The Rhetorical Genre in Graphic Design

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Abstract

This presentation will examine the place of rhetorical theory in graphic design education and practice from the perspective of assignments involving a level of authorship on the part of the designer. The recent interest in the notion of authorship in graphic design invites a look into the role rhetoric can play in the process of generating and organizing content. From this perspective, the act of designing is defined as the search and development of word-and-image arguments meant to facilitate some type of action. This definition acknowledges the existence of visual/verbal genres that help to constitute a framework for the existing possibilities of action.
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Rhetoric and Graphic Design

The relationship between graphic design and rhetoric has been an elusive one. The two disciplines have evolved in very distinct periods in time — one has an established track dating back to the ancient Greeks, the other is a child of the industrial revolution and the ensuing fragmentation between production and planning processes. However, when comparing statements of purposes, they may sometimes sound quite alike, as in the following in examples:

> *"[Rhetoric is] the art or the discipline that deals with the use of discourse... to inform, persuade or motivate an audience.*[1]"

> *"A more contemporary definition of graphic design might include the 'art' of communication – to inform, educate, influence, persuade, and provide a visual experience – one that combines art and technology to communicate messages vital to our daily lives..*[2]"

> *"All the ends of speaking are reducible to four; every speech being intended to enlighten the understanding, to please the imagination, to move the passions, or to influence the will.*[3]"

"Design broadens perception, magnifies experience, and enhances vision. Design is the product of feeling and awareness of ideas that originate in the mind of the designer and culminate, one hopes, in the mind of the spectator. Design…is also an instrument of disorder and confusion. Design for deception is often more persuasive than design for good; seduction is one of its many masks.[4]"

From its beginnings in Antiquity, classical rhetoric was expanded from a discipline pertaining solely to the art of speaking to include the art of writing once printing became widespread during the Renaissance. Similarly, in the age of mass media, the art of combining words and images into arguments represents one further step in the evolutionary process of human communications.

In the past century, several design theorists have pursued the relationship between rhetoric and visual communication. We see some early attempts of a synthesis between rhetoric and semiotics as a path to a graphic design theory at the HfG Ulm during the 60s, particularly with the writings of Bonsiepe[5]. Later in the 80s, we find Ehses[6] undertaking in systematizing some of these ideas into a teaching methodology. More recently, numerous calls for the reinsertion of rhetoric as a bridge between graphic design theory and practice have been proposed by Boekraad, Kinross, Poggenpohl, Triggs, and Wild, among others[7].

Early accounts of the use of rhetorical principles in graphic design have concentrated mainly in the use of figures of speech in advertising.[8] This focus falls within the realm of elocution, or the articulation of the style of the message. Although elocution is only one step of the rhetorical process, the overlapping between verbal and visual tropes such as metaphors, metonymies, puns, etc. presented a common ground for the exploration of the shared possibilities between the two areas.

Because of its openly persuasive purpose, the entry point for studies in visual rhetoric has been the advertising format. However, as Kinross[9] demonstrates, the distinction between design for information and design for persuasion is not as clear-cut as it is often assumed, and the rhetorical component also pervades so called "objective" information such as a train timetable. Wood [10] makes a similar case by revealing how ideological interests are filtered into the apparent factuality of geographical maps.

One common point in the writings advocating the role of rhetoric in graphic design is the acknowledgment of the impossibility of neutral discourse, of discourse without intention. There is no such a thing as pure information; every communication, verbal or visual, is always tainted by an agenda. And as soon as this agenda helps to define the shape of the content, the rhetorical process leaks into the design[11]. If graphic design is to be accepted as a rhetorical practice, then by implication, the design act is subjected to social, moral, and political ramifications.[12] It suggests a degree of authorship, bearing responsibilities extending beyond its professional sphere.

Design Authorship

During the 1990s, the possibility of authorship in graphic design was frequently discussed in the American design press[13]. Although the offered models and interpretations of authorship varied considerably, the common thread of this conversation was the notion of increased responsibility of the designer over the content of the designed message, no matter if self-initiated or client-defined.

The enhanced sense of agency of design over the shaping of the content invites us to broaden the rhetorical role of graphic design beyond elocution, and calls for investigating how the search for topics and collection of data (the invention), as well as the editing and organization of content into an adequate format (the disposition) can be established as integral parts of the design process.

