

Visualising Rhetoric: Reflections on Barthes, Tradition, and the Project of Semiotic Foregrounding¹

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Neque id statim legenti persuasum sit omnia quae optimi auctores dixerint utique esse perfecta.

(Quintilian 10.1.24)

[The reader should not at once be convinced that everything which the best authors have said is, of necessity, perfect².]

During a visit to Seikei University in 2019, Dr. Fabien Arribert-Nacre, lecturer and researcher in French literature and culture at the University of Edinburgh, remarked that he considered writers such as Barthes, Derrida, and Foucault primarily to be creative authors, not clinical, analytic philosophers. Reading Barthes, there is a certain *jouissance* (a term used advisedly, given the transgressive connotations raised by Lacan) in his work that is seductive even now; it is tempting to slip into the pleasure of his text, to draw it close and warm about oneself, and to show appreciation by offering an interpretation and furthering of whatever one's (doubtless imperfect) understanding of his discourse might be. It is perhaps not as bad as the madness that seems to overcome Deleuzians when they get a mood upon them, but can still result in paragraph after paragraph of purple prose, where meaning becomes elusive, or, indeed, endlessly deferred.

Barthes is to come later in the present discussion, but it should be mentioned here that, despite what some scholars, such as Claudia Pino, have characterised as his turn to rhetoric, he only published three works with the word "rhetoric" in the title³. These are "The Rhetoric of the Image," "Rhetorical Analysis," and "The Old Rhetoric: An *Aide Mémoire*." All of these were written between 1964 and 1970, although the last belongs firmly to the earlier stage of Barthes' output, as it is a writing-up of a previous seminar. As the reader will be aware, there is a familiar division between the earlier, more focussed and scholarly Barthes, and the later, more speculative incarnation, or, as Elena Oxman puts it, a first in which he "crusades against" the myths of culture, "decoding its signs," and a second in which he sinks into the joys of culture and the text, regressing somewhat (71). Jonathan Doering has written of Barthes' "mutable" sense of the art over the course of his development, seeing:

... rhetoric as profound *basso continuo* upon which he improvised while his other interests changed. Much can be gained by observing that rhetoric formed a dear, constant, and insatiable *topos* for his thought, enduring amidst his mutable judgments of *l'empire rhétorique*. (110)

In some senses, this exploration shall be taking a similar, although somewhat differently-focussed, journey to that undertaken by Barthes in “The Old Rhetoric.” Let the curious reader bear this in mind as the focus shifts back to the early modern period.

The Master of the Shortcut

Somewhere around the midpoint of the sixteenth century, one man attempted to place himself firmly in the history books by seeming to challenge established ideas of rhetorical methodology and expanding the limits of dialectic. The son of a farmer from Picardy, he was born Pierre de La Ramée, but he styled himself “Petrus Ramus” in print. The story goes that this very same Ramus had graduated from the Collège de Navarre in 1536 with a Master’s thesis entitled *Quaecumque ab Aristotele dicta essent, commentitia esse*, or “Whatsoever was stated by Aristotle was a fiction”⁴. Whether or not this tale is actually true, he subsequently built a career out of attacks on both Aristotle and Aristotelianism. Finding some small success in this direction, he went further and began to target Quintilian, another leading figure of the ancient intellectual world, as well as Euclid and other individuals who were, by virtue of being deceased, conveniently unable to argue back.

In essence, Ramus wished to revise an educational tradition based on the classical *trivium* of grammar, logic, and rhetoric, by borrowing from the last of these and mostly moving key elements to dialectic. Rather than focussing on the Ciceronian definition of rhetoric as composed of *inventio*, *dispositio*, *elocutio*, *memoria*, and *pronuntiatio* (Vickers 54), he argued that only *elocutio* and *pronuntiatio* were proper to the art. By this method, he proposed to re-imagine the curriculum:

