

An Analysis of the Rhetorical Nature of Comic Books

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Today people are inundated with visual messages from the mass media, an inundation that has grown ever larger due to technological advances. These visual images use a combination of logos, ethos, and pathos to lull people into a false sense of independence, individuality, and freedom of mind. To resist this rhetorical persuasion, people must use a new type of literacy that most people are unaware they have. This new type of literacy has been termed "visual literacy" by scholars (see Elkins) or "visual rhetoric" (see Handa). Since visual literacy has not been emphasized much by educators in the past, the public does not always understand how to interpret the true purposes or hidden motives that visuals impose upon their readers. Specifically, the true purpose of visuals is not always recognized when they are seen in any number of genres, including comic books, and audiences do not always realize what the visuals are arguing. What people infrequently acknowledge is that elements of persuasion are present in every visual image. The visual images presented by a comic book can have serious implications for society's value systems. In particular, mainstream popular culture comic books from the publishers Marvel and DC Comics as well as Image Comics, IDW, and other independent publishers use visual images to promote a particular set of American values to their readers. These values include what the ideal man and woman should look like as well as promoting patriotism through the use of intrigue by means of sophistication, nostalgia, and sex appeal.

A general misconception about comics (or comic books) is that they are childish and for adolescents. Comics are much more than mere childish entertainment. Instead, comic books have literary and artistic value that is not just for the masses but also for the high-brow educated elite (B. Burke). The writer and artist place as much thought into creating a comic book as does a novelist or short fiction writer. Both present a story to an audience, but the presentation is slightly different. The novelist or short fiction writer is creating a story through words which, in a sense, is only two-dimensional. The comic book writer and artist must not only create a story using words, but also exchange textual description and narration for graphic depictions. The effectiveness of the story relies on the how

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the text and the graphic art are brought together to complement each other.

Scholars have argued the academic value of comic books, and the medium of comic books can be seen as a story that incorporates sequential art (Eisner). Comics have been critiqued as juvenile entertainment and not for the academic elite. On the other hand, I believe comics tell us much more about culture, mythology, and literary ideals. Image and text coexist in a dichotomy that enhances the cognitive value of the other. In short, a comic book is a form of iconography. Gilbert defines "iconography" as "a story within a work of art" (68). In this essay, I highlight how some comics tell a story that is rhetorical in nature and promotes a specific set of American ideals.

The Nature of Reading Comic Books

McCloud defines comics as "a vessel which can hold any number of ideas and images" (4). Comics are also "intended to convey information and/or to produce an aesthetic response to the viewer" (9), much like any other text. The images can be referred to as an "Icon" (27) because an icon is used to represent "any person, place, thing or idea" (27). Fleming categorizes pictures or images, with or without accompanied text, as a form of argument. Fleming rationalizes that pictures can be suggestive, persuasive, and driven towards a cultural and social rationale (11). Blair also asserts that images and/or pictures can be "influential in affecting attitudes" and "more powerful than a single verbal assertion" (23). Icons are used to focus the reader not on the lack of realism, but to amplify the "specific details" (10).

In Will Eisner's *Comics and Sequential Art*, the task of reading a comic is addressed. Comics, or graphic novels, are different from most other media/genres because, as stated before, they incorporate images into the actual reading task; the reader ingests the words and images simultaneously. In addition, without text, the images can still convey the message of the author. Eisner illustrates the function of reading a comic book in the following passage:

The reading process in comics is an extension of text. In text alone the process of reading involves word-to-image conversion. Comics accelerate that by providing the image. When properly executed, it goes beyond conversion and speed and becomes a seamless whole. In every sense, this misnamed form of reading is entitled to be regarded as literature because the images are employed as a language. There is a recognizable relationship to the iconography and pictographs of oriental writing. When this language is employed as a conveyance of ideas and information, it separates itself from mindless visual entertainment. This makes comics a storytelling medium. (Eisner 5-7)

It is also apparent that visual arguments escape the limits of verbal meaning. Birdsell and Groarke state, "Visual images can be vague and ambiguous" (2). This allows for multiple interpretations and not

just one concrete interpretation that a verbal argument gives. Where meaning is limited to that of the text/verbal articulation, a visual image conjures countless text/verbal articulations for constructing interpretations. The end result is multiple meanings and multiple interpretations with some interpretations being more persuasive than others.