Both in rhetoric and graphic design, it is generally accepted that "the beginning of all discourse is a question, a problem, an issue" that needs to be addressed to a specific audience".[14] We begin by researching a topic, gathering information, assessing a situation, and formulating a proposition, a thesis statement, or a brief. Resnick describes the design process as beginning with the "clarification of the client's objectives" and continuing "through an analytical phase in which the objective is further clarified and detailed." From the initial collection and analysis of information, a visualization phase ensues in which the overall look and feel of the piece is determined through the building of prototypes ranging from thumbnails to more complete layouts[15]. These can be considered themselves rhetorical tools to guide initial deliberations. Poggenpohl defends the value of design prototypes in general as effective deliberative tools in their ability to envision concrete scenarios for decision-making.

> *"In the early stages of its development, a prototype is a kind of ill-formed argument. The designer is working through conceptions of what "might be." These early prototypes can take the form of a diagram or sketch which respectively reveal a primary set of functional relationships or an even more general basic concept."*[16]

The Visual/Verbal Genre

Research and early prototyping are perhaps the equivalent of the invention and disposition phases in rhetoric. This is when graphic designers decide which visual/verbal strategies will be employed in support of their communication goal. These decisions are often based on a combination of the designer's previous experience of similar situations and his/her creative drive within the specificity of the problem at hand. It is in the realm of the previous experience, of the recurrence of similar situations, that consciously or intuitively, designers resort to a framework of visual/verbal genres as a departure point for the consideration of a solution.

One way of examining the rhetoric genre in graphic design may involve a breakdown of its features into 3 layers, ranging from abstract to concrete levels of representation in the following manner:

1. discursive functions
2. expressive patterns
3. graphic mediums

Discursive functions

Discursive functions can be defined as broad archetypal units pertaining to visual/verbal addresses. Here, we can locate at least four major functions:

- **Summation**, pertains to abbreviated representations of entities. This function is called upon when instant identification and recognition is needed. An identity system, for example, relies heavily on this function and its reductive drive to translate a complex subject into a limited set of visual attributes. The ideogram would be the basic expression of this function.

- **Juxtaposition**, entails the delivery of concise statements through the combination of visual/verbal cues. This function relies on the synthesis of disparate concepts converging into precise focus, as in the slogan or in the montage. Magazine covers, book jackets, posters, and other forms of address aiming to frame a concept through a unified single composition often exemplify the predominance of this discursive function. The epigram would be the expression of this function.

- **Narration**, pertains to the development of an argument through time. Issues of tempo, sequencing, and systematic treatment are some of the concerns here, as in the visual/verbal essay. Structural features found in multi-page publications, story telling, games, and other instances where messages progressively unfold are closely related to this function. The chronogram would be at the core of this function.

- **Exposition**, implies the visual demonstration or the clarification of relationships between the parts to the whole or among disparate entities. Spatial arrangements that can be accessed through various entry points, such as maps, charts, and tables are heavily invested in this function. The diagram is the fundamental expression of this function.

Discursive functions are presented here as abstract paradigms that rarely exist in a pure state. Rather, in most forms of visual communication these functions are coalesced in an infinite number of

frequencies and intensities. The possible patterns obtained by these combinations are dependent upon cultural and cognitive processes, and constitute a grammar of expressive patterns.

Expressive patterns

Examples of expressive patterns in Western culture include the advertising, the annual report, the announcement, the catalog, the instruction manual, the bus schedule, the graphic novel, etc. In order for these expressive patterns to be accessed by users they have to be made concrete or visible; they need some form of physical presence. These physical embodiments are being called here graphic mediums.

Graphic mediums

Graphic mediums are ultimately the interfaces utilized in conveying expressive patterns. They may be defined both by convention and material need. And they involve considerations of production, reproduction, and distribution. The booklet, the brochure, the magazine, the website, the pdf, the broadside, constitute examples of the range of mediums currently available. At its most rudimentary level, graphic design is concerned with the customization of these interfaces to support specific visual/verbal messages defined by clients and content providers.

However, it is argued here that the degree of authorship in graphic design is expanded when designers have the ability to negotiate discursive functions into carefully re-examined expressive patterns and graphic mediums. In other words, when they are able to critically engage visual/verbal genres in the articulation of informative and/or persuasive statements.

