

NON-DISCURSIVE RHETORIC

IMAGE AND AFFECT IN
MULTIMODAL COMPOSITION

JODDY MURRAY



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Multimodal Composition*

JODDY MURRAY

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Introduction

The rhetorical theory espoused in this book is one that attempts to replenish our symbol-making practices with all of our symbol-making textual forms. This theory of non-discursive rhetoric is meant to provide a more integrated view of composing better suited to the contemporary composition classroom. Such a classroom often ask students to compose various hybridized, multimodal texts, and in doing so, students must learn how the imagination is required for logical, reasoned, claim-based argument; how the emotions are not only omnipresent but integral to image and textual production; and how choosing colors for the background of a web page, or choosing the rhythm of a particular kind of drum, or choosing a particular camera angle in snapping a photograph can all work rhetorically in compositions. But how do writing teachers teach these things when most rhetorical training focuses on discursive, print-oriented rhetoric? This book theorizes a new composing model, one that views symbolization and the rhetorics it produces as having two distinct types: discursive and non-discursive. Though each type of symbolization is needed, useful, and important, the latter type is the most neglected in many discussions about symbolization and language.

As I talk to other scholars about the term “language,” however, it has become clear that suggesting an expanded definition of the term has its difficulties. The word and its variants resonate in a Bakhtinian way throughout many discourses, many theorists, many philosophies, and, as such, there seems to be significant resistance among many language theorists to expanding the common use of the term so that it can include all modes of symbolization. The reason I wish to broaden the term language is similar to my reason for suggesting that rhetoric has both discursive and non-discursive symbol systems. Not only should the term language include the specific syntaxes and lexicons of German or Chinese or American Sign Language (i.e., any word-based system, etc.), I would like to also suggest that the term “language” include the symbol systems of music, film, sculpture, dance, et cetera. I could speculate as to the reasons for this resistance, but for now it may be enough to emphasize terms like “symbolization” and

“textual production” rather than exclusively language—though not synonymous, they serve similar purposes here. I point to this resistance in order to broaden this term (which has already been done in many other fields, such as computer science, poetry, and even dance) as only one more indication of the extent to which discursive language is privileged in academia today. Part of this text, then, includes a discussion of what language is or is not, what symbolization is or is not, and what symbol-making tools are actually in use for textual production.

Non-discursive rhetoric, as theorized here, is an important development to rhetors and teachers alike because it provides us a way to talk about rhetoric as it is experienced in many multiple and layered textual modes and media. We are currently experiencing a Gutenberg-like explosion of textual production, one that radically changes the way texts are produced, consumed, and distributed. I avoid using the terms “revolution” or “paradigm shift” because, from a rhetorical point of view, the same tools once available to only a few are becoming more available to an increasing number of people. Textual production itself is being distributed and, consequently, the texts and those who author them are changing and being changed. Rhetoric has always suffered from distribution problems—from the distance one voice may carry in a forum, to the limited production of books and textiles and the limited literacies able to consume these books, to a gradual, though not complete, distribution of rhetorical agency to those who were fortunate enough to learn reading and writing. Historically, rhetoric has been dogged as much by its lack of distribution as by its lack of mass education, and, on a global perspective, this is as true now regarding digital literacy as it was in ancient Greece regarding print literacy.¹ Rhetors have always valued image and emotions, for example, but they both have lacked sufficient consideration within rhetorical theory. Language, often defined traditionally as “articulated sound” or written orality, necessarily limits what can be counted as rhetorical text because of the way it is constructed to function: “abstractly sequential, classificatory, explanatory examination of phenomena or of stated truths” (Ong 8). But rhetoric must be able to escape the confines of any single medium, and as long as the term “language” is only associated with discursive text, it cannot take advantage of all that image and emotions bring to rhetorical texts and their production, much less handle the challenges of hybrid texts that incorporate many modes at once.