Visual Rhetoric

Comics are a form of visual communication of cultural ideals as their images contain rich visual symbolism (Blair 24). Bongco clarifies the purpose of comics as both constitutive of and rebelling against the ideas of the people and the nation. Bongco says readers are cognizant of a hegemonic or dominant mentality and comics are perceived as either rebelling against or catering to this mentality. Critics frequently echo this sort of construction, either attempting to align comics with those forces that assert legitimization of the common or dominant cultural values, what some see as "standard American" values. Bongco explains that comics often promote these dominant values:

The uses of cultural forms to maintain social control, the relations between dominant and subordinate cultural forms, the possibility of cultural authenticity, the necessary relations between technological progress and cultural decline, the corrupting effects of generally accessible forms of culture, the hierarchies imbued in categorizing forms, and the gender roles in cultural production and consumption are all areas which have been explored in this general critical project. (30)

In particular, Bongco notes how the institution of the Comics Code, which standardized and censored comics content, led comic books to offer constructions of social relations that presented a unified notion of "the American people." It is these same paradigms that recent comic books now work to de-construct (Bongco 26).

One way to understand the rhetorical function of comics is in what Kenneth Burke terms "Motivations." Burke says motivations are meant to create four states of being in readers: compliance, dominance, inducement, and submission. Burke highlights each of these states of being as a means of accomplishing a unit response (34). In the case of comic books, compliance comes when the reader yields to the suggestive imagery of comic books. Dominance occurs when the artist and writer impose or reinforce the ideals of society on the reader. Inducement is the advertisement of the actual comic books that demonstrate some type of sexual appeal or aesthetic reason to pick up the comic book to read it and be subjected to the ideals of society. Submission is the passivity a reader reaches if he/she is not willing to completely believe the ideals presented in the visual argument but is nevertheless willing to accept them as a possible reality.

The "occupational psychosis" or a pronounced mindset that Kenneth Burke describes is the contextual frame of mind for society that

the rhetor considers when “socializing” his art of trade. If one were to stress a certain pattern of sex appeal in an argument, then one must assume the cultural mindset of the society. In doing so, Burke further explains, “He builds and manipulates the intellectual and imaginative superstructure which furthers the appropriate habit-patterns useful to his particular economic system” (40). However, Burke expands this beyond the economic systems of society and into the thought patterns of society. By “stressing patterns of thought,” the subjects (the audience to whom the rhetor attempts to persuade) will shape analogously to the patterns of work. Burke explains this phenomenon of citizens falling into this trap:

And today, our psychotic openness to fads, the great cry for innovation engendered by competitive capitalism, could seem to be in keeping with the marked unsteadiness of our economic and social expectancies. (39)

The rhetor accomplishes this task by flaunting the hopes, fears, and idealizations of the culture and society through style and ingratiation. For example, since American popular culture is often obsessed with sex. Thus, by utilizing images and phrases (vernacular) of sexual innuendo, a rhetor can successfully cross the communicative medium between rhetor and audience by taking advantage of this sexual psychosis. For the rhetor, in this case the comic book artist and writer, to tap into this sexual psychosis, they must use explicit, even exaggerated, sexual imagery, and link it to popular artistic styles and universal story themes with culturally relevant details.

Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca discuss of the role of presence or “the displaying of certain elements on which the speaker wishes to center attention in order that they may occupy the foreground of the hearer’s consciousness” (142). If the content has presence, it will stand out to the reader. Kenneth Burke discusses how sexual impulses can govern the way a person thinks because as sexual beings, we are drawn to the sexual. In Burke’s words, “since sexual matters are of great importance, a pattern of thinking may reveal itself noticeably in the patterns of sexual thinking” (27). Through sexual symbolism, sexual or non-sexual ideas can be hidden. The sexual image will be what the reader stops to examine first and foremost. Comics often make use of this type of sex appeal. The issues where artists draw their female characters in sexually erotic fashions are the issues that are sometimes the most difficult to find because they sell out. Comics utilize this explicit sex appeal to convey a particular set of dominant social values.

When the artist and writer of a comic book sit down and plan their story, they strategize their point of attack on the reader: “How are we going to get the reader to pick up our comic book off the shelf?” Connecting to the audience and developing context is important. To create this context, the writer and the artist must consider this audience. Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca state, “The audience, as visualized by one undertaking to argue, is always a more or less systematized construction” (19). The task for the writer and artist of the comic book is to consider a “typical” audience. Who reads comic books? Typically, young adolescent males are the primary

reading demographic for comic books. How can creators get that demographic to buy a comic book? Most male adolescents are drawn to sexually charged imagery. Aristotle advocates this claim as he suggests developing the argument so that it dwells upon the reader's "habits, virtues and vices" (165). Aristotle states, "The young are prone to desires and inclined to whatever they desire. Of the desires of the body they are most inclined to pursue relating to sex, and they are powerless against this" (165).

