

Introduction

A young artist stands twenty feet above the ground on an old wooden ladder. Delicate brush strokes are adding color and detail to an image on the side of a grocery store's northeastern wall in a downtown, American city. The image, a public mural coming to life, features a pomegranate tree prominently standing in the center. The shadowy outline of a factory rests to the right of the tree. Tall smoke stacks rising from the factory, releasing billows of smoke into the air, are visible through the artist's semi-stable, weather beaten ladder. Faint but discernable outlines of heavy vehicles are traveling down the side of a mountain on a road littered with bones and death. To the tree's left, a much healthier scene is beginning to take form. Colors often found in a healthy garden surround a large group of people gathered in a beautiful field. They sit at picnic tables in front of well-groomed farmland. The muralist is bringing a scene of contrasting imagery to life and is following a strategy that intentionally fails to unify the piece in a single, straightforward message.

The syllabus indicated we were in week nine of my first upper division rhetorical studies course before I could even voice a working definition of "rhetoric." The term is elusive. It is perhaps fitting that we have an abundance of definitions for rhetoric, a subject inherently involving ambiguity, subjectivity, and the development of a shared conciseness. Given this opacity, rhetoric's classic connection to persuasion, and people's inherent distrust of each other, it is no wonder the art has had a difficult time shaking its negative reputation since the days of Plato's assaults. Anyone who loves the rhetorical tradition may have a fair amount of empathy for non-academic audiences, and their contempt for the subject matter, as the twenty-four hour

news cycle bombards modern populations with the buzz words “empty rhetoric” as a characterization of politician’s vacuous, malicious, and intentionally evasive speech.

Though few people outside scholarship seem interested in exploring this unwelcoming and distasteful style of human interaction, rhetoric as the sophists practiced the tradition was an art of everyday speech. Rhetorical concepts should not be confined to the academy and are digestible when clarified, translated into everyday language, and framed in common vernacular. A few years ago, I decided to change career paths and I set my sights on collegiate instruction in an attempt to improve the lives of others by demystifying some of these theories. Coincidentally, I also began volunteering my time supporting the local art scene. Through these personal and professional experiences, I came to believe many artists already understand some of the ideas contained within commonly held social constructivist ontologies found in communication studies. The formulation of shared realities through the creation of artwork and public interaction is not a foreign notion to these communities. By making the different rhetorical techniques more clear, I hope to help artists have more flexibility and agility in the decisive application of persuasive techniques already available to them.

Public art, in particular, has many functions, purposes, and styles. These styles can be crafted to serve different objectives. In fact, the term “style” itself is often used to convey different meanings. Although particular color palates, symbols, and general themes may not vary a great deal within a particular form of expression, the rhetorical style of a piece can play an important role in shaping the artist’s message, thereby influencing the subsequent effect a piece may have on an audience. These stylistic characteristics often serve as the skeletal structure on which the intent, scope, delivery, and end product of the message depend.

All art has a message. Concerning public art, some pieces invite democratic deliberation better than others. My project seeks to demystify, clarify, and examine the differences between those murals that do so well and those that do not. The primary objective of this project is to help artists realize and employ the potential public art offers to generate democratic culture by exploring one strategy in particular: juxtaposition. By framing public art that employs juxtaposition as stylistic equipment for creating democratic culture and democratic action, and by differentiating that style from others, lay audiences will likely gain a better understanding of how these texts can play a significant role in fostering an interactive world. The body of easily accessible information available to the public that describes this concept, while also detailing the process necessary for this type of analysis, seems to be quite limited. My project focuses on murals exclusively, as they are the most common form of public art ("Americans for the Arts").

The end product of my project is an educational resource for both scholarly and non-scholarly audiences. The project has resulted in a website for all audiences which illuminates and clarifies these particular rhetorical concepts in a digestible manner. It is an attempt to share with working artists and other public audiences some of the theories and concepts discussed within rhetorical scholarship and suggest a form of rhetorical praxis for those not operating within academia. This free educational resource provides artists with techniques for examining or evaluating murals to help assess the painting's democratic potential.

This project has changed since the prospectus was approved. Though originally rooted almost entirely in Kenneth Burke's, "Literature as Equipment for Living," a larger influence now comes from Robert E. Terrill's "Spectacular Repression: Sanitizing the Batman." Terrell's essay thoroughly examines differences between two types of Batman characters as he illustrates the

rhetorical work being done in the presence of unresolved, internal tension. My project's website, "Looking at Public Art," examines murals in a manner similar to that employed by Terrill.