This book attempts to emphasize non-discursive text, image, and emotion (or affectivity). Discursive text and the sequentiality of spoken and written language are important, but, as Langer has shown us, it is only part of what we can do with our symbol-making skills. The prevalence of digital tools, as well as the importance of emotions to inventing and composing, both make it necessary to reiterate how language is much more than words; language includes non-discursive forms of meaning-making, forms that take

advantage of image, emotion, and nonsequentiality. In other words, non-discursive symbolization makes it possible to emphasize, analyze, and teach non-discursive rhetoric.

Image, it turns out, is vital to both discursive and non-discursive symbol-making practices. All symbolization, including traditional notions of language, is based in image because our brains function through image. No matter how abstract and disassociated they may become from pictures or illustrations, no matter how mechanical and practical their articles and linguistic placeholders, no matter how fallible and distanced they are from direct communication, symbol and image are virtually synonymous. Though this may not be an entirely new claim, the conflation of symbolization and image in rhetoric and composition may be increasingly important at this current intersection in time: new media studies, visual rhetoric, and visual literacy have all become important new areas of research in our field as scholars begin to get a glimpse of the importance of image to the symbols we make. Communication studies, and most of the history of rhetoric before it, has long accepted the fact that communication takes place through nonverbal means; the suggestion that rhetoric applies to more than just words is not a new one. What I suggest, however, is (1) that although non-discursive symbol systems are somewhat known and theorized, they are largely eclipsed by a strong bias toward alphacentric, or word-based, discursive symbol systems, especially in rhetoric and composition; and (2) that image is central to all symbol systems no matter what its medium or mode.

In addition, there exists a need to acknowledge just how image is theoretically important to our composing practices and pedagogies, as well as a full conception of symbolization itself. This book—drawing from philosophy,² rhetorical theory, neuroscience, and composition studies—posits a theoretical view of image that is elemental to thought, to emotion, and ultimately to composing. In doing so, it provides a conception of symbolization that is not limited to discursive meaning-making but one that values non-discursive symbolization, especially as it applies to rhetorical practice. Such interdisciplinary work carries with it the danger that individual disciplines will not find the work done by others as convincing. However, it also carries the promise that such interdisciplinarity is characteristic of images and image studies in general. By ultimately theorizing a new composing model that incorporates both discursive and non-discursive textual production, I provide a pedagogical aid for contemporary writers.

Connections to Langer

In 1942, Susanne Langer first defined the terms “discursive” and “non-discursive” in *Philosophy in a New Key: A Study in the Symbolism of Reason*,

Rite, and Art. The discursive, the form of symbolization most common to composition classrooms and associated with verbal and written or printed text, includes the kind of language-making in which we “string out” our ideas; it relies on language to be ordered, sequential, and adherent to the “laws of reasoning” often assumed to be synonymous with the “laws of discursive thought” (82). Discursive texts often take the form of the expository essay, the oral presentation, research and argument papers, and the common modes such as narrative and description. The discursive is bound by semantic forms and, consequently, limits itself by those forms because it assumes that the “word” is the only means to articulate thought, and that anything that cannot be directly conveyed by discursive means—i.e., anything unsayable or ineffable—is mere feeling, or too “fuzzy” for serious study. The discursive, therefore, is commonly referred to as “verbal” or “written” communication because, like this paragraph, it aims to convey one idea after another.³

Conversely, the non-discursive is free of such ordering. In fact, its most apparent difference from discursive symbolization is that it often happens at once, is primarily reliant on image (taken here to mean both sensory and mental images), and that it most often becomes employed to symbolize what cannot be said or written directly by the word. Here is what Langer says about the non-discursive:

Visual forms—lines, colors, proportions, etc.—are just as capable of articulation, i.e., of complex combination, as words. But the laws that govern this sort of articulation are altogether different from the laws of syntax that govern language. The most radical difference is that visual forms are not discursive. They do not present their constituents successively, but simultaneously, so the relations determining a visual structure are grasped in one act of vision. Their complexity, consequently, is not limited, as the complexity of discourse is limited, by what the mind can retain from the beginning of an apperceptive act to the end of it [. . .] An idea that contains too many minute yet closely related parts, too many relations within relations, cannot be “projected” into discursive forms; it is too subtle for speech [. . .] But the symbolism furnished by our purely sensory appreciation of forms is a non-discursive symbolism, peculiarly well suited to the expression of ideas that defy linguistic “projection.” (93)