There are two parts of rhetoric: Style (*elocutio*) and Delivery (*pronuntiatio*) ; these are of course the only parts, the ones proper to the art, and so for the sake of clear and easy teaching you should distinguish the general and common principles of Grammar, Rhetoric, and Dialectic, and not mix in matters foreign to each discipline. Each is marked off by its own proper ends: Grammar, through its four parts of etymology, syntax, prosody and orthography, will safeguard clear and correct speech; Dialectic will furnish the invention and disposition of matters, and through its disposition will provide the concomitant of memory; Rhetoric therefore will keep this particular task, that it takes the matter found and related by Dialectic,

and laid out in clear and correct speech by Grammar, and then embellishes it with the splendor of the ornaments of style, and renders it acceptable with the grace of vocal tone and gesture. (27-28)

Ramism, in part because of its association with Calvinism, had a bit of a moment in late sixteenth- and early seventeenth-century Europe, but its influence failed to last much beyond this except in a few outlying areas. A large part of the problem was that many people began to realize all Ramus had really done was move things around by re-defining them. His output began to be seen as, in the rather direct but painfully accurate words of Walter Ong, the “amateurish works of a desperate man who is not a thinker but merely an erudite pedagogue” (1962, 79-80).

On the surface, Ramus seemed to be attempting a radical re-imagining of the foundational pillars of Western education, but a strong case can be made for the argument that he ultimately managed little more than a facile reshuffle of subjects. As Hardin Craig once wrote, he became seen as “the greatest master of the shortcut the world has ever known” (143). He was not the first, and certainly not the last at whom such an accusation can be levelled. However, work in this field by one more modern figure that has been generally more intellectually successful but specifically – in the case of rhetoric – less able to achieve a repositioning rather than a reclassification is significant enough to deserve something of a re-evaluation in these terms.

The individual in question is, of course, Roland Barthes, and following a brief look at the history of rhetorical arts, this discussion shall now consider his interaction with rhetoric at the historical, visual, and semiotic levels, arguing that, despite attempts to re-position, he ultimately achieves little more than the grafting of contemporary terminology onto principles which remain, at their core, firmly Ciceronian.

The Rhetoric of the Arts

Rhetoric seems, arguably, to be the most classical of the liberal arts. With deep roots in Greek culture and society⁵, it is inextricably linked to the development of Western thought. Strictly speaking, it is a meta-art rather than an art on its own terms. It can be used to frame music, painting, architecture, and a host of others, as well as oratory, with which it is traditionally the most closely associated.

Rhetoric does this at two levels. The broadest, structural level can be termed the “macro-rhetorical,” and includes elements such as the traditional layout of an oration, a standard example of which can be found in Book III of Quintilian’s *Institutio Oratoria*:

Cuius partes, ut plurimis auctoribus placuit, quinque sunt: prooemium, narratio, probatio, refutatio, peroratio.

[The parts [of an oration], according to most authors, are five in number: the introduction, the statement of facts, the proof, the refutation, and the conclusion.] (3.9.1)

From here, one can differentiate a second level, at which smaller elements combine to create the fabric of persuasion. This can be described as the “micro-rhetorical,” and includes elements such as tropes and schemes, changing the signification of words and their arrangement respectively. Figural elements of this sort make up much of the material in historical treatises, with a particular emphasis being placed on them in the early modern period.

It is by drawing upon these two levels, as well as through reference to the emotive material in rhetorical methods, that one can begin to apply the meta-art to a range of arts. One may consider the disposition of figures as part of *narratio* in a painting, a contrasting movement in a *Sonata da Chiesa* to *refutatio*, decorative architectural elements as *figurae*, and so forth throughout the various “polite and mechanic” arts, as the anonymous author of the 1749 treatise *The Polite Arts* would term them⁶. Given that formal Western education was, for well over a thousand years, built upon the *trivium*, with rhetoric occupying a central position, it is hardly surprising that its influence is so pervasive, and that one can discern both macro- and micro-rhetorical elements in a vast range of cultural production. One such example is the foundational work of Alexander Gottlieb Baumgarten in the establishment of what we today think of as aesthetic theory, which was so convincing that he famously somehow managed to convert Kant to his views posthumously⁷.

