

## Visual/Verbal Rhetoric

### Gui Bonsiepe

*Gui Bonsiepe is the Editor of the Journal of the Ulm School for Design. In this remarkable article, based on a conference led by Tomas Maldonado, Mr. Bonsiepe has had the courage to resurrect what most of us would like to think is a defunct study, but which we use anyway, in an unstudied, unsystematic, intuitive way, namely rhetoric. As the author points out, rhetoric is the art of persuasion by means of communication in ways aside from the normal declarative sentence. His analysis is extraordinarily valuable in that he has not only enabled us to systematize our perception and use of the devices of persuasion, but has also extended the analysis into terms applicable to visual communications. This has a clear and vital relevance to the needs and uses of the advertising industry, as a way of quantifying the persuasive content of advertising communications.*

*If everyone had a better understanding of the functions and vocabulary discussed here, art directors and copy writers would burn a good bit less midnight oil over the problem of communicating with each other about what they are trying to communicate to the public.*

Rhetoric has fallen not so much into disrepute as into virtual oblivion. It has come down to us from ancient times with an aura of antiquity about it that makes it seem, at first sight, unsuited to handling the message of the advertiser, which is the rhetoric of the modern age. Yet it can be shown that a modern system of rhetoric might be a useful descriptive and analytical tool for dealing with the phenomena of advertising. To explain how is the aim of this article.

The ancient Greeks divided rhetoric (the art of eloquence) into three parts: the political, the legal, and the religious. It was primarily the politicians, lawyers, and priests who were adepts in rhetoric, since it was their business to use speech to work on their public. Their object was to obtain a definite decision (on a campaign of war); to implant an opinion (concerning the prisoner at the bar); or to evoke a mood (in a religious ceremony). The domain of rhetoric is the domain of logomachy, the war of words.

Rhetoric divides into two kinds: one is concerned with the use of persuasive means (rhetorica utens) and the other with description and analysis (rhetorica docens). Practice and theory are closely linked in rhetoric. It is generally defined as the art of persuasion, or the study of the means of persuasion. The aim of rhetoric is primarily to shape opinions, to determine the attitude of other people, or to influence their actions. Where force rules, there is no need of rhetoric. As Burke says (in "A Rhetoric of Motives," N. Y., 1955), "It is directed to a man only in so far as he is free. . . . Insofar as he must do something, rhetoric is superfluous."

These conditions of choice are fulfilled by the situation on a competitive market where various wares come together. The consumer is given a wide range of choice among goods and services, and it becomes desirable to influence him in the selection he makes. This is the function of advertising. And so a new partner joins the classical triad of politics, justice, and religion in the domain of rhetoric; and that is marketing.

Of the listing of rhetorical processes there is no end. Shades of meaning have been set down with precision. Textbooks of rhetoric (and they are still textbooks of classical rhetoric) are as notable for their abundance of fine-spun distinctions as for their uncritical acceptance of traditional classifications. A terminology suited to Latin and Greek makes it difficult to use these concepts; rhetoric is weighed down by more than two thousand years of ballast. The time has come to bring it up to date with the aid of semiotics (a general theory of signs and symbols). For, apart from inconsistencies in the concepts it uses, classical rhetoric (which deals purely with language) is no longer adequate for describing and analyzing rhetorical phenomena in which verbal and

visual signs, i.e. word and picture, are allied. Here the practice of rhetoric has far outrun its theory.

If one thinks of the unending spate of posters, advertisements, films, and television spots turned out by an industrial society with all the facilities of the communications industry at its command, and compares it with the very sporadic efforts made to throw light on the rhetorical aspects of this information, the discrepancy stares one in the face.

The five main sections of classical rhetoric can be reduced to only one useful for the analysis of advertising information: the third, covering the linguistic and stylistic formulation of the material. The rules for collecting, arranging, memorizing, and speaking, can be largely ignored. The stylistic aspects of rhetoric appear primarily as rhetorical figures, which can be defined (after Quintilian) as "the art of saying something in a new form" or (after Burke) as "changing the meaning or application of words in order to give the speech greater suavity, vitality and impact." According to classical theory, the essence of a rhetorical figure consists in a departure from normal speech usage, for the purpose of making the message more effective.

