structure the viewer's experience with the visual text. In addition, I encourage them to consider the ways in which a visual argument can be more "present" to viewers. In this discussion, I frequently draw from Chaim Perelman's and L Olbrechts-Tyteca's *The New Rhetoric* and their concept of presence. According to Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca, "the thing on which the eye dwells, that which is best or most often seen, is, by that very circumstance, overestimated. The thing that is present to the consciousness assumes thus an importance that the theory and practice or argumentation must take into consideration" (116-17). Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca are speaking here of the power of verbal description, but it, of course, has ramifications for visual argument, which frequently seems more "present" than the verbal argument. We also discuss the ways in which visuals can add to the "truth value" of arguments. For example, in viewing a film on global warming, we might look at the way the footage of a melting ice shelf can add truth value to the accompanying verbal claim about the rate of melting. In short, the claim seems "more true" when it's accompanied by a fitting visual image.

Further, I ask students to consider how their visual argument can conciliate with the opposition. Often, students discover that conciliation is one of the ways in which a visual argument is inevitably more limiting than its verbal counterpart. This discovery is often powerful, given most students' tendency to defend the supremacy of visual over verbal

communication. This can lead to interestingly philosophical and ethical conversations about the role of the visual in communication generally.

Reflecting on the Translation

More important than the actual visual argument, though, are students' verbal statements that they submit to me. In this statement they must provide a brief description of the visual, analyze the rhetorical strategies they employed in it, discuss any differences between the visual and verbal arguments (i.e., any opportunities presented, or limitations imposed, by the visual format), and reflect on the ways in which they could go back and improve their written arguments using what they've learned from crafting the visual argument. My students, being artists and designers, are used to writing artist (or "designer") statements that hang on the walls next to their creations, and I compare this statement to that (still pointing out, however, that the visual argument should stand on its own). It's this verbal statement alone that I grade. Of course, they have to submit a visual project that's carefully and thoughtfully done, but because my class is not one that grades students on their abilities to design a successful poster or PowerPoint presentation, I don't place the emphasis here. Plus, at an art and design college, the situation is greatly complicated by the fact that some students, such as graphic design majors, have a great deal more training in creating posters than, say, the art history or sculpture majors do, and I need to level the playing field a bit and put the emphasis on verbal description and analysis, which is one of my course's stated learning outcomes.

Peer Review as Integral Part of the Process

Peer review is quite useful in the drafting process. A peer reviewer who looks at a draft version of the visual argument can provide feedback on whether the visual argument really stands on its

own or whether it requires additional verbal elaboration. In the majority of cases, I've found that the students' first attempts at the visual argument are not self-standing. In fact, I would identify this as the most common weakness of the visual products and, thus, the most necessary focus in peer review workshops, whereas, in the case of written drafts, peer reviewers may often be reluctant to share critical feedback. With these visual drafts, for some reason, peer reviewers tend to be more forthcoming in telling their peers that the visual argument is unclear. It's helpful, perhaps, that visual argument is contained enough so that it's possible for multiple peers to view and comment on it simultaneously. That seems to promote better discussion and review—and, interestingly for me, this kind of review has productive similarities with the kind of verbal critique that my students—as artists and designers—do in their disciplines.

In addition, peer reviewers should comment on the accompanying statement and whether it clearly and thoroughly articulates the rhetorical principles at work. It's best, however, if the peer reviewers look at the visual argument alone first, so that they don't rely too much on the verbal elaboration of it and recognize how well the visual argument stands on its own.

Conclusion

Communication has always been at least partly a visual experience—insofar as the speaker's appearance on a stage or the text's appearance on the page. Certainly, however, the experience is becoming more and more visual. Thus, equipping students with the tools necessary to analyze and evaluate the visual rhetoric that surrounds all of us is a task that seems difficult for those of us in the field to ignore. This assignment presents one possible way to handle this challenge in a productive way and, in particular, to get students thinking about the complicated relationships between the visual and verbal. Although it has particular value for my setting—a college of art

and design—it's an exercise that instructors at a variety of institutions can easily adapt and use in

composition instruction.

Work Cited

Perelman, Chaim, and Lucie Olbrechts-Tyteca. *The New Rhetoric: A Treatise on Argumentation.*

South Bend, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1969.