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ENG H225

English II Honors with Dr. Henri Wood

## Evoking Emotion: The Visual Rhetoric of World War II Propaganda

### Abstract

*In our media-dominated culture we are constantly bombarded by visual rhetoric and every image we look at leaves some form of influence on us. The instant that we see an image, whether it is a poster, billboard, or picture, we form unconscious biases in our minds. This is the goal of most visual rhetoric, to elicit a response. Visual rhetoric, the use of images to influence or persuade an audience, is used countless times each day but goes unnoticed by most people. One of the most famous and most successful uses of visual rhetoric is found in propaganda posters during World War II. Government-employed artists designed these posters to persuade people to buy war bonds and enlist in the armed forces, among other things. These images depicted determined and patriotic soldiers raising flags or carrying children home to their parents.*

*In this paper, I will illustrate the use of visual rhetoric during the Second World War to demonstrate the mechanics of visual persuasion, of which most people have little understanding. Drawing on the scholarship of Rick Williams, a visual communications scholar, I will analyze several propaganda posters to demonstrate the role of the effectiveness of visual rhetoric while increasing the understanding of how images influence people.*

*Increasing public understanding of visual rhetoric will not only increase the awareness of the many influences people encounter daily. It will also lead to more logical and unbiased decisions due to people recognizing propaganda efforts of the media and interest groups and therefore rationalizing the issues instead of letting emotion control one's thoughts and actions. I claim that visual rhetoric has a profound, yet unnoticed, effect on our culture.*

In our media-dominated culture we are constantly bombarded by visual rhetoric and every image we look at makes some form of impact on us. The instant that we see an image, whether it is a poster, billboard, or picture,

we form unconscious biases in our minds. This is the goal of most visual rhetoric; to elicit a response. Visual rhetoric, the use of images to influence or persuade an audience, is used countless times each day but goes unnoticed by most people. One of the most famous and most successful uses of visual rhetoric is found in propaganda posters during World War II. Government-employed artists designed these posters to persuade people to buy war bonds and enlist in the armed forces, among other things. These images depicted determined and patriotic soldiers raising flags or carrying children home to their parents. In this paper, I will illustrate the use of visual rhetoric during the Second World War to demonstrate the mechanics of visual persuasion, about which most people have little understanding. I will also analyze several propaganda posters to demonstrate the effectiveness of visual rhetoric while increasing the understanding of how images influence people.

## Visual Rhetoric

Visual rhetoric is the use of images to communicate a message intended to evoke a response from the viewer. Rick Williams, a visual communications scholar, asserts that people do not perceive the influence on themselves from an image because most media images are “designed to bypass reason” (Williams 28). Thus, visual rhetoric techniques appeal to *pathos*, a form of persuasion appealing to an individual’s emotions rather than their rational mind, therefore having greater persuasive influence (“The Forest of Rhetoric”). Although it might seem hard to believe that humans can be influenced subconsciously, it can be explained. Neurobiology researchers Joseph LeDoux and Antonio Damasio observed that when the eye observes a visual image, a signal is sent to the neocortex, the part of the brain that houses rational thought. But before the sensory signal is sent there, another signal is sent to the amygdala, the part of the brain that processes emotions and memory (LeDoux). Therefore, before our minds can fully perceive an image, the amygdala is already forming an emotional response and creating a subconscious bias. That is what makes visual rhetoric so powerful—its ability to “communicate directly and instantaneously” and “appeal to our deepest emotions, inner desires, and needs” (Williams 22, 26). Images can easily induce an incredibly wide range of emotion much more easily than words because our memory processes cannot tell the difference between simulated experiences (or images) and real ones (Williams 28). When you see a visual image, such as a poster, the image becomes a reality to your emotional mind and stimulates an emotional response before you process it rationally. It is only when the signal reaches the neocortex that you are able to analyze the image and suppress or

regulate your feelings. Visual rhetoric is intended to circumvent reason and elicit an emotional response. The visual rhetoric uses specific images to create strong emotions to persuade an audience to follow an intended course of action.

## WWII & Propaganda

Some of the best examples of visual rhetoric were posters made during the Second World War. Through these posters I will illustrate how, given the context of the war, propaganda was used and why certain themes and symbols were used.

American involvement in WWII began on December 7, 1941 when the Pearl Harbor Naval Base was bombed by Japanese fighter planes. Before Pearl Harbor, many Americans did not want to get involved in another war, having only recently withdrawn from the Depression a few years earlier and knowing the devastation a World War brings. The surprise attack by Japan, however, became a call to arms for Americans. Support for the war was seen everywhere: children picking up cans for scrap metal, mothers planting victory gardens, and fathers carpooling to conserve gas for the army. Patriotic American citizens were filled with a sense of duty to serve in any way they could. George Roeder, a liberal arts professor, observed that the ways citizens could support the war effort were visible in hundreds of places on propaganda posters, which the government presented as a reminder that “everything citizens did...had an impact on the war effort” (Roeder 141). This gave civilians a sense of “personal involvement in the war” even though they were not directly fighting (Roeder 60).