These figures fall into two classes: (1) word figures, which work with the meaning of words or the position of words in the sentence; and (2) idea figures, which work with the shaping and organization of information. The terminology of semiotics makes it easier to sort out these figures. Starting from the fact that there are two aspects to every sign, namely its shape and its meaning, we arrive at two basic types of rhetorical figure; for such a figure can operate through the shape of the sign or through its meaning. If we consider the shape, we are in the dimension of syntax. If we consider the meaning—or relata, to use the semiotic term—we are in the dimension of semantics. (Relatum is a term embracing everything a sign stands for; its sub-classes are the things designated, the things denoted, and the things signified. The technical words for these are designata, denotata, and significata.) Using this classification, it follows that the two classes of rhetorical figure are the syntactic and the semantic. A figure is syntactic when it operates through the shape of the sign; it is semantic when it operates through the shape of the sign; it is semantic when it operates through the relatum (or referent). In traffic signs, we find that contours, colors and sign arrangements belong to the syntactic dimensions, and the meanings belong to the semantic.

Sifting and simplifying the ultrafine distinctions of classical rhetoric, we can catalogue the verbal rhetorical figures thus:

#### I. SYNTACTIC FIGURES

A. Transpositive figures (departure from normal word order)

1. *Apposition (explanatory insertions)*
2. *Atomization (treating dependent parts of a sentence as independent)*
3. *Parenthesis (enclosing one sentence in another)*
4. *Reversion or anastrophe (dislocation of a word for emphasis)*

B. Privative figures (omission of words)

1. *Ellipsis (leaving out words which can be supplied from the context)*

C. Repetitive figures

1. *Alliteration (repeating an initial letter or sound)*
2. *Isophony (repeating sounds of similar words, or parts of words, in a series)*
3. *Parallelism (repeating the same rhythm in successive clauses or sentences)*
4. *Repetition (repeating a word in various positions)*

## II. SEMANTIC FIGURES

A. Contrary figures (based on the union of opposite relata)

1. *Antithesis (confrontation in a sentence of parts having opposite meanings)*
2. *Exadversion (assertion by a double negative)*
3. *Conciliation (coupling of contradictory relata)*

B. Comparative figures (based on comparisons between the relata)

1. *Gradation (words in an ascending order of forcefulness)*
2. *Hyperbole (exaggeration)*
3. *Metaphor (transfer of a word to another field of application in such a way that a similarity of any kind between the two fields is assumed and given expression)*
4. *Understatement*

C. Substitutive figures (based on replacement of the relata)

1. *Metonymy (replacement of one sign by another, the relata of both being in a real relationship)*
2. *Synecdoche (a special case of metonymy: replacement of one sign by another, the relata of both being in a quantitative relationship)*

## III. PRAGMATIC FIGURES

A. Fictitious dialogue (speaker asks and answers himself)

B. Direct speech

C. Conversion of an objection into an argument in one's own favor

D. Asteism (irrelevant replies to a question or argument)

With the aid of these definitions from the art of rhetoric, advertising copy can be analyzed and described in terms of its rhetorical characteristics. In this way, its persuasive structure can be brought to light.

It is the usage among philosophers of language to contrast persuasion with information, opinion-shaping with documentation and instruction, and everyday speech with scientific language. In the eyes of orthodox representative of a purified and unambiguous language, rhetoric is merely a handbook of verbal tricks, unworthy of the true scientist. In reply to this, the champions of rhetoric argue that the systematic ambiguity of linguistic signs is an inevitable consequence of the power of language, and is an indispensable part of the means of human communication. In thrashing out the theoretical question whether there can or cannot be any communication without rhetoric, the arguments seem to favor the latter alternative. The only examples of simple, dehydrated information, innocent of all taint of rhetoric, that come readily to hand are such things as logarithm tables, time-tables, and telephone books. Fortunately communication is not limited to this; informative assertions are interlarded with rhetoric to a greater or lesser degree. If they were not, communication would die of sheer inanition.

"Pure" information exists for the designer only in arid abstraction. As soon as he begins to give it concrete shape, the process of rhetorical infiltration begins. It would seem that many designers—blinded by their effort to impart objective information (whatever that may mean)—simply will not face this fact. They cannot reconcile themselves to the idea that advertising is *addressed* information, and that its informative content is often secondary if it plays any role at all.

It is hard not to feel a little sympathy for this view, mistaken though it may be. It is the expression of a certain unease, a dissatisfaction with the role of the visual designer, felt in our competitive society, where his abilities are often wasted on the mere representation of the imaginary qualities of goods and services. And this representation often strikes a grandiloquent note in blatant contrast to the triviality and banality of the product offered. The prescribed, euphoric superlative is humbug. It is just as much humbug as "objective" information in advertising which is ashamed of its promotional purpose and tries to dissemble itself.