Langer frames the difference between “visual forms” and “words” (her way of simplifying the difference between “non-discursive” text and

“discursive” text) as differing primarily through “laws” that “govern” them. What Langer clarifies later is that images are not just “visual forms” but any form taken by the senses, and these forms are necessarily more complex, in part because they are “simultaneously” received. A non-discursive text is also complex because it “contains too many minute yet closely related parts.” Non-discursive symbolization, therefore, includes those “things which do not fit the grammatical scheme of expression” (88). It is symbolized language, but it is a form not limited to the chain-of-reasoning we require in discursive text. Its strength, in part, is that it can accommodate meaning unsuited to sequencing—unutterable, affective, ephemeral—and that there are connections through images that may lead to further articulation. The value of non-discursive text, therefore, is that it thrives and derives its meaning-making from the complexity and ambiguity of its medium, whereas discursive language works best when it reifies and reduces complexity and ambiguity as it goes along.

Langer must have known that to theorize language one must also theorize the activity and purpose of the human mind. One reason I call for the broadening of the term “language” is precisely due to the discursive bias that exists in what is normally considered language. Langer says a symbol is anything that can “articulate” thought: “Such *expression* [of an idea] is the function of symbols: articulation and presentation of *concepts*” (*Feeling* 26). This kind of articulation can be both discursive or non-discursive, and both carry with them their own brand of logic. She spends a great deal of time, for example, in both *Feeling and Form* and in *Philosophy in a New Key* to situate her theory of symbolization with some consideration of what reason and rationality are mentally:

Rationality is the essence of mind, and symbolic transformation its elementary process. It is a fundamental error, therefore, to recognize it only in the phenomenon of systematic, explicit reasoning [. . .] Rationality, however, is embodied in every mental act, not only when the mind is “at the fullest stretch and compass.” It permeates the peripheral activities of the human nervous system, just as truly as the cortical functions. (99)

Before the days of CAT, MRI, PET, or even reliable x-ray scans, Langer was asking and answering questions about the way our minds function, especially in terms of language.⁴ Remarkably, the connections Langer intuited between the science of the mind and the philosophy of the mind remain today; remarkably still, many of these connections are being validated today by scientific methods she could only imagine.

Connections to Neuroscience

In addition to expanding and enriching the way language is viewed by the field, this book embraces an interdisciplinary view of image and emotions by bringing into composition the work done by neuroscience regarding new research on the way our brains function. As with Langer, these new theories now being investigated by neuroscientists are largely consistent with many of the other theories of language, image, and consciousness offered by theorists as varied as Vygotsky, Bakhtin, Cassirer, Berthoff, and others. The combination of these theorists and the recent work done in neuroscience indicates an emerging view of image that complicates and extends assumptions about the role of image in composing, and provides a great deal of rich theoretical potential for rhetoric and composition.

So how can philosophers and rhetoricians, who study image, emotion, and invention, connect with neuroscience and contribute to our understanding of writing in composition? Although there is more detail about this in chapter 3, it is enough to point out four claims relevant to image, emotions, and consciousness. First, neuroscientists and cognitive psychologists have begun to fully recognize the role image plays in the construction of knowledge: image is not only a basic unit of thought in the brain—the progenitor of language and a component of reason—but image also *shapes* the brain, constructs pathways and nodes which make up such potentialities as personality, health, and acumen. In other words, there are structural and functional elements in the brain that point to the centrality of image to thought—displacing alphacentric language.

Second, consciousness itself is becoming a valid object of study in science, even though consciousness has been eschewed by science in the past because it was thought of as too subjective or unpredictable to yield generalizable results.⁵ Perhaps most relevant to this book is the research done by Antonio Damasio: his claim about consciousness as being made up of images is crucial. Damasio also claims that the making of symbols extends consciousness away from the core consciousness of our evolutionary ancestors to the more advanced, self-aware consciousness located in higher brain functions (such as the cortex and neocortex, as well as areas connected to the frontal lobes) (*Descartes*' 89–90). The difference between the brain and the mind, if there is one, might very well be the difference between perceiving images and being aware of and manipulating those same images.