These posters created support, both material and immaterial, for the war effort by advocating the purchase of war bonds, promoting cooperation between employees and employers, and withholding military intelligence from the enemy (although a vast majority of Americans didn't have any of the latter). The propaganda tactics used in WWII were first honed and developed during WWI, when President Woodrow Wilson declared that it was not just the army that must be conditioned for war, “it is an entire nation” (Raico). Some of these methods included censoring all photographs of dead soldiers and of soldiers engaging in questionable activity such as torturing or raping prisoners of war (Roeder 33). These methods helped keep a positive mentality about the war for the civilians as well as provided the government with funding and resources to continue the war. Wartime propaganda was also used in an attempt to unite the nation in supporting the cause. This national cohesion was attempted by displaying posters advocating cooperation between labor

unions and big industries for the sake of the troops. Class differences were also minimized by wartime imagery through “elevating workers as well as by humanizing big shots” (Roeder 48). Both the emphasis on cooperation between businesses and workers and the supposed de-stratification of social classes were intended to unite the nation under a single cause, particularly because of the wide gap between the upper and lower classes due to the Great Depression. Also, most of the soldiers illustrated in propaganda pieces were white, which was an attempt to prevent social issues from distracting the nation’s attention from the war (Roeder 45). This attempt to gain widespread support was continued by distributing propaganda focusing on positive themes, rather than the more violent ones.

Most propaganda posters did not emphasize the fighting and killing of German and Japanese soldiers. Rather, they appealed to the human sense of compassion and empathy by emphasizing the dangers that the troops faced every day and the sacrifices they were making for those back home. The need for constant support from Americans to buy war bonds, donate scrap metal, and plant victory gardens was highlighted and usually implied the reward of the war ending sooner and the troops returning safe. In one poster titled “Bring him home sooner!” the government conveyed this message with an illustration of a soldier joyously returning home, walking through a white picket fence, and on another poster titled “Carry your share” burdening a large supply bag. These posters impart a sense of responsibility to Americans and appeal to their sense of familial obligations to garner further support for the war effort. This appeal made it easier for government-employed artists to connect with people and remind them of all the sons and fathers overseas protecting their country. The artists made people feel compelled, if not obligated by some patriotic sense of duty, to contribute.

Propaganda during the Second World War also played heavily on the emotions and fears of the people. For example, one poster with the slogan “You can’t afford to miss either” depicted an avian gunner firing rounds at the enemy in order to advocate for regular purchases of war bonds. This subtly implies that if they do not buy on time or are not buying bonds at all, then the man in the poster will suffer because of it. The soldiers were usually depicted with short, dark hair and an attractive face. This was done to reflect the public image of a masculine ideal and maximize viewer identification with the soldiers and increase the chance of persuasion (Fehl). All of these influences incorporated by government-employed artists were included to create a bias within the viewer to support the war, however most influences were not recognized.

## Propaganda Analysis

In the next section I will analyze two propaganda posters in the context of the war period and illustrate the techniques and themes that influence our emotions and biases.

Upon looking at the poster “Deliver us from evil,” there is immediately a sense of dread accompanied by a strong desire to help the little girl featured in the image. There is also a link established between the word “evil” and the swastika because the German Nazis are our enemies and therefore evil, and that the girl must be protected from harm. But why? Taking a step back and looking at the image rationally we can see the themes and techniques used to persuade an audience.

The first aspect is the color scheme. The black and white image conveys a sense of negativity and despair because there are no bright colors that normally illustrate happy moods. Even the blue font reading “Buy War Bonds” is muted and doesn’t stand out, compelling the viewer focus on the girl rather than the intended response in a more natural, less contrived way. The quote at the top of the poster, “Deliver us from evil,” is an excerpt from the Lord’s Prayer, something that most onlookers would be able to recognize because at the time the majority of Americans were Christians. This quote emphasizes the sense of desperation because prayers are commonly associated with a time of great need and obstacles that must be overcome. It also acts as a call to arms for the American population to rise up and fight off the “evil”. The word “evil” is obviously referring to Nazi Germany, symbolized by the swastika in the center of the poster, surrounding a frightened girl. The poster also associates the word “us” with the young girl in the center, asking the viewer to save her and girls like her. Looking at the child communicates a feeling of empathy and suffering because her hair is disheveled, her eyes are tearing up, and her clothing is worn and dirty. The use of a young girl is also a key factor in this example of visual persuasion intended to demonize the enemy. The girl is a symbol of innocence and purity that, in the context of the image, is in danger of being corrupted and tarnished by the Nazi government. This imparts a sense of protection on the viewer to defend the child, as well as creating a strongly negative impression of the German government. Thus, it becomes assumed that the enemy is wrong and therefore we, Americans, are in the right. All of these factors are symptoms linked with hardship and pain with which the viewer is able to identify easily.