As Jennifer Montagu has pointed out in a discussion of the problems of relating rhetoric to different arts and whether the non-verbal and verbal can interact:

One might well question whether the same limitations do not apply to painting, and ask just how far one can ‘read’ a picture simply from the gestures and expressions unless one already knows what it represents. But this was not a doubt that was ever discussed by the theorists of painting in the Renaissance or the seventeenth century. (Montagu 57)

In other words, the relationship was not an issue at the time. Montagu here underscores the point that the study of rhetoric was so ingrained in the mindset of painters, sculptors and other artists in the early modern period that the modern structuralist and post-structuralist concerns about linguistic limitations and the permeability of barriers between language and other forms of cultural production never appeared even to enter their minds. Even when not linguistic, meaning is, in terms familiar to Barthes scholars, both denotative and connotative.

Many other late twentieth-century critics, such as Mary Vidal, James Anderson Winn, and Todd Borgerding have explored the interrelative nature of rhetoric as a meta-art, although with varying degrees of focus. One landmark extensive discussion of this is Gerald LeCoat’s 1975 book *The Rhetoric of the Arts*. Humanism, LeCoat states, held “the imitation of man’s actions and pas-

sions” as the common end of the arts in the early modern period (LeCoat 13). This led to the quest for common ground between various arts, poetry, painting and music in particular, that first manifested itself in the fourteenth century. The imitation, or *mimesis* of nature was such a denominator, and led, in turn, to the idea that human emotion could be studied and quantified. One finds here a turn to the “natural” which was to so engage Barthes over two centuries later than the early modern rhetorical aestheticists.

The final part of LeCoat’s book consists of various rhetorical analyses of works, including poetry, painting and music. He uses a multi-level analytical technique, looking at structure and elements, such as figures and rhythmic feet, then relating them to visual, musical, and other aesthetically directive elements. Of particular interest is the rhetorical examination of the *Massacre des Innocents* by Nicolas Poussin (LeCoat 92-124). Elements such as the “martial body” and use of colour, particularly red, are related to the affective whole, as well as the symbolism of gesture. This is part of the examination of “Three Imitations of Anger,” which forms the last chapter. The other two works are *Strage degl’ Innocenti*, a sacred poem on the massacre of the innocents by Giambattista Marino, and *Il combattimento di Tancredi e Clorinda*, an operatic *scena* by Claudio Monteverdi. LeCoat manages a convincing interrelative analysis, linking common elements of style within both a broad affective and specific figural framework.

LeCoat’s 1975 work here represents a relatively contemporary understanding of how rhetoric has, for centuries, been both understood as visual and employed as a primary methodology in the construction of different arts, such as music and painting. He stands alongside a host of other scholars who have explored a fascination that began in the classical world of the ancients and flourished amongst the heirs of Cicero, particularly in the early modern period. One also finds a relationship between the representational and reality that is more nuanced and complex than a facile division based on the medium of presentation. The significance of this to the present discussion is that what one may today consider to be visual rhetoric has a long history, and is both complex and diverse.

Semiotics as the New Ramism

Don Paul Abbot discusses the dismissal of rhetoric as antiquarian from the perspective of the emerging discipline of semiotics in the last quarter of the twentieth century, noting that Seymour Chatman asked in 1974 “shall we try to transform rhetoric as such into a science ... or shall we be content, in a merely historical way, to trace its breakdown and absorption into a variety of fields [?]” (303). This is Ramist in the sense that the art and its associated methodology would remain fundamentally the same, but a definite attempt was made to place its old wine into new bottles.

There is an added irony that this was underway at the same time as LeCoat and other more classically-focussed scholars were reasserting the primacy of the Ciceronian and post-Ciceronian development of rhetoric throughout a multiplicity of arts.

Abbot notes that desires such as Chatman's to "proclaim rhetoric's demise" (305) have become a tendency in modern semiotics, and argues that Roland Barthes himself was a champion of this idea, beginning with a seminar in 1964-65 which later became the "The Old Rhetoric," the first chapter of *The Semiotic Challenge* (first published as *L'Aventure sémiologique* in 1985). For Barthes, semiology could be understood as the "fundamental method of ideological critique" (*The Semiotic Challenge* 5).