Rhetorical genres

The recurrent combinations of certain expressive patterns and graphic mediums often become codified responses to specific situational demands, thus constituting the realm of rhetorical genres. Here, I am departing from Todorov's definition of genre as "the codification of discursive properties."[17] In literary genres, these properties stem from semantic, syntactic, and material aspects of the text. They are institutionalized forms of discourse and as such are based on the dominant ideology at a certain moment. That would explain why certain genres are present in one society while absent in another.[18] According to Todorov, the institutionalized existence of genres make them function on one level as "horizons of expectation" for the audience and on another level as "models of writing"[19] (and I would add designing) for authors.

In the essay "Genre as Social Action," Miller defines the rhetorical genre as a typified rhetorical action that exists in relation to a specific social motive, an exigency. She thus places genres at the crossroads between private intention and public occasion and assigns to the rhetorical practice a social and historical dimension. In her view, genres are dynamic forms that are constantly evolving

and decaying. And the number of genres in any society is indeterminate and dependent upon the complexity and diversity of that society.[20]

Rhetorical genres, and visual/verbal genres in particularly, are rooted in cultural, economic and technological developments. Witness the development of advertising in capitalist societies, an expressive pattern that is continually being reconfigured, given new graphic mediums, blending into new genres, such as the infomercial and the electronic spam, and even blurring the borders between commercial and editorial voices.

Because these fluctuations are suggestive of changes in market forces, social priorities, and technological emergences, they invite questions of the ethical role graphic designers play in enforcing or challenging existing genres. If genres are understood as parameters from which social actions are performed, an increased agency over them on the part of the graphic designer means a broader sense responsibility over the consequences of such actions. Whose interests are being served by taking certain genres at face value while probing the existence of others? Designers may become complicit with the ideology of the message by legitimizing the authority of the address. Alternatively, they may assume subversive roles by undermining "naturalized" forms of address.

A critical approach to visual/verbal genres might entail asking questions such as: what "horizons of expectation" the homogenizing effects of a visual identity programme are fulfilling? Are these effects desirable to all entities? Is a visually "transparent" or "neutral" approach always certain to enlighten a message? Or is it at times merely a strategy for disguising unstated bias? When is it beneficial to reduce a message to a single powerful symbolic statement; when is it preferable to take a narrative approach that elaborates on the complexity of the issue portrayed? What are the assumptions behind the packaging of an idea or the packaging a bland product? Since the goal is to present either one in the best light possible and incite action, should the methodology be the same? What happens to a society when the design of consumer and civic messages become undifferentiated? As the design theorist Richard Buchanan states in reference to design and rhetoric:

> *"Designers deal with matters of choice, with things that may be other than they are. The implications of this are immense, because it reveals the domain of design to be not accidentally but essentially contested. The essential nature of design calls for both the process and the results of designing to be open to debate and disagreement. Designers deal with possible worlds and with opinions about what the parts and the whole of the human environment should be."*[21]

Considering visual/verbal genres in graphic design also raises questions on the role of originality and the relationship between individual vision and convention. To what extent is the designer an innovator if we are to accept that generic frameworks are the starting point for effective communication?

Boekraad defines visual communication as a “more or less creative manipulation of commonalities” and acknowledges that its effectiveness depends on “that tiny twist applied to the familiar cliché.”[22] The study of rhetorical genres in graphic design might be instrumental in illuminating the relationship between the commonplace and the unique while avoiding the traps of simplistic universalisms or novelty fetishism.

Practice and Education

In practice, the expanded rhetorical role by the designer has taken many guises. An embryonic form of this practice can be examined through the examples of creative partnerships between designers and copywriters in advertising throughout the 20th century (Russian Constructivism and American New Advertising are cases in point)[23]. These are instances when the designer participates in the early drafting of the argument, and words and images are worked in a synergistic manner; meaning that visual/verbal genres are being elaborated on the level of their discursive functions. More recent evidence of designers’ attempts to position themselves in the early stages of argument construction may be found in the transmutation of graphic design firms into strategic communication consultancies during the past decades. In this type of practice, the designer presents his or herself as an all-inclusive architect of character of the client’s voice.

In undergraduate education, a move towards a critical focus on rhetorical genres requires a shift from the way studio projects are traditionally introduced. All too often, assignments are defined by pre-determined graphic mediums. For example, design a poster or a website for this company or that event. The usual expectation is that the solution provided would help the student to understand the accepted rules of a particular medium and its current visual languages, giving him or her the skills to respond creatively to similar requests from the professional world. The focus on pre-determined graphic mediums usually means that the brief and its contents are supplied ahead of time and the design process starts at the later stage of the styling of the argument. The danger here is the perpetuation of the postulate that form equals flair, relegating design to little more than an appendage or an embellishment to the overall rhetorical strategy rather than a possible starting point for the speech act.