Sexual Imagery in Comic Books

Burke asserts that sex or sex appeal is used to propagate literature (129). If elements of sex are what we see on a normal basis, then the most daring and controversial elements of sex will attract people's attention the most. To externalize is to make cogent (K. Burke 25), or an attempt at socialization; it creates an appeal to the audience. In this case, it's the writer and artist's attempt at creating a sexual appeal that will attract a consumer to a given comic book.

The overt sexual imagery of comics is a way of intriguing readers to buy more issues. For example, Zenoscope's comic publications are regularly offered in "variant" cover versions. The variants are often much more sexually provocative than the original cover. With each issue of *Grimm Fairy Tales* or *Grimm Fairy Tales* miniseries, a set of variant covers is offered for each issue starting with "Cover B." These covers often depict fairy tale characters, like Snow White, in hyper sexualized portrayals. Retailers can order as many of each variant as they wish depending on customer demand. Typically, the rarer the variant, the more valuable it becomes. However, the sexuality depicted on the covers of the Zenoscope variant issues is generally exclusive to the covers. The interior artwork is rarely sexually explicit, and the quality of art is far inferior to that of the cover art. This helps show that sexually explicit art on comics covers is aimed to attract a reader to pick the comic book up off the shelf.

Although the Zenoscope publications use blatant sexual art, most mainstream superhero comics do not appear to be openly sexualized. However, the way super heroes are drawn plays upon the sexual psychosis of readers. One way of taking advantage of the male adolescent's sexual psychosis is to emphasize the explicit with exaggeration. DC Comics' character Harley Quinn is an example of this. Starting with the New 52's *Suicide Squad*, Harley Quinn was reimagined from her harlequin inspired bodysuit to a stripper-esque cheerleader rogue. Her first solo issue publication, issue #0, had four printings due to high sales. Each reprinting was published with an alternative variant cover that presented Harley Quinn in a different erotic pose.

This phenomenon is widespread in comic literature. Take, for instance, how the character Witchblade is typically drawn starting with her first published issue. Sara Pezzini gains super powers by wearing a magical bracelet. However, when this bracelet is activated, it morphs into a gauntlet by shredding her regular clothes. Without her clothes, Witchblade's gauntlet barely covers her most intimate curves. Her physique is over-exaggerated with a large bust, long hair,

thin waist, and flat abdominals. The positioning of the character is also sexually explicit. *Witchblade's* action poses drawn on many of the covers and interior pages exemplify the idealization of her figure. Many of her stances resemble poses one might find in an issue of *Playboy*.

In 2004, Michael Turner revitalized Wonder Woman with the same art style he used for *Witchblade*. Wonder Woman is not drawn as blatantly erotic as *Witchblade*, but her supermodel physique is noticeable as Michael Turner draws her in *Superman/Batman* #9 and #10 and *Identity Crisis* # 4. Wonder Woman is drawn standing strong and confident yet still able to be recognized as a sexual object. Much like Sara Pezzini, Wonder Woman's female form is exaggerated and idealized.

In addition, Michael Turner uses his artistic rhetoric on Superman of *Action Comics* and *Superman*. In Michael Turner's depictions, Superman is shown to be in the peak of physical fitness. Artistic images like this are used to uphold the utilitarian attitudes of a culture of perfection in body image, attitude, and actions (K. Burke 72). Like the superheroines mentioned before, Superman's idealized figure is also reflective of socio-cultural ideas of perfection. While the reasons for and the implications of that idealization differ between male and female characters, the idealization still exists in comic literature.

Michael Turner's constructed imagery of the male form implies the idea that men who look like Superman have more social and cultural capital than those men who do not look like Superman. Take for instance the imagery of Superman and Wonder Woman from the cover of *Superman/Batman* #8 where Superman, Batman, and Wonder Woman are illustrated standing together representing the "trinity" of DC's superhero mythology and continuity. To the average comic reader, these three superheroes are elite not just because they are the most renowned but also because they represent the socially and culturally ideal physiques for men and women. Again, Turner is not the innovator of this line of thought with his art, instead he is reinforcing what other comic illustrators for many years.