Abbot characterises Barthes, along with Tzvetan Todorov, Gerard Genette, and Paul Ricoeur, as one of a number who saw the "death" of rhetoric as somehow taking place in the late eighteenth or early nineteenth century (310). Such histories of the art tend towards the artistic and poetic, and towards a metanarrative, and what Lyotard says about those has become a truism of the postmodern condition. Abbott also criticises such a pre-emptive obituary because of what he sees as a common reduction of rhetoric to figures and tropes by modern writers (311). That being said, there may be an influence from French rhetorical traditions at play (319).

Beginning with "The Old Rhetoric" in *The Semiotic Challenge*, this examination will now turn to how Barthes considers rhetoric. He defines it here as "the classical practice of literary language," and notes that "the world is incredibly full of old Rhetoric" (11). He calls the art a "metalanguage" at the outset, noting that its "language- object was 'discourse'" (13). By this, he means something a little different from the way in which the present discussion employs the term, as he does not generally make a fuller connection between rhetoric and other arts.

For Barthes, rhetoric is an entirely bourgeois phenomenon when considered as a social practice (14). He becomes immediately concerned, in his brief history, with the question of truth in the Platonic/Aristotelian oppositional dyad, the emergence of Ciceronian *elocutio* (24), and the forcing of language (26). He also notes that Quintilian re-emerged in the 4th century (25), although he does not mention that, due to copies of the work becoming lost, it was soon to be obscured until the early 15th. Nor does he consider the tremendous significance of that loss throughout the middle ages, during which Cicero's *De Inventionae* and the anonymous *Rhetorica ad Herennium* were the most influential and widely-known of the classical rhetorical treatises.

Barthes offers an interesting, "neurotic" (40) view of *disputatio*, which he sees as two adversaries attempting to castrate each other with the "invincible knife" of syllogism (41). He notes the classificationist tendencies of Aristotelian thought (47), considering the psychological pleasure of the enthymeme (59-61), which he defines first in the Aristotelian sense as "a syllogism based

on probability or signs" (57), and second as "an abbreviated syllogism" in the post-Quintilianistic age. Incidentally, on arts, he mentions music briefly in terms of "tones" or *ethé*, those attributes of the orator to be displayed to the audience to advance the emotional aspect of the argument (74).

Barthes notes the modernism of Aristotle when talking about *pathé*, in that "all these passions are deliberately taken in their *banality*," which he sees as the opposite of the psychological project of searching for something hidden (75, italics Barthes). The question must be asked whether this is really the case, however. Whilst Brian Vickers points out (24n.) that Barthes was praising Aristotle for avoiding "the reductive tendencies of modern psychology," a different reading of Aristotle might rather see his work as proto-psychological.

Having defined his position in this seminar (one should remember that, despite the date of publication, this is based on work which predates his other essays), it is possible to see Barthes evolving his ideas in "The Rhetoric of the Image." This is also where the theme of the relationship between rhetoric and sister arts begins to emerge more closely.

Barthes begins by exploring the question of whether the photographic image can convey meaning effectively. Perhaps, for "photographic image," one might be tempted to substitute a painting, a building, a sculpture, or a work of music, but Barthes differentiates constructed art on the grounds of what he calls "codes of transposition," or the deliberate denotation of meaning through established systems of form, whilst somehow failing to clarify precisely how the photographic image is separate from these (43). By this, it is meant that he certainly does argue that a photograph represents a "kind of temporal equilibrium (having-been-there)," and is thus something entirely new (44), but quickly returns to placement and the construction of meaning after a brief digression into the idea. There is a natural element to a photograph which eludes painting. Margaret Olim notes that this direct and natural element is, at least in the mind of the Barthes-of-1964, predicated upon the nature of the medium rather than something inherent within the resulting image (100). The objects are representational of a past reality that is undeniable – or was, at least, at the time. In this, Olim sees the early Barthes' goal here as to "expose the naïveté that makes pasta ads effective" (114), going on to argue, however, that this was something he was to transcend in his later writings.