Literature Review

In the following pages, I will examine a number of different concepts, how they function, and how they might be effectively presented to a lay audience. As with most conceptual explorations, I will begin by defining my terms, then move into a discussion focusing on the benefits of such an exploration, and of course, consider how the material offered can apply to tangible realities familiar to my audience. Some of the concepts may initially seem out of place to a public audience, but it is my conviction that these ideas will not seem foreign if framed appropriately. Rather, audiences will view the evidence as an assembly of common sense, logical perspectives, which unfortunately, are not commonly encountered outside of scholarly circles.

For this project to be successful with non-academic audience outside the realm of higher education (although I would be thrilled if those within the realm like the materials enough to use them), I have framed rhetorical concepts through a non-academic lens. I have claimed lay audiences would understand rhetorical concepts if framed differently, so I have demystified basic concepts. Nevertheless, an academic exploration and explanation is needed. This project defines rhetoric as a persuasive form of communication through which humans generate shared realities. My definition is informed by the work of Aristotle, Bitzer, Burke, Crowley, and Vatz.

Defining rhetoric

Greece, about 2,400 years ago, is a good place to start. Some of the earliest known references to rhetoric are found in the writings of popular educators of that time. Aristotle, a prolific early author, considers the persuasive capacity of rhetoric in his book, *Rhetorica*, and offers a definition my examination can use as a starting point. A professor of Greek philosophy

translates Aristotle's thoughts. "Rhetoric may be defined as the faculty of observing in any given case the available means of persuasion" (McKeon, 1329). Adding another voice, this one more recent and from the communication studies field, adds to this definition. "Rhetoric is understood as the persuasive *dimension* of discursive and symbolic practice" (Jasinski, 2001, p. 13, emphasis added). To these definitions, Burke adds, "Rooted in an essential function of language itself (is) the use of language as a symbolic means of inducing cooperation in beings that by nature respond to symbols" (Burke, 1952, p. 41). Bitzer agrees with this notion and can be a valuable addition by introducing a perspective which helps begin to frame "reality" as flexible and malleable. "In short, rhetoric is a mode of altering reality, not by the direct application of energy to objects, but by the creation of discourse which changes reality through the mediation of thought and action...In this sense rhetoric is always persuasive" (Bitzer). Now rhetoric seems to have an element of rhetoric beyond mere persuasion, an element which can alter the psychological and material worlds through an exchange of perspectives, thoughts, and ideas.

Crowley invites her readers to consider another way of looking at language and communication, not as a tool to discuss or shape an already existing reality, but rather as the process that makes reality itself. She credits another ancient Greek gentleman, Gorgias, as being the originator of this perspective and uses the records available to reconstruct his rhetorical theory (Crowley). It seems Gorgias thought of language as a magical thing, playing a crucial part in forming our world. Gorgias acknowledged the hurtful potential of language, but also held that the power of language had the capacity to act as a kind of medicine. Gorgias put forth the concept of world creation through language as humans use communication to mediate, negotiate, and attach meaning to their experiences. In this respect (changing reality through the mediation of thought), Gorgias seems to be in alignment with Bitzer. Although Vatz disagrees with Bitzer

on many levels (as is common in rhetorical scholarship), he contributes to the conversation while considering rhetoric's ability to attach, or generate, meaning in a situation. "Thus rhetoric is a *cause* not an *effect* of meaning" (Vatz). This generative capacity of rhetoric, along with persuasion, is the other key ingredient.

This project's definition of rhetoric, a persuasive form of communication through which humans generate shared realities, stands on solid ground. Circling back to Aristotle's thoughts and the claim that rhetoric is a faculty, using the basic understanding of faculty as, "an inherent mental or physical power" (Oxford), the art of rhetoric is available to all humans. Therefore, the capacity to alter reality and our collective experience by exchanging persuasive ideas is a concept which begs to be shared with the masses, not hidden behind language which would seem confusing and prohibitory to an audience that has not had the privilege of enjoying higher education. This project helps audiences understand the basic functions of one strategy in the realm of visual rhetoric. In doing so, the public facing aspect of this project brings value to audiences outside the realm of traditional scholarship as well as audiences within it.