Going back to the connection between the word “evil” and Nazi Germany, it can be realized that this link is made because of two factors: the matching colors of the word and swastika and the placement of the symbol surrounding the little girl. In the poster, white is the brightest color and since

both the word “evil” and the swastika are both the same shade of white the eye recognizes this and the mind instantly associates one with the other in the context of the image. As for the position of the swastika, it looks as if it is trapping the little girl and is therefore responsible for the hardship and agony that the girl is experiencing.

The combined effects of associating the word “evil” from the Lord’s Prayer with the swastika causes the viewer to mentally associate Germany and Nazis with negative images that cause civilians to dislike and even hate the Allied enemies and subsequently generate a sense of duty to support for the war effort with the hope that children similar to the one in the poster are protected. And underlying all of these emotions is the subtle message of the poster “Buy War Bonds.” This is intended to be the overall reaction to viewing the propaganda and although it is not overly emphasized, there is no room left for questioning or considering an alternative option. It is a firm, declarative statement with the unsaid “or else” that implies that the child in the poster will suffer if not followed.

The second piece of propaganda I will analyze, “Care is costly,” is also a promotion of buying war bonds. It depicts a wounded soldier sitting down and leaning against a wall, his hands and legs are bandaged and bloodied and his facial expression is one rife with hopelessness. At first gaze, the viewer feels emotions of suffering, anguish, and guilt. This seems to be a fairly natural response to seeing someone in pain because, if you recall, the amygdala, which houses the unconscious mind, can’t differentiate between a real experience and a contrived one. But after our rationalizing functions become active we can interpret the different parts of the visual rhetoric displayed in this image. The main focus of the poster is the injured soldier, whose worn down look of despondency triggers the empathetic link with the audience. The soldier’s unfocused gaze communicates a dazed state or a condition of shock. The bright red color of the blood on the soldier’s leg helps communicate this sense of injury to the viewer. The word “Care” is made so much bigger than all of the others to drive home the point that caring for soldiers in the army’s highest priority, and that is where the funds from any war bond purchases are directed. It implies that the contributions are used to buy medical equipment such as bandages and antibiotics, inferring a direct impact on the soldier’s well-being. The cost of care is emphasized because it places pressure on the audience to buy the war bonds because they aren’t risking their lives fighting for their country, so spending money is not a great sacrifice when compared to that the soldier’s suffering. The guilt that comes with this implication also serves as a means to persuade the viewer to buy war bonds.

Clearly visual rhetoric can be used to aid war support and as propaganda but that is only one example. The true importance lies in the understanding of how these images influence us and how they persuasively communicate to our emotions, in a direct and unfiltered manner. This knowledge can and will allow us to better communicate ideas and arguments and thus enhance the quality of all forms of rhetoric in discourse communities. However, more research needs to be done in the area of visual rhetoric recognition, specifically message resistance. My current hypothesis is that an understanding of visual rhetoric takes away some of the persuasive effect of an image because it enables the viewer to logically dissect the image and analyze whether or not the interest group promoting the image is using sound reasoning in attempting to evoke a response. To expand upon this field, many studies need to take place that observe the difference in the persuasive effectiveness on someone with a solid grasp of visual rhetoric and someone with no knowledge on the subject. Despite the need for this research, this would be a relatively difficult study to conduct because there are so many extraneous variables other than an understanding of the topic, such as intellect, environment, social standing, upbringing, race, religion, age, and gender, among others.

## Conclusion

Visual rhetoric is a constant influence on our lives everyday and a powerful force in shaping our biases and perceptions. The persuasive element of visual rhetoric lies heavily in its ability to instantly connect with our emotional mind before the rational part of the brain is signaled. Visual persuasion through appeal to emotion influences the viewer much more strongly than non-visual methods, evidenced in the effectiveness of WWII propaganda posters. These images rely on their ability to identify the emotional dispositions of the viewer and then compel the individual towards a specific goal, whether it is to buy war bonds or collect scrap metal. Being able to recognize the patterns of visual persuasion and decipher why certain themes evoke certain responses will enable scholars of rhetoric in all fields to be more effective at communicating with their respective discourse communities. Also, increasing public understanding of visual rhetoric will not only increase the awareness of the many influences people encounter daily. It will also lead to more logical and unbiased decisions made due to people recognizing propaganda efforts of the media and interest groups and therefore applying reason to the issue instead of letting emotion control one's actions.





**CARE** is costly



**BUY AND HOLD WAR BONDS**





**YOU** can't afford  
to miss **EITHER!**



**BUY BONDS EVERY PAYDAY**

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