Once the point is yielded that there are various grades of rhetorical infiltration, then the question arises how these different grades can be assessed in terms of quantity. Mensuration and numerical data are the order of the day. They parade as the proud achievements of science. Despite a certain suspicion of figure-fetishism, which will accept new knowledge on the sole condition that it is in numerical terms, we can sketch out a simple possibility for measuring the rhetorical content of a text. In measurements one must keep to the ascertainable. And what is ascertainable in a text is the number of rhetorical figures of various kinds which it contains. The ratio of rhetorical figures to normal sentences in advertising copy is an index of its persuasiveness. If ten rhetorical figures and five normal sentences appear in a text, it may be said to have a persuasion grade of 2. What persuasion is, is not specified. It is not even defined. All that is given is the data needed to measure what is called persuasiveness.

Verbal rhetoric paves the way to visual rhetoric. As we said before, classical rhetoric was confined to language. But most posters, advertisements, films, and television spots contain linguistic and non-linguistic signs side by side, and these signs are not independent, but interact closely. So it makes good sense to ask about typical picture/word combinations, typical sign relations, and visual/verbal rhetorical figures.

Visual rhetoric is still virgin territory. In what follows we shall make some tentative efforts to explore this new country. Our discussion is based mainly on interpretations of the analysis of a series of advertisements.

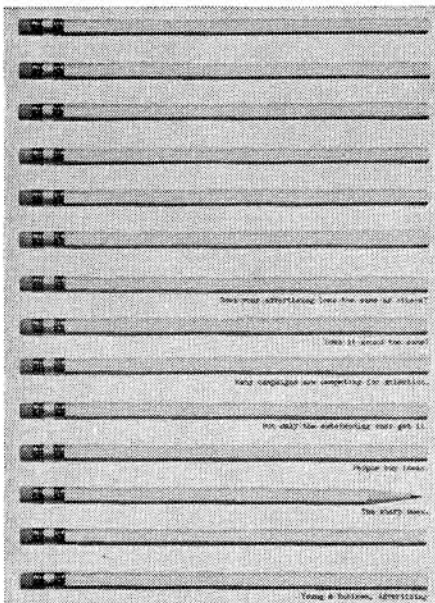
Taking the conclusions of verbal rhetoric as a guide, we dissected out figures having exclusive reference to the interplay of word and picture. The terms of verbal rhetoric were used to designate the concepts of this new rhetoric. New concepts were introduced where necessary. In this first approach, the visual/verbal figures were simply noted. The work of classifying and systematizing them still remains to be done.

To define a visual/verbal figure, it is no longer enough to apply the criterion of the "departure from normal usage" as in verbal figures; for it cannot be established what relations between verbal and visual signs form the standard from which one can depart. It would, therefore, seem more appropriate for purposes of definition to fall back upon the possible interactions already inherent in the signs. Thus a visual/verbal rhetorical figure is a combination of two types of sign whose effectiveness in communication depends on the tension between their semantic characteristics. The signs no longer simply add up, but rather operate in cumulative reciprocal relations.

The illustrations on the following four pages are reproduced from Ulm 14/15/16 which is the Journal of the Ulm School for Design.

**Visual/verbal comparison**

*Visual/verbal comparison (a comparison that starts with verbal signs and is continued with visual signs)*



*Advertisement: Young & Rubicam  
The "sharp ideas" expressed verbally are represented by the sharpened pencil. The sameness of the advertisements from which an effective advertisement stands out is illustrated by the uniform row of unsharpened (= ineffective) pencils.*

**Visual/verbal analogy**

*Visual/verbal analogy (a relation expressed verbally is paralleled by a similar relation expressed visually)*



*Advertisement: Esso  
"Refuel anywhere." The refuelling of cars is illustrated by the analogy of the feeding hummingbird.*