Third, because image and consciousness are integrated, science is also invested in looking at the role of emotions in all brain functionality; consciousness and our ability to make images are set within an emotional, or affective, context. Damasio, in *"The Feeling of What Happens": Body and*

Emotion in the Making of Consciousness claims that the relationship between image and consciousness comes from our ability to *feel* that we have created images (26). Damasio's point has resonance for those of us studying image in the context of writing. He essentially asserts that it is precisely because we associate feelings with images that we eventually are able to achieve a state of higher consciousness. What this says in terms of this book is simply this: images are not only integral to non-discursive symbolization, they also help form our very sense of who we are.

Finally, the fourth valuable contribution from neuroscience for compositionists is that the connection between image and thought is not representational but cognitive. Damasio makes it clear that mental images are not mirror copies of the real image; we are only able to conjure approximations of images. Damasio finds that nothing less than thought itself is reliant on image: "The factual knowledge required for reasoning and decision making comes to the mind in the form of images" (96). There is therefore a connection between image and any or all of our cognitive abilities. That alone says much about the importance of image to who we are, how we symbolize, and, ultimately, how we think.

In sum, symbolization is dependent on image to do its work of meaning-making. Whether the symbol is a discursive one or a non-discursive one, images not only become stored as approximations in our brains by the experiences we have, but they drive our brains' functioning. Our relationship to image is not just a perceptual relationship; our brains require images in order to operate. Consequently, if we are to integrate this knowledge into our theories of composing and rhetoric, scholars must theorize the relationship of image and the affective domain in a much more complex and integrated way than we have done in the past.

This work from neuroscience, combined with including Langer's conception of non-discursive text, indicates a substantive change in the way rhetoric and composition treats image and composing. As soon as we ask students to consider image as rhetorical, as soon as we create hypertexts, for example, that attempt to displace the linearity of discourse, as soon as there is special attention played to invention and the role of prewriting in the writing process, we are also talking about the role of non-discursive texts in our pedagogy. As such, writers gain a view of composing that posits image as a lexicon of thought and emotion as a carrier of reason. We now have an opportunity to integrate the non-discursive as a framework in our teaching practice applicable to the use of electronic and multimodal texts. As we integrate non-discursive texts into our composition practice, we begin to practice a corresponding writing theory that accommodates the challenges and opportunities of multimodal rhetoric.

Connections to Multimodal Texts

As new media and digital production of symbols promulgates through our culture, writers are refortified in textual modes that were never really lost; due to the ease and historical prevalence of discursive production, these rhetorical practices are now somewhat strange and daunting to us.⁶ The ability to produce text non-discursively is currently necessary—but largely unconsidered—while digital tools make it easier and easier for rhetors to produce multimedia texts: hardware and software with improved interfaces and accessibility are not ubiquitous, but strive to be. As composers, we can no longer ignore these multimodal texts in our classrooms, and this book joins several others in claiming the importance of bringing our classrooms into the twenty-first century by assigning the kinds of texts students will undoubtedly encounter outside of academia. The hegemony of discursive text and orality has worked hard to remove from itself any vestige of its author: we often teach how discursive texts are “logical” and organized, perspicacious and adherent to strict formatting and disciplinary expectations. This is important work and it must continue. The challenge presented here is not one of substitution, rather one of addition: we must continue to teach students to become adept at writing discursive text with its sequential structures, disciplinary expectations, and, ultimately, nonaffective tone; we must also teach students to become adept at “writing” non-discursive texts with its layers, images, and, without a doubt, pervasive affectivity. This particular time in history is not so much requiring that we apply fundamentally new questions to our pedagogy. Rather, it requires that we revalue and reauthorize what has always been important to our symbol-making process: image and affectivity. We can no longer rest on the assumptions that the body and the mind are separate, that affectivity and “logic” are opposites, or that rhetoric and design are fundamentally separate disciplines.

