Rhetography:

In light of our understanding of the role of mental images in reasoning:

1. Can we conflate rhetography with visual texture? ie. is rhetography “pictorial narration”? 

Rhetography and Sermon on the Mount: rhetorical impact due to visual texture or mental images evoked by repetition + culturally conditioned images?


2. Is rhetography an argumentative form, analogous to inductive reasoning? Put another way, if rheto-graphy is to be distinguished from rheto-logy does the “logy” (logos) necessarily correspond to “logic,” and therefore the “graphy” to non-logical, qualitative argumentation?

An exemplar of qualitative argumentation is the analogy:

“For as the eyes of bats are to the blaze of day, so is the reason in our soul to the things which are by nature most evident of all” (Aristotle, Metaphysics, 2.993b quoted in Chaîm Perelman and Lucie Olbrechts-Tyteca, The New Rhetoric: A Treatise on Argumentation [10th, 2006 ed.; trans. John Wilkinson and Purcell Weaver; 1958: Presses Universitaires de France; repr., Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1969], 373)

Is this rhetography?

“For it will be very difficult to persuade men of sense that he who with dry eyes and satisfaction of mind can deliver his brother to the executioners to be burnt alive, does sincerely and heartily concern himself to save that brother from the flames of hell in the world to come.” John Locke, A Letter Concerning Toleration as quoted in Chaîm Perelman and Lucie Olbrechts-Tyteca, The New Rhetoric: A Treatise on Argumentation (10th, 2006 ed.; trans. John Wilkinson and Purcell Weaver; 1958: Presses Universitaires de France; repr., Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1969), 203

What do we do about highly pictorial apocalyptic language that in fact is structured by quite formal cause-effect argumentation, is this rhetography or is it rhetology? (e.g. Ezekiel 28:1–19)

Answer: I have no idea! BUT, there may be some value to investigating the rhetoric of visuals as a “thought experiment” in order to help refine what we mean by the term “rhetography.”

-will first give an overview of Linda Scott’s article, then follow with a discussion of the form of argumentation found in a few visuals.


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- visual advertising makes for an interesting analogue because the visuals are intended to be persuasive: will give a brief overview of some of the insights from Linda Scott’s article.


2. Assumption that “visual perception is a passive, automatic activity rather than a guided approach to negotiating the environment” (p. 256)

- Scott argues that there exists a “cultural basis for seeing” in all visuals, not just advertising “A key premise will be that pictures are not merely analogues to visual perception but symbolic artifacts constructed from the conventions of a particular culture” (p. 252).

1. Clinique ad: lipstick in a glass of soda with lemon on top. A pictorial description does not help make sense of the picture. Lipstick does not belong in a drink. “If we were to restate this picture in verbal terms, it might say something like this: ‘Clinique’s new summer line of makeup is as refreshing as a tall glass of soda with a twist.’ Such a statement is an example of figurative speech—a simile to be exact” (p. 254).

“In reading the Clinique ad, consumers must combine experience with soda water and cosmetics—two very dissimilar things—deduce what they might have in common, select which commonality might be appropriate as the basis for an ad (‘refreshing,’ e.g. but not ‘tasteless’), and make the metaphor” (p. 265)

“As our pictorial vocabulary expands, previously learned schemata are processed more readily, which causes us to see styles that once seemed highly mannered as natural. Although newly devised styles of representation are often seen as arbitrary, awkward, cryptic, and even frightening, the conventions are learned until, in time, they look self-evident. One way of demonstrating this process is to examine the historical response to new sets of visual conventions. The style of impressionism was at first jarring and unintelligible to viewers of the late nineteenth century. Now, few of us have trouble seeing dancers, children, or gardens in the works of Degas, Renoir, or Monet” (p. 261)

ethnocentrism: photograph of a house (p. 262)

Fallacy of resemblance: “visual resemblance is neither necessary nor sufficient for pictorial representation... ‘A Constable painting of Marlborough Castle is more like any other picture than it is like the Castle, yet it represents the Castle and not another picture—not even the closest copy’” (pg. 263)

2. “visual perception has often been characterized as passive and automatic, as a natural capability based in biology rather than in culture. Now, however, many scientists and theorists say that seeing is an active behavior and that seemingly natural visual processes are actually learned. Far from operating independently of cognition, vision is purposive and directed...Medical studies of blind adults given sight through corrective surgery show that we have to be taught the ‘rules of seeing,’ a process that takes years. The rules of seeing we must learn are not universal principles but are formed by the natural and social environments that
teach us both what to look at and how to look...Efforts to duplicate visual perception in artificial intelligence have shown that the nature of seeing rests first on the purposes of looking. Thus, even simple visual perception of the environment is a problematic concept—seeing is learned behavior that involves cognitive activity” (p. 260)

3. Conclusion: Picture-writing: “Several theorists suggest that visual artifacts are much more fully understood as a symbol system—a kind of picture-writing—than as a replication of sensory experience” (p. 263).

“Because visuals are convention based, all pictures must be interpreted according to learned patterns—just like reading words or recognizing numbers—and thus must be processed cognitively rather than merely absorbed” (p. 269).

“Pictography” - “all pictographies employ a combination of contextualization and stylization of the pictures. In this way, the system moves from the concrete reference to complex communication (p. 264).”

“visuals are a social, rather than logical, code and an elaborated, rather than restricted system” (p. 264).

Elaboration and the Pandora’s box example: not just inference to the myth of Pandora which brought illness etc. into the world but a reconfiguration of the contents of the box as delightful due to the “cosmetic” frame that structures the argument:

“Instead we say, ‘Oh! it is like Pandora’s box, only it brings beautiful things, not destructive things into the world.’ As the textual clues confirm, the ad is intended to evoke a Pandora’s ‘box of loveliness’” (p.266).

“We adjust our interpretation of Pandora’s box to fit the intentions we expect from advertising. Such an activity is clearly inconsistent with the notion that the viewer simply absorbs the image, or is conditioned by it in the classical sense. Instead, the viewer is actively reconciling shared extratextual material with a frame that suggests what is appropriate for an advertising claim” (p. 266).

Tentative suggestions:

1. rhetography is concerned with mental images;
2. a labour-centered distinction between rhetography and rhetology: do the words of the text or the mental images perform the rhetorical task? Tentative suggestion is that both quantitative and qualitative argumentation may give prominence to or completely intertwine either of rhetology or rhetography.

- will examine a sampling of a few visuals in order to look at their forms of argumentation.