Mode of Inquiry

This project employs rhetorical criticism as a mode of inquiry. Just as "rhetoric" does not carry the same meaning in scholarly circles as it does in the common vernacular, the second half of the term may also be unfamiliar to a lay audience. Criticism does not connote negativity, but rather, is a process of investigation via argument and reasoning through which people can extrapolate meaning and gain an understanding of the world around them. In other words, "Critical activity seeks to describe or disclose how an object is put together and how it works" (Jasinski, pp. 127). Jasinski helps map contemporary scholarly conversations surrounding

inquiry and the investigation of various rhetorical acts within their institutional settings. While considering the process of reading rhetorical texts and how that process might differ from other “methods” typically found in other scholarly research, Jasinski observes the claims of modern rhetorical scholars. He posits that the idea of a rhetorical “scientific method” is, “an inappropriate model for the activity of rhetorical criticism and interpretation” (Jasinski, 2001, p. 20). Instead, he advocates for a textual analysis, often called a “close reading,” in an effort to unpack and discover the various aspects and causal relationships contained within the mechanics of texts themselves.

As stated earlier, this project employs rhetorical criticism as a mode of inquiry. “Mode of inquiry” fits the process being employed much better than the concept of “method” because, unlike method, it does not promise an exact procedure that might be replicated in the future to reproduce the same findings. However, I do take a coherent and consistent approach to my study of murals. Therefore, my “mode” of inquiry refers to the work I am doing as a rhetorical critic - what I'm looking for, how I am reading the text, and how I am framing my findings to my audience.

Robert Ivie argues the productive qualities of rhetorical criticism and frames “rhetoric as a generative term for social critique” (Ivie, pp. 1). He introduces the term “productive” as a descriptor in the rhetorical criticism conversation as he articulates the social and political significance a rhetorical critique can offer as a source of invention. “Rather than dissipating scholarly energy in direct political action, productive critics can address the problematics of democratic culture thoughtfully and persuasively, enriching the social imaginary from which political actors may develop better strategies for bridging the human divide” (Ivie, pp. 3). In the spirit of this source of invention, the main purpose of this project is to enrich the resources

muralists have at their disposal to create pieces of pictorial rhetoric that can generate and promote democratic conversation and democratic culture.

This project is most informed by Robert E. Terrill's essay, "Spectacular Repression: Sanitizing the Batman." Although the project was originally conceived with a heavy influence from Kenneth Burke's "Literature as Equipment for Living," I am no longer focusing on murals that suggest a particular attitude. Instead, I am looking at murals that open up space for democratic deliberation by purposefully creating unresolved tension through the use of juxtaposition. Terrill follows a similar mode of criticism as he explores cinematic representations of the classic Batman character in Tim Burton's 1989 film, "Batman," and compares them to representations of the character portrayed in Joel Schumacher's 1995 "Batman Forever."

Terrill frames his mode of inquiry early in the essay as he offers readers his perspective concerning the work a rhetorical critic performs. He posits that a critic reads texts, "...by exploring the inventional resources – patterns and forms through which meaning might be made of experience – such texts offer to their readers" (Terrill). He focuses on inventional resources the two different characters offer audiences as he compares one Batman representation to another. Burton's Batman is mentally unstable, violent, and morally ambiguous, while Schumacher's Batman is straightforward, decisive, and entirely confident in himself.

The main thrust of Terrill's essay claims that the more simplistic character is too shallow, perfect, and set apart from audience members to offer any space for them to consider and explore their own internal conflicts and imperfect humanity. He claims the unresolved conflict in the 1989 film creates tension and offers audiences resources to consider and explore issues in their own lives. The 1989 Batman, like members of the cinematic audience, is often torn by competing desires and motivations. He struggles with uncertainty and often finds himself in situations

which necessitate action in the face of ambiguity. Terrill argues that this pressure to perform, when “right” and “wrong” may be subjective or opaque, opens up space for people to consider their desires and actions in their own lives. The essay, “Sanitizing the Batman,” is named as such because Terrill believes the 1995 version is so clean, clear, and sanitized, lacking any type of internal tension or conflict, that it ceases to function as a useful artifact for exploration of one’s self or a larger society, or to borrow a phrase from Burke, it is less useful “equipment” for democratic life.

Despite drawing on Burke, Terrill’s approach to criticism differs from Burke’s notion of “literature as equipment for living” (EFL). The two pieces operate from different theoretical perspectives and find value in very different ways. Burke provides a platform detailing the manner in which his selected artifacts can name a situation and simultaneously offer advice for an attitude one should adopt when encountering that situation (Burke, 1941). He outlines the purposes proverbs perform in Western culture and shows how literature is in service to those same goals. Burke argues that both proverbs and literature serve a number of functions. They order the world by identifying situations, establish points of identification with others, provide a name for those situations, and offer advice pertaining to an attitude one would be wise to employ when directing their “campaign of living” (Burke, pp. 298). In doing so, proverbs and literature are able to generalize the particular in a manner that can be cross-situationally applied and serve as intellectual equipment people can use to navigate their lives.