Similarly, inventing, composing, and designing need no longer sound like completely separate, stand-alone processes. One of the consequences of acknowledging the efficacy and rhetorical power of non-discursive text is the knowledge that not only are these elements iterative, they are consubstantial: they exist at once in body, and though their production could be broken down into these elements, they are happening simultaneously even while the text is being read. A theory of non-discursive rhetoric makes possible the advancement, analysis, and pedagogies of all rhetorics employed in multimedia, not just those based in the printed word, and not just those labeled “visual.” We can include under the umbrella of non-discursive rhetoric all of the sensual ways information reception can be rhetorical: visual, haptic, aural, olfactory, and gustatory. By dividing symbol-making into discursive and non-discursive text, it is possible to consider the meaning potential-

ties of each form, one potentially good at leading the audience through a constructed sequence of meaning placed in time, and the other potentially providing an experience irrespective of time or sequence, built upon layers of unuttered and at times unutterable, meaning and affectivity.⁷

This book attempts to revisit the connections between symbolization and image in order to imagine a theory of non-discursive rhetoric: a theory that both acknowledges and values image and the affective domain as critical to the way writers invent and compose text—especially multimodal texts created with digital tools—as a way to achieve consensus, form communities, make connections, build knowledge and/or persuade. Chapters 1 and 2 revisit Susanne Langer’s theories about language as a way to first make some claims about symbolization that are important to this theory, and then review some of the ways visual rhetoric and visual literacy are discussed in rhetoric and composition. Chapter 3 focuses on the way cognitive science and advances in neuroscience have begun to understand the connections between thought and language, specifically those advances relevant to image, and how important the affective is to the way our brains function. Finally, chapters 4 and 5 conceptualize ways in which we must help students invent and compose, advocating in the end a new composing model designed to accommodate the flux between discursive and non-discursive texts.

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CHAPTER 1

Non-discursive Symbolization

What is non-discursive rhetoric? The following chapters attempt to answer this by proposing that the stuff of rhetoric—the symbols used—includes more than the ordered, grammatical, and codified linearity of discursive text. In fact, rhetoric throughout history has often taken advantage of our ability as a species to symbolize through non-discursive text, a text that is more than the linear, largely nonaffective, and enthymemic set of resources found in discursive text; more than the one-to-one correspondence between sender to message to receiver; and more than any supposition that symbolization is primarily a set of (arbitrary) linguistic sign systems useful in communicating thought transparently from sender to receiver. Rhetors have always known about the power of a particular orator's tone of voice, the use of gesture at key points in a speech, appeals to patriotism and the emotions, the use of vivid imagery and storytelling, and even the value of grooming and general appearance: manipulation of any one of these elements has a direct affect on the audience. Over time, however, as rhetoric became increasingly bound to the printed word, it also became bound to discursive symbol-making. As rhetoric became more and more reliant on written discourse, the non-discursive aspects of rhetoric became more and more ancillary, even rejected altogether as logical positivism and rational discourse prevailed during the modern age—vestiges of which still dominate today.¹

As a result, the view that language is primarily a vehicle for the communication of ideas continues to dictate the way textual production is theorized today. One such discursive symbolization systems is the Shannon-Weaver view of communication—a paradigmatic example of how texts are discussed: symbols “communicate” by sending “information” through a medium between sender and receiver.² Obviously, this use of symbols is acceptable and necessary—as compositionists, it literally exemplifies what we most often are asked to do. However, even the Shannon-Weaver theory of communication eventually acknowledges the complexity that emerges from human symbol systems left unaccounted for in discursive symbolization. And as Langer states, “If the mind were simply a recorder and transmitter,

typified by the simile of the telephone-exchange, we should act very differently than we do" (*New Key* 36). Non-discursive symbolization is simply a term that accounts for the many other ways humans use symbols to create meaning—methods wholly outside the realm of traditional, word-based, discursive text. With this distinction in symbolization, then, comes a distinction in rhetoric; non-discursive rhetoric is the study of how these symbol systems persuade, evoke consensus, become epistemological, and organize or employ intended results in human behavior. In short, non-discursive rhetoric is to non-discursive symbolization what discursive rhetoric is to discursive symbolization.³