Barthes calls a photographic image "a message without a code" in "The Photographic Message" of 1961 (Oxman 74). A photograph is analogous rather than arbitrary, and it therefore has a "denotative" power which also naturalizes "culturally coded connotations" (74). Essentially, the idea that such an image can be "pure" is challenged, and a photograph must always carry connotation.

This being said, an image can elude connotation in Barthes' later work, and become "sus-

pendent meaning,” or take on a Lacanian significance (Oxman 76). This is an evolution and development of Barthes’ concept of the photographic image, and culminates in “The Third Meaning,” where he looks at “a level of the image that resists determinate signification” (Oxman 78). As Bradford Vivian notes:

Individuals indeed produce or appropriate images as mediums of intended, rational, and coherent communication; but images simultaneously disrupt communicative intention, rationality, and coherence. We use or interpret images as mediums of instrumental rhetorical exchange; but their material properties severely qualify their efficacy as mediums of discursive or ideological content. The materiality of the image delimits the claims one can make concerning its argumentative, persuasive, or communicative meaning while concomitantly producing something quite other than intended, rational, or coherent meaning as such. (479)

Barthes, for all his suggestion of photographs as different, “reads” his chosen image just as one might an allegorical painting from the Italian renaissance, recalling Ramus (whom, by the way, he barely considers in his historical examination of rhetoric) in the way that he re-classifies but does not alter the underlying methodology. Besides, it is arguably the case that all works of art contain an aspect of memory, nostalgia, and recall. They evoke, either as frozen or fluid affects. They do so precisely through figures and placement in the same way as the photograph.

For his discussion in “The Rhetoric of the Image,” Barthes explores an advertising image – for Panzani – noting the marginality of the linguistic elements (i.e. the text on the packets), and focussing on the construction of meaning through scattered and disparate signs. Pasta, a net, vegetables, the colour scheme – their placement is connotative of “Italianicity” (33). Later in this essay, he goes so far as to relate these elements to classical figures, such as tomatoes as metonymy, which he sees as the most significant producer of connotators (50). Barthes rejects the constancy of the image as a vehicle of meaning, seeing it instead as “polysemous,” or containing a multiplicity of significations (39), and lacking the fundamental literality of text. Despite this, and despite his apparent need to make distinctions between text, image, and even deliberate creative arts such as drawing, he later speaks of rhetorics as differing perhaps in substance, but not in form (49).

The early Barthes may have been Ramistic in his desire to proclaim the end of the rhetorical and the rise of the semiotic, but he wavered in this conviction never quite abandoned the art. As Doering points out, “Barthes would increasingly use Saussurean terms and mix them with other linguists, but it is not clear that he ever entirely displaced rhetorical analysis as a critical *habitus*” (120). Although it does not have the word “rhetoric” in its title, Barthes’ last work represents a return to rhetorical visuality and the nature of the image. *Camera Lucida*, published initially in

French as *La chambre claire: Note sur la photographie* in 1980, is concerned with the interplay of the *studium* (the field of cultural or educational potential) and the *punctum* (something capable of stabbing, striking, or otherwise piercing the field). As Olim notes, before critiquing the limitations of Barthes' *studium* and noting that the book is itself performative rather than argumentative, this *punctum* is a personal tool, and dependent upon individual experience and perception (101; 114). It is also accidental. In a staged photograph, there is visual rhetoric in contrast, but it leaves Barthes somehow cold:

... when Bruce Gilden photographs a nun and some drag queens together (New Orleans, 1973), the deliberate (*not to say, rhetorical*) contrast produces no effect on me, except one of irritation. (*Camera Lucida* 47, emphasis added)

What follows from this is a search for the "antitheatrical," or un-staged image, which, as Michael Fried has pointed out, is also somewhat predicated on the intention of the photographer, with the *punctum* serving as a kind of "ontological guarantee" (553).