**Visual/verbal metonymy**

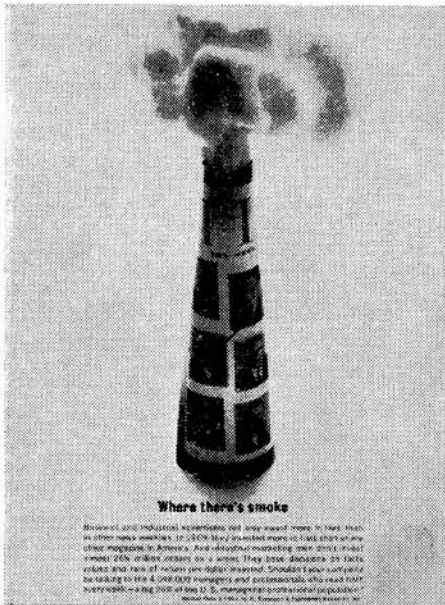
*Visual/verbal metonymy (a relation indicated by verbal signs is visualized by signs in a real relationship to the verbal relation; e.g. cause instead of effect, tool instead of activity, producer instead of product)*



*Advertisement: Esso  
"Be precise!" The imperative expressed verbally is visualized by the tool (a micrometer) for carrying it out.*

**Visual/verbal chain**

*Visual/verbal chain: (a topic begun in words and continued and completed visually)*



*Advertisement: Time Magazine  
"Where there's smoke"*

**Visual/verbal negation**

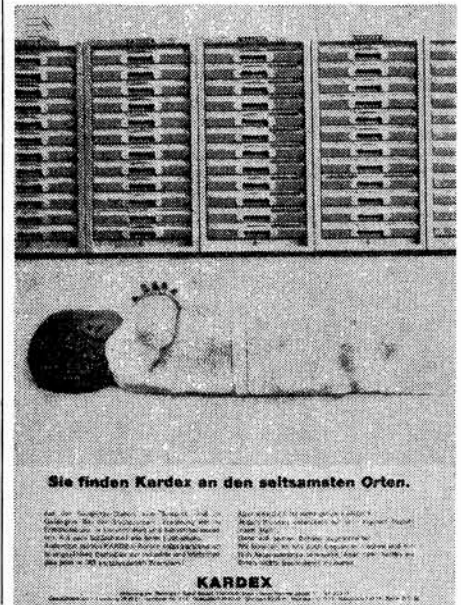
*Visual/verbal negation (verbal signs negate what is shown visually)*



*Advertisement: Kardex  
"We don't do this." The picture is cancelled out by the verbal statement.*

**Visual synecdoche**

*Visual synecdoche (a relation expressed verbally is visualized by a part representing the whole, or vice-versa)*



*Advertisement: Kardex  
"You find Kardex in the most unlikely places." The baby is a visual sign standing for the whole nursery, and for the whole class of "unlikely places".*

## Verbal specification

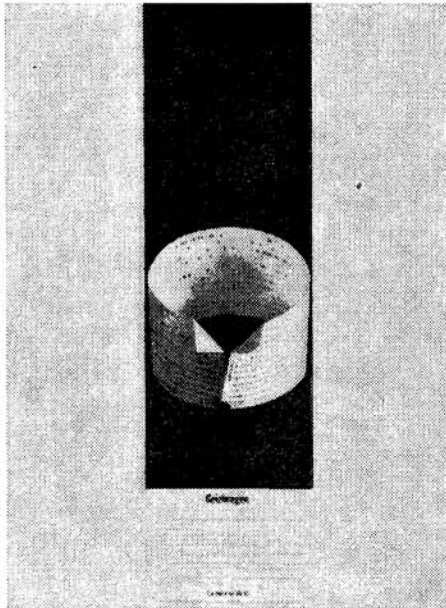
*Verbal specification (a visual sign accompanied by only as much text as is necessary for its comprehension)*



*Advertisement: Elizabeth Stewart  
"Elizabeth Stewart Swimwear"*

## Visual substitution

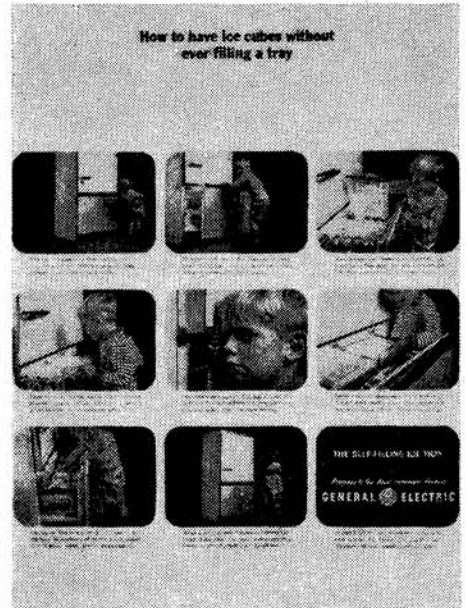
*Visual substitution (one visual sign replaced by another because of its formal characteristics)*