The terms discursive and non-discursive provide another way to talk about symbolization, or language. Susanne Langer's main claim in *Philosophy in a New Key* is that humans are capable, even practiced, at much more than communicating discursive information in sequence. By including all symbol systems as a legitimate part of our repertoire of language (some of which—specifically ritual, art, and dreams—may only be internalized by the individual), the tools available to any composer become complete, no longer limited to convey merely the "facts of consciousness" (36). On the other hand, it is too often the case that the communicative role of symbols becomes the entire concept of symbolization; that in our efforts to create and clarify our discursive texts, we often overlook the pivotal role of non-discursive composition. In contrast, the view of meaning-making proposed here necessitates and values all that our symbols—though especially image—can do: affectivity, circularity, ambiguity, incongruity, and even ineffability.

The main consequence of Langer's insistence on including *both* discursive and non-discursive texts in her theory of symbolization is that it broadens the landscape for rhetoric. By considering non-discursive texts, all possibilities of symbolization become tools for the rhetor: the symbols of math, music, textiles, food, poetry, commerce, violence, inaction, and even silence. The world is text because we read the world as symbols, and, in turn, create symbols to be read.⁴ Jacques Derrida acknowledges this in *Of Grammatology*, and his notion of the sign continually rewriting itself is consistent with the way symbolization is viewed here: what we know about the human ability to symbolize is that we must, and that we do it often, and that such symbolization itself recreates itself as it goes along.⁵ We create and produce symbols whether or not we are educated or uneducated, within a community or alone, naïve or wise, destitute or wealthy, sleeping or awake. Symbol-making consists of more than its discursive function, more than Roman Jakobson's six "constitutive factors of any speech event" (as one example), more than the traditional sender-messenger-receiver paradigm.⁶ Rather than consider symbolization to be primarily communication in the absence of noise, I prefer to think of symbolization as encompassing all of

our powers to create and manipulate meaning and emotions through a wide variety of symbols beyond the discursive word.

As I illustrate more fully later, a view of symbolization that accounts for both discursive as well as non-discursive texts can provide a more integrated view of composing better suited to the contemporary composition classroom: one that encourages the powers of the imagination not just for what is often labeled “creative” writing, but for logical, reasoned, claim-based argument as well; one that acknowledges the value of emotions not just in so called “expressivist” or “personal” writing, but also in the kind of social awareness and normal, rational decision-making we encounter every day; one that views text not just as printed paragraphs on a 8.5 x 11 inch sheet of paper, but as any kind of symbolization: digital or analog, 2-D or 3-D, haptic, olfactory, or gustatory. The key element, the piece that has been missing in our composing models—in the way we view symbolization, and in the way we discuss the rhetorical implications of any text—is the value of the non-discursive.

Langerian Symbolization

It is crucial to begin with symbolization systems to show the impact image has to our textual production because traditional conceptions of language may be too narrow to allow for non-discursive elements—elements that I argue are often as important as discursive elements of text. The terms “symbolization,” or, sometimes, “language,” are not intended to refer to grammar systems, or a particular brand of linguistically codified rules and procedures that communicate or produce meaning and emotion.⁷ Symbolization, as I mean it here, is the very nature of a human symbol-use in all forms—both discursive and non-discursive. By symbolization I mean the act of cognizance at the very beginning of our lives that is hard wired, innate, inevitable, and most characteristic of our species—a definition very similar to Suzanne Langer’s: “The symbol-making function is one of man’s primary activities, like eating, looking, or moving about. It is the fundamental process of his mind, and goes on all the time” (*New Key* 41). Symbolization, therefore, goes on all the time and is part of who we are.

As many other theorists have noted, symbolization is learned socially, within a culture, and with immediate emotional consequences and shadings. But symbolization or our use of language is rarely if ever talked about this way when it is mentioned in theoretical or pedagogical texts: language has traditionally been biased toward discursive meaning-making and little else (just as this text is). Although it is true that this line between discursive and non-discursive text is often blurry (that both have elements of each other