Claudia Pino has characterised Barthes' rhetorical writings across his career as evidence of an "Inexistent Great Work," which would seem to be an accurate description (54). Much of Barthes' rhetorical thought must be guessed at and teased out of a relatively small direct corpus.

The Return to Cicero

Hairong Huang has argued, in a close reading of the rhetorical thought of Nietzsche, Derrida, de Man, and Barthes, that, for the last of these, the oppressive in language is not "the knowledge or the culture it conveys, nor the contents," but rather comes via "the discursive forms through which this knowledge or culture is proposed" (253). This suggests the possibility of a "syntactic resistance" to control, via a subversion of *dispositio*, releasing textuality from limited interpretations and foregrounding the reader (Huang 256). In other words, Huang seems to feel that one can see in Barthes that a struggle against the formal nature of a rhetorical structural methodology becomes a struggle against the forced imposition of ideology.

Whilst this is quite true, it can certainly be argued, however, that nothing in any of Barthes' writing departs very far from Ciceronian rhetoric, or even Aristotelian relativism. The nature of signs as persuaders, the promulgation of ideology through the reading of text, the arrangements of denotation and connotation, the figural nature of signs at an individual level ... all of these still feel somehow classical, clothed as they may be in the exciting robes of Barthes' late Structuralist aesthetic. Transformed, evolved, and made complex, yes, but fundamentally recognisable. Despite the *eleutio* of late 20th-century theory, it after all remains a meta-art, a meta-language; it is self-critical, and has been self-aware from its very beginnings, containing (and utilizing) the very

tools needed to argue against itself. Barthes' definition of semiotics as the "fundamental method of ideological critique" can thus surely equally be applied to rhetoric.

Visuality and rhetoric in a semiotic context are not un-Ciceronian, or, at least, not incompatible with the discourse of Ciceronian heirs through the early modern period. The "realistic" nature of a photograph alone is not sufficient to detach it from the existing discourse of painting as representational. Perhaps, at least for this early Barthes, the division between semiotics and rhetoric is a distinction without a difference. Or, more accurately, rather than a distinction without a difference, one might argue that here Barthes indulges in a difference without a distinction. Like his (decidedly less gifted) sixteenth-century predecessor in this tradition, Barthes-as-Ramus plays with signifiers, but leaves the signified relatively unmolested.

Barthes may have been initially eager to proclaim the death of the old and the triumph of the new, but it is hard to believe that he ever completely escaped from escaped the seductive pull of centuries of intellectual tradition at the heart of Western thought. As Plato's Socrates-puppet demonstrates so unwillingly in *Gorgias*, it often the case that those who wish to argue against rhetoric end up being forced to draw upon it, thus simultaneously entrenching its position.

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Notes

¹ This paper – perhaps more a collection of loosely connected musings than a truly structured polemic – is based in part on a presentation initially given by the author at the University of Edinburgh in March of 2023. It was part of a symposium titled “Interdisciplinary Perspectives on Roland Barthes and the Arts.” The original paper was called “Reading the Arts Rhetorically: Bacon, Barthes, and the Transformation of the Oratorical Metaphor.”

² Unless indicated otherwise, all translations are those of the present author (on whom the irony of this quotation is not lost).

³ For two other works with the word “rhetoric” in the title which did not see print in Barthes’ lifetime, see *Album*, a posthumous collection of his unpublished writings translated by Jody Gladdings.

⁴ Walter Ong, a modern biographer of Ramus, has argued that this might be a fiction, whether one created by Ramus or another (1958, 36-41).

⁵ Rhetoric appears to have passed to Greece from Sicily, where Corax and Tisias, in the dryly ironic words of Harry Caplan, “first saw the uses of argumentation from probabilities” (13).

⁶ This work is modelled closely on Charles Batteux’s 1746 treatise *Les Beaux Arts*.

⁷ Of course this is written somewhat in jest, but there is a certain amount of truth to it all the same. Baumgarten died in 1762, whilst Kant shifted his position from oppositional to one of acceptance with regard to Baumgarten’s theory of aesthetics between his *Critique of Pure Reason* (1781) and *Critique of Judgment* (1790).