Bringing invention and disposition, the earlier steps of the rhetorical process, into assignments can allow opportunities for students to move into the realm of genre exploration more freely, where the patterns of discursive functions and their mediums can be examined and challenged. Miller suggests that “what we learn when we learn a genre is not just a pattern of form, or even a method of achieving our own ends. We learn, more importantly, what ends we may have.”[24] Presenting assignments where students have to apply design skills to both locate and address specific communication scenarios, at the same time that they are encouraged to critically examine how similar calls have been typified into

rhetorical genres, could be a path towards a graphic design pedagogy that places the student in the position of a social agent first and before that of a service provider.

Perhaps different emphasis could be spread across the undergraduate curriculum. For example, on lower level classes, a greater focus may be given to learning how to manipulate discursive functions. Assignments can be tailored towards the learning and exploration of principles of visual synthesis, word and image relationships, visual/verbal narrative, spatial configuration, etc.

Mid-level assignments would then move the focus towards the examination of present and past expressive patterns and graphic mediums. At this point, the historical and social dimension of the rhetorical genre can be further emphasized. Exploring the role different mediums or different communication patterns has played throughout the ages can be enlightening of the contexts in which designers operate. For example, in terms of rhetorical action, what does it mean to design a poster today, in relation to what it meant to do so in the communications landscape of 100 years ago? Does the poster fulfill the same strategic objectives in today's world of pedestrian-deprived suburban streets and enclosed malls as it did back in early days of street consumer culture? What are the expressive patterns currently found on the web environment of today? Are there any other untapped ways of constructing meaningful arguments in this medium? How do expressive patterns behave in different mediums? Say, what are the functional advantages and limitations of a printed catalog over an electronic one? Or vice-versa? How can the designer help to negotiate these advantages and limitations through visual/verbal treatments?

On higher division courses, students can be guided towards developing their own content and parameters, whenever possible. One feasible way of sidestepping the time constrains required by data collection and analysis of their subject would be to nurture links between general studies university courses and graphic design studio classes. This can be done in several manners, ranging from interdisciplinary co-taught courses to simply suggesting the use of research papers and other materials previously developed by the student in liberal studies classes as a starting point for their advanced graphic design projects. By making connections between graphic design and the broader context of the humanities and sciences, students have the chance to experience first hand the integrative potential of their own field.

As they are asked to author a visual/verbal argument pertaining to a subject familiar to them, students can start by first locating the regions, or topics from which the substance of the argument will be drawn. Utilizing a rhetorical framework, they can position their approach as one of definition (examine a concept), of cause (examine the implications of an action), or of similarity (compare 2 similar subjects). As they progress towards the choice of a genre, the break down of discourse types into deliberative (to call to action), forensic (to accuse or defend), or ceremonial (to praise or blame) can be called upon as a way to sharpen the focus of their intentions.

In assignments demanding higher degrees of design authorship, the process book can play a key role as a space for rhetorical organization and reflection. This is the space where the narrative of the construction of the visual/verbal argument can unfold and later be recalled. In the classroom, the process book can be a revealing blueprint of the student's creative path, allowing for ideas and feedback to be shared among classmates long after the critique day. Similarly, in the professional world, this kind developmental report becomes a powerful tool in making the case for an idea to a client. Both in the classroom and later in the design studio, the formats of these narratives can vary considerably and are symptomatic of the multiplicity of genres available in visual/verbal thinking.

Understanding graphic design as rhetorical practice invites both the educator and the practitioner to move away from medium-centered assignments towards a sharpened focus on intention and strategy. The idea here is not to blindly accept generic conventions as recipes for communication, but quite the opposite, to encourage a deeper questioning on how these conventions go about reproducing certain institutions, why some are more stabilized than others, and what are the contexts in which innovation occurs. As the linguist Bahktin puts it, "we speak only in definite genres." These are "relatively stable" but not rigid forms[25]. They are flexible, plastic, free, and creativity is possible and visible. Genres are also sites of contention in discourse, where social and ideological action takes place. Designed messages, willing or not, are a fundamental part of this dialogue.

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