Burke’s approach differs from Terrill’s on several levels. Both approaches investigate the rhetorical resources that texts offer and both take a comparative approach to criticism. However, Burke compares literature to proverbs in order to show similarity while Terrill uses comparison in order to show contrast. Burke’s approach focuses on texts that offer audiences clear

suggestions for strategies they would be wise to employ while Terrill's approach focuses on a text that is useful specifically because it is ambiguous. Unlike Burke's essay, which finds value in the clear advice texts can offer, Terrill finds value in a text that does not draw straightforward conclusions. For Terrill, the value lies in the space opened up for exploration of one's self. A person could draw any number of conclusions or find any number of truths through the interaction with a text, conversely, Burke's theoretical structure would have advice dispensed in a finite, focused fashion. Theoretically, these pieces are based in different perspectives, function differently, and have different goals.

Applying rhetoric in murals

Public art has immense potential to generate democratic conversations when artists employ techniques that connect with their audiences and offer multiple perspectives. Murals can invite democratic deliberation by allowing audiences to consider inconsistent possibilities while also failing to unify in a straightforward message. Some murals employ tactics that use conflicting concepts and avoid offering simple conclusions. In doing so, they open up space for deliberation and invite people to engage in conversation. My project seeks to demystify, clarify, and examine the differences between these two types of messages.

I frame public art as stylistic equipment for creating democratic culture and democratic action, and differentiate that style from others. I do this only by describing the visual characteristics of each mural and avoid delving into the history behind a piece, a particular artistic style, or the intentions of the artist. Instead, my project examines the rhetorical work a mural is doing from the standpoint of an audience member, should that person not have not had the privilege of an education in rhetoric or any other art. Lay audiences, interacting with my site,

will likely gain a better understanding of how these texts can play a significant role in fostering an interactive world. My project focuses on murals exclusively as they are the most common form of public art.

Terrill's mode of inquiry explores the inventional resources a text provides an audience. Specifically, Terrill investigates the space a text can open for the deliberation and consideration of issues while he draws comparisons to other texts that do not open up space for such discussions. I use the same reading strategy in my project. I have built a website, "Looking at Public Art," that focuses on a number of San Jose murals. Some of these murals use juxtaposition to open up space for democratic deliberation. I also offer comparisons to other murals that do not use juxtaposition. Much like Terrill, I am identifying rhetorical resources by examining a text, offering my conclusions, and comparing those texts to others as I show how they differ.

Other essays have explored public art in different ways, as many scholars have approached the subject of public art. They offer perspectives from performance studies, rhetoric, cultural studies, and fine arts. However, the available literature is silent concerning the type of textual analysis my project offers. Some academic works discuss the various ways murals can be considered performances. The concept of a physically fixed image performing for the public may not be easy to grasp. Although the materials of the mural may remain stationary and stagnant (paint, chalk, etc.), most everything else about them seems to fit generally accepted definitions of the performance concept. While detailing a basic definition for the term "performance," the *International Encyclopedia of Communications* observes, "...performance usually suggests an aesthetically marked and heightened mode of communication, framed in a special way and put on display for an audience" (Bauman).

Lucaites and Hariman apply Bauman's definition to the realm of visual rhetoric while examining the potential photojournalists offer the democratic process. They make a connection that the communicative work being done in a pictorial message is strikingly similar to the communicative act of a theatrical performance. "By performance we mean to focus attention on aesthetically marked and intensified communicative behavior put on display for an audience toward the general goal of maintaining collective life. Photojournalism...seems to meet the terms of performance quite naturally" (Lucaites and Hariman).

Murals comfortably meet these terms and criteria. While discussing the manner in which murals can help create history and community identity, Spangler contributes, "...public spectacles, which themselves are fundamentally performative, provide a stage for what Diana Taylor calls 'the construction' (and...contestation) of 'communal identity'" (Spangler). He goes on to say, "Key to my argument here is that murals are not *like* performances, they *are* performances." In light of these voices, we can see that murals fit the definition of performances quite nicely, however, this is not the work my project is doing.

Dwight Conquergood offers an examination of pictorial rhetoric that is very similar to murals as he explores gang graffiti in his book, "Homeboys and Hoods: Gang Communication and Cultural Space." Conquergood observes how graffiti, which may seem like mere vandalism to an untrained eye, is actually a complex and intricate form of communication. He offers an explanation to the misunderstanding. "Gang graffiti is inscrutable to outsiders because it draws on an elaborate system of underground symbols," and he adds, "local homeboys look at the same graffiti mural and appreciate the complex meanings and messages it artfully conveys" (Conquergood, p. 27).