Burke has stated that our mind is a "social product" (173), and we associate our personal image with the images that are projected onto us through our culture. These images and ideals do evolve over time, however. By looking at how comics have been drawn in the past versus how they are drawn today, we can gain some insight into how these cultural ideals have been evolving. When looking at how Superman was drawn in the late 1950s (see image Superman #2), one can see he has a bulging midsection, less defined musculature in the arms and chest, and a square jaw line that protrudes from his face—a statement of male dominance and power. If one were to compare this image of Superman to the muscle magazines of the era, the body builder's physique would be similar to that of Superman. The Superman of today (see image Superman #1 & 3) is much more detailed in body physique and facial expression. The noticeable physical trait in newer interpretations of Superman is the emphasis on musculature and facial features. Superman is drawn to have the face of a model, with perfect good looks. While Superman has always been physically idealized (no matter the era), the modern incarnations of the char-

acter reflect how his power is physically represented rather than what the powers actually do. In other words, his value as a modern character is rooted equally in how he appears as well as what he does.

Even though the physical features of Superman and Wonder Woman have changed as cultural standards have changed, the one thing that still holds true like an immovable “rock” (Burke 173) is what these characters stand for: the ideal patriotic American who fights for what is right and good for all. Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca point out that the subtle and the specific have more of an effect on the imagination than the generally vague (147). Artists in comics avoid being generally vague by how they illustrate characters and their settings, thus creating desired emotional responses in their readers.

Artistic images can also cultivate ideals through antithesis (Burke 94). Images of an exaggerated opposite can also define cultural standards. In comic books, an antithetical morality is defined by drawing and writing villains to represent the opposite of cultural ideals. Having discussed Superman and Wonder Woman earlier, it is productive for this essay to look at their arch-nemeses. Superman’s arch-nemesis is Lex Luthor, a balding businessman (or in some stories a mad scientist) whose solitary presence suggests a lack of affection or romantic relationship. Wonder Woman’s villains frequently juxtapose her aesthetic and are usually characterized by their ugliness. Take for instance the Hellhounds of Apokolips who are drawn as overweight, wrinkled, and haggard-looking—completely non lady-like in appearance and actions; women with these characteristics are, therefore, made to be thought of as undesirable.

Comic Books’ Role in Promoting Cultural Values

Comics can certainly work to define an idealized version of beauty or use a sexualized version of that ideal to draw readers’ attentions. Comics are also often used to promote other social norms. For example, U. S. patriotic values have often been promoted using comics. A useful illustration of this is examining how the comic book *G.I. Joe* has been developed to promote patriotic and militaristic ideals. *G.I.-Joe: A Real American Hero* has existed, as a comic book, since 1982. In *G.I.-Joe*, the men and women that serve this military special missions force are clean-cut with no unsightly features and have well defined physical features. Add to this their fashionable tastes in wardrobe, and an idealization of the perfect Special Forces op is created. Specifically, a Joe (which is how members of the special unit are labeled), such as Duke, resembles a stereotypical “All American” with a confident smile, blonde hair, blue eyes, and muscular stature. Similarly, the original G.I. Joe female character of Scarlett is drawn as the team’s red-headed vixen. Scarlett’s love interest is Snake-Eyes, who is the ninja/commando of the Joe team. Unlike his teammates who are dressed in standardized kaki colors, Snake-Eyes is dressed all in black to visually and artistically establish him as the black sheep of the team. Snake-Eyes, despite his solitary nature, is found to be the most popular of all the Joes with comics read-

ers because they personally associate with this character yearning to be the one man army commando who can control and manipulate any situation to his liking.

The G.I.-Joe team's enemy, Cobra, is written and illustrated to be the antithesis of the patriotic American hero. Members of Cobra are drawn with unsightly features, bumbling antics, and participate in terrorism with Cobra Commander as their leader. Cobra Commander is the prime example of the disgruntled, ungrateful, and unpatriotic American citizen who decides to take over the government rather than be subjected to its governance. Cobra also has its own ninja/commando named Storm Shadow who is meant to be the opposite of Snake-Eyes. Storm Shadow is the ninja clan brother of Snake-Eyes who was captured and brainwashed to be Cobra Commander's main body guard. Whereas Snake-Eye's uniform is all black, Storm Shadow wears an all-white garb. Artists use these dichotomous images to present a visual representation of good and evil.

G.I.-Joe is a comic book about being patriotic because it reminds the reader why there is a constitution and why the American public needs a government to protect them. The comic's purpose is to also refocus any negative public views of the American army, particularly in the wake of the Vietnam War. The *G.I.-Joe* comic series was created in the early 1980s to give a fresh face to the U.S. military and, in effect, to romanticize the military for adolescents. The G.I.-Joe team was written to be the epitome of American patriotism. Writers such as Larry Hamma accomplished this feat with some underlying uses of sex appeal. Hamma created a team of co-eds that did not follow the strict dress code of the U.S. military. Scarlett was one of many characters added to the line-up who was sexualized. Scarlett's uniform, like other future female Joe recruits, was form fitting and accentuated her physique. As for the other Joes, each Joe was created to represent a different personality type within the American public so that the reader could relate to and find personal significance in reading each issue. *G.I.-Joe's* adventures were unrealistic yet stimulating with intrigue, suspense, and physically idealized characters in form-fitting uniforms.