*Advertisement: Univac  
"Geizkragen" ("Greedy-collar" = "skinflint")  
The metaphorical word is illustrated by a  
punch card bent to look like a collar.*

## Syntactic climax and anticlimax

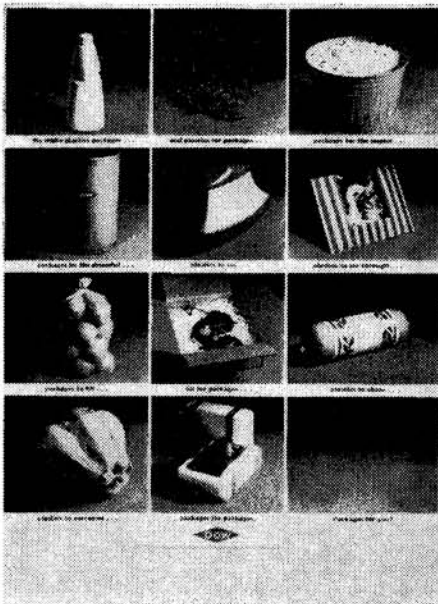
*Syntactic climax and anti-climax  
(a purely visual figure)*



*Advertisement: General Electric  
"How to have ice cubes without ever filling  
a tray" The series of pictures form virtually a  
mirror symmetry, with the middle picture  
the turning point. Up to this point the  
photography grows closer and more detailed;  
from this point, it recedes again into the distance.*

**Visual/verbal parallelism**

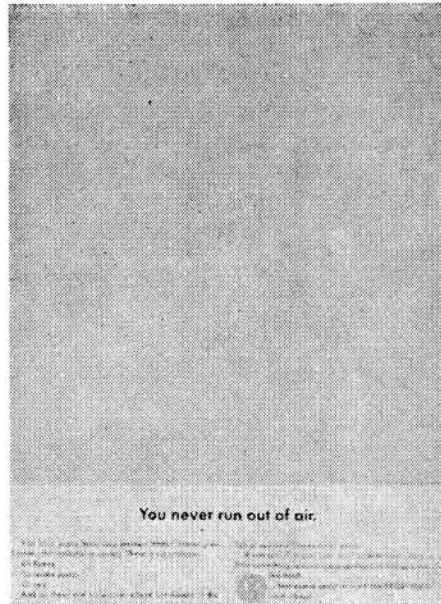
*Visual/verbal parallelism (visual and verbal signs representing the same relatum)*



*Advertisement: Dow*  
 "We make plastic packages..." The verbal assertion is specified by the illustration of a plastic bottle. The assertion, "We make packages by the drumful..." is supplemented by the parallel illustration of a drum.

**Visual/verbal parallelism.**

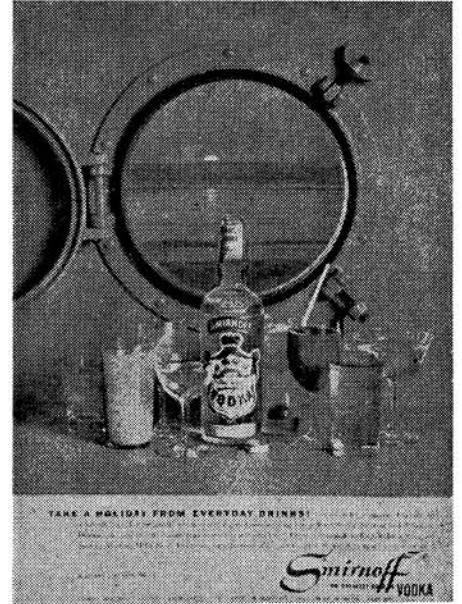
*Visual/verbal parallelism (visual and verbal signs representing the same relatum)*



*Advertisement: VW*  
 "You never run out of air." The abundance of air suggested verbally is visualized by an inserted area of light grey.

**Associative mediation.**

*Associative mediation (one verbal sign out of a series is illustrated by a series of visual signs, which lead, in turn, to another relatum of the verbal signs)*



*Advertisement: Smirnoff Vodka*  
 "Take a holiday from everyday drinks!" The verbal element "holidays" is singled out of the series and illustrated by means of an open porthole, sunset, and a calm sea. Thus vodka and holidays are linked together.