Conquergood's work differs from my project for several reasons. In this portion, he is describing visual rhetoric, and on that point they are the same. However, his larger focus is an ethnography, and investigates the artists involved in the community. My project is not concerned with the artist who made a piece, but rather, looks to the text itself. He also examines texts that are specifically intended for an "in-group" audience, purposefully intelligible to an average lay audience, while mine specifically looks for texts that engage a lay audience.

In order to further situate this project within the context of scholarly conversations about public art, I offer the following essay as an example of a piece that examines the ways murals can beautify a community while combating graffiti and neighborhood blight. An *Arts in Society* article details the history of beliefs pertaining to murals and their place in neighborhood beautification in East Los Angeles. "Placas and Murals" provides insight to anti-graffiti attitudes and their strong correlations with barrio murals. The article details attitudes still common in the new millennium. Providing insight about attitudes of community centers and public schools that supported mural programs, the authors note widespread impetuses for using large, public art work "...with the intent of enlivening the architectural surroundings as well as decreasing graffiti" (Romotsky, and Romotsky, 291). Making a final assertion that murals, "...are one of the most productive responses to barrio graffiti..." (299), motivations behind this essay's purpose in examining artistic tactics become clear.

These pieces do in fact have value as they are intended (that of blight and graffiti containment), but in order to complement their primary function, the "messages" in these pieces are significantly more mild and less likely to generate strong feelings or democratic deliberation. In an effort to please the community so as to be respected, and therefore not vandalized (images such as children playing or a beautiful sky-scape), the paintings featured promote commonalities

already held in the status quo. Their purpose is very different than the murals featured in my project. These East L.A. murals do not intentionally use juxtaposition of conflicting concepts to build tension. They aim to pacify an audience rather than open space for democratic deliberation.

Robert L. Scott penned an article in the *Western Journal of Speech Communication* which highlights controversy surrounding a Diego Rivera mural. His mural *did* spark a healthy amount of democratic conversation. In his essay, “Diego Rivera at Rockefeller Center: Fresco Painting and Rhetoric” Scott noted that murals have power for, “those who analyze and discuss their provocative content” (Scott). Rivera painted a large mural consisting of several panels in the Ford Motor Company factory while in Detroit. Many panels contained juxtaposition, including one which showed scientists producing lethal gasses for warfare while others created life-saving vaccines. “The Vaccination” was seen as a caricature of “The Holy Family.” The cap of the nurse has the effect of a halo as she holds a small child to be vaccinated. The child’s light colored hair has the effect of a halo as well. Vaccination was a controversial topic when it came to religious matters in the 1930’s, as it can be today. Rivera juxtaposed two inconsistent ideologies together without providing any sort of resolution. The painter created unresolved tension in the high profile, public piece, and democratic deliberation ensued and grew into a heated debate.

Scott’s essay mentions democratic deliberation and juxtaposition, however, it does not approach the relationship between the two concepts from the same perspective as my project. Rivera created controversy by using juxtaposition, which opened up space for conversation. This mural fits the approach I employ in my website, but Scott’s essay focuses on another matter. Scott’s work is providing background for a larger controversy Rivera sparked, in New York, when he seamlessly integrated an image of Lenin on a fresco which championed the average

laborer. That second fresco would not fit this project because the seamless integration is not using juxtaposition. Although Scott's essay describes a mural in Detroit that fits my project, his mentioning of it is incidental. He is using the Detroit mural to further his thesis that Rivera had a history of creating controversy and is not exploring the rhetorical work of the mural itself.

Conclusion

In contrast to Scott, and in the spirit of Terrill's criticism of the sanitized Batman, my project looks at the way juxtaposition opens rather than closes texts to deliberation. It has resulted in an educational resource for both scholarly and non-scholarly audiences. The primary objective of this project is to help artists realize and employ the potential public art offers to generate democratic culture by exploring one strategy in particular: juxtaposition. The project fills a void in the academic conversation surrounding public art. It has resulted in a website for all audiences, a free resource which illuminates and clarifies these particular rhetorical concepts in a digestible manner. Lookingatpublicart.com is an attempt to share with working artists and other public audiences some of the theories and concepts discussed within rhetorical scholarship and suggest a form of rhetorical praxis. This free educational resource provides artists with techniques for examining, evaluating, or creating murals. It helps them assess a painting's democratic potential so they may open new spaces for democratic deliberation in communities of their choosing.

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