

AISV

International Association for Visual Semiotics  
Association internationale de sémiotique visuelle  
Asociación internacional de semiótica visual



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*Rhetoric of the Visible.*  
*Strategies of the Image between Signification and Communication*

**IX Conference of the dell' AISV-IASV**  
**VENICE 13-16 april 2010**

**Call for papers**

**Max 500 words / English-Italian-French-Spanish / Deadline: December 15**

The 9<sup>th</sup> Conference of the International Association of Visual Semiotics (IASV), to be held in Venice at the Iuav University, from the 13<sup>th</sup> to the 16<sup>th</sup> of April 2010, will take as its theme the *rhetoric of the visible*. The aim of the meeting is to explore the knowledges, the methods and the techniques through which the image deploys its argumentation and asks consent for the meaning it articulates.

All cultures use various forms of figurative investment to manipulate and to transform an entire range of contents, procedures and motifs. Images – paintings, diagrams, installations, films, pictures, sculptures, artefacts – are never mere embellishments. They are fields of manoeuvre for ‘the other’, grounds for strategic conducts for challenges, accord and conflicts among actants.

Our reference here is Perelman and Olbrecht-Tyteca’s approach which rejected the use of logic and grammar. The latter tended to confine rhetoric within limits related to truth and to the distinction between figurative and literal meaning.

The re-integration of rhetoric within the theory of text and discourse and the restitution to tropes of their linguistic and semantic ground has made it possible to extend the enquiry to different substances of the expression and media, thus raising the epistemological question of the pertinence of rhetorical concepts in entirely new areas (Groupe  $\mu$ ).

It is on these bases that we intend to propose a reflection upon the rhetoric of – and rhetoric within – the visible, which will further explore the point made by Roland Barthes: from its very inception, rhetoric is a social *gestus*, *vox populi*. As Barthes has shown, rhetoric introduces systems of force, it does not indicate the natural. It is the virtualisation of a sort of armed struggle that articulates meaning and endows it with a performative aspect; that establishes an internal pragmatics of communication. In Paolo Fabbri’s words, rhetoric is an ‘*eristica del senso*’, an exercise in the redefinition of the way our worlds are viewed and constructed.

What means does semiotics have – and what further means can it draw upon – in order to refine its analysis of the image as the articulation of discursive strategies? How, in the visual dimension, is it possible to distinguish between the art of argumentation (either via inference or narrative/figurative

structures) and rhetorical figures? How does it evaluate the presence (and power) of such rhetoric in scientific, political, historical and religious activities? What light can it throw upon the manipulation of beliefs, upon the practices whereby cultures recognise value or engage in derision? The submissions to the conference will explore the potential and the limits of semiotics in accounting for rhetoric.

We suggest that they should take into account:

- an epistemological level
- a theoretical level
- a methodological level

and that they adopt an empirical approach; as a starting-point and a basis of verification, they should focus upon actual visual articulations, advanced both as examples and as objects of analysis.

At the epistemological level, it is important to explore the relation between semiotics and rhetoric, with regard to: i) the position that rhetoric occupies *within a theory of semiotics*; ii) the role that rhetoric plays in *semiosis* and *communication*.

i) With respect to the visible and case studies thereof, one should consider what applications there might be for the definition of rhetoric as a “connotative” semiotics, which organises and ‘re-motivates’ existing signs (Hjelmslev). In any case, it is impossible to maintain a clear distinction between semiotics and rhetoric because, in pointing out rhetoric’s “agonistic heart”, what is at stake is binarism, the main *a priori* epistemological principle of structural semiotics, from Saussure to Jakobson and Lévi-Strauss. Binarism is indeed the constituent way in observing phenomena (Fabbri e Montanari). Meaning is grasped through difference, negatively – and this applies at all levels of the construction of signification. Such binarism is active from the deep opposition between values, which exist in reciprocal relations of contradiction, implication and contrariety, to their narrative deployment, which explicits what is at stake and articulates the clash of programs, actants and modalities, up to thematic and figurative investments on the discursive level, on which these oppositions find a stage. The polemic-contractual model is present at all levels of the “generative trajectory of meaning”. And it is also present in the sphere of communication, in order to account for the fiduciary, unquiet and unstable character of such a sphere (Greimas). ii) From this point of view, rhetoric is the level at which “the art of argumentation” reveals its abilities to create tension between forces (Bertin). It emerges as the interaction of conflicts and contracts of value at the narrative level; thence it becomes the stratum of the enunciative act proper, of *semiosis in the making* (upon the condition that it replace the neutral motions of emission and reception with competent subjects acting according to different modalities). The exploration of rhetoric give back to semiotics the “just-thisness” of the act of semiosis. It is by focusing upon the varying praxis of enunciation – the *delineating instance of discourse* (Fontanille) – that one also sees emerge the functions operating within the image and the *dispositifs* specific to the image.