When the G.I.-Joe team was first introduced to the American public in the early 1980s as a toy (the toy line based on the cartoon, updated from the original toys sold in the 1960s), the evil organization (Cobra) was referred to ambiguously as "The Enemy." It wasn't until the autumn of 1982 that the comic's writers and illustrators redesigned G.I.-Joe's arch-nemesis as Cobra. Cobra has a biblical connotation in relation to the serpent that tricked Adam and Eve into disobeying God. This clever placement of the biblical connotation along with their anti-American characteristics established Cobra as the ultimate and ideal evil enemy of the United States.

A Rhetoric of Nostalgia

Because comics have been in publication since the 1930s, they allow for one more powerful form of rhetorical argument: a rhetoric of nostalgia. Comics can appeal to certain readers by mimicking the

appearance of older comics. Again, *G.I. Joe* is useful for exploring this phenomenon.

When Larry Hamma's first began the *G.I. Joe* series in the 1980s, his artwork was relatively simple. Hamma did not try to imitate ideal body forms. Details were given to muscle tone, and fashion style was not a major priority in his rendering of the characters. The only thing that directed or dictated how a character was drawn was how similar that character was to his/her toy version. When Image, and then Devil's Due, began publishing *G.I.-Joe* again after a seven year hiatus, the new Image artists illustrated the title's characters with a devotion to detailing physiques that were more reflective of contemporary comics' awareness of idealized figures. Characters were updated to reflect changes in the comics industry.

With each artist's rendering of the characters in the *G.I.-Joe* comic books, the art evolved from the cartoonish form of Larry Hamma to a more realistic style and form. When the Image/Devil's Due *G.I. Joe* run concluded in 2007, the comic book was rebooted by IDW Publishing into two separate concept lines. The first concept line was not just a reimagining of the title in the form of a new art style, the story was also reimagined. Instead of following and continuing what had been done in the 1980s, IDW's version of *G.I.-Joe* established its own new storyline (continuity). This new storyline also included changes to the appearances of the characters. Most of the characters were now rendered in standardized military fashion that made it hard to identify which character was which in a given panel. Both the story premise and the art concepts innovated the *G.I.-Joe* line for a newer generation of readers.

Far more interesting, though, was the second concept book of *G.I.-Joe* by IDW Publishing. This series was a continuation of the original Larry Hamma run of the book with Hamma returning as the main writer for the series. It had been more than fifteen years since the cancellation of the original *G.I. Joe* title, but instead of reimagining the art design of the characters like the Image artists did, Hamma simply retained the art style he had originally used. This was a direct rhetorical appeal to the nostalgia of an older readership that had first fallen in love with *G.I.-Joe* comics. The series revisited the original storylines, but no longer had to market a toy line in the way the original comic series had. Nostalgia then became a factor in the marketing of the comic book as it catered to past readers' emotions instead of relying on establishing fresh stories and contexts.

A nostalgic rhetoric can, in fact, be seen in a number of the '80s revival pop culture comic book lines available today that began in the early 2000s. Nostalgic rhetoric, a rhetoric that appeals to a reader's sentimentality, is employed in these comics to market to a customer base that grew up in the 1980s and '90s. A recent book, *Transformers Versus G.I.-Joe*, uses the same art forms that were used in the 1980s cartoon depictions of the *G.I.-Joe* and *Transformers* television shows. Since the cartoon was more widely recognized than the Hamma comic book renditions, the cover series' first issue was designed to represent the first issues of the '80s comic series of *Transformers* and *G.I.-Joe* (Scioli 21).

Conclusion

It should by now be apparent that comic books are far more than juvenile fluffy reading material. Comics are filled with a broad range of rhetorical appeals. Comic artists choose how they want to render their subjects in hopes to appeal to potential comic buyers. They use sexual appeal, but also rely on cultural value appeals and nostalgia. These rhetorical appeals are used to motivate readers to take part in the experience of comic books and their mythologies. In response to such rhetorical moves, teachers should work to help students develop their visual literacy skills. Helping students to gain a better understanding of how rhetoric operates in visual media can make students more critical readers not only of comic books but all visual genres.

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