At a theoretical level, it will be essential to realize if the rhetoric of the visible is to be understood as the search, within images, for the tropes to be found in verbal language or whether it has its own

autonomy. Fontanille and the Groupe  $\mu$ , for example, have formulated rhetorical rules and operations that can be generalised. However, to avoid basing oneself on the rhetoric of/in the verbal, one would accept François Rastier's proposal of a *moratorium on metaphors*: as Rastier argues, contemporary tropology is by now reduced solely to this figure of speech. The metaphor can only be the object of reflection when seen in relation to other rhetorical figures.

At the methodological level one must discuss the semiotic instruments and models to be used in the description of manifestations of rhetoric. In redrawing canonical narrative schema for the communicative level, for example, Greimas emphasized the *modal composition* of the agent who communicates, bringing together persuasion (knowledge), seduction (will) temptation (power), intimidation (duty) and provocation (will+power). Within the field of discursive structures an important contribution to the theme of the conference will come from an in-depth reading of the *syntax of the plastic and figurative aspects of the image* – an area in which the results achieved have yet to be modest. Here again, Barthes is a pertinent example, with his distinction between an “emphasis of accentuation” and “elliptic emphasis”; the latter is characteristic of the “obtuse”, a thin layer that blurs the limit between surface and disguise, an insufficiently ‘prehensile’ rotundity that eludes us through derision and the blunting of edges. Mereology (Bordron) and enumeration – chaotic versus zuegmatic tendencies, of such types as ‘congeries’, ‘accumulation’, ‘mass’ and ‘collection’ (Geninasca) – will be equally useful instruments of analysis, helping to make the rhetorical mechanisms of the image intelligible. With regard to the semantics of discourse, one will explore the aspect of diagrams, working upon the abstract structures that underlie visual argumentation (Arasse). From the second half of the fifteenth century, the image in the West no longer served to provide props and supports that could serve in the recollection of a story (*mnemotechnics*), but rather composed that story within itself. As a result, the grid framework was erased and simulacral figures were placed in coordinated movement, with the spectator receiving ‘instructions for reading’ (*rhetoric*). Hence the polyptych, a format that makes its appearance in the early fourteenth century, appears as a perfect edifice of memory, with precisely distinct ‘places’ organised in clear topological order. The altarpiece, on the other hand, is a single layout, its dynamics depending upon the syntagma of the figures, who use their position to create relations and make the event credible, acting to persuade or move the spectator. We hope for diachronic or synchronic investigations of the schema in play here – that is, of the *use of figurative rendering for rhetorical ends*.

Further questions and issues dealt with in the papers might be:

- the relevance of the various phases of rhetorical discourse: *inventio*, *dispositio*, *elocutio*, *memoria* and *actio*. It would be very interesting to understand their place and role in the contemporary rhetoric of visibility – whether syntagmatic (still within a tensional narrative chain) or paradigmatic (abstracted from any program and rendered autotelics). Various installations of contemporary art, for example, draw solely upon the aspect of *inventio*;
- the transduction between verbal and visual rhetorical figures, seen in terms of a commensurability that may be fruitful. Compare, for example, the studies of apostrophe (Frontisi- Ducroux; Fabbri), pun (Barthes), chiasmus (Floch), tautology (Kosuth), allusion

(Jullien), synecdoche (Meyer), ellipsis (Rozik), listing (Geninasca), irony (Groupe  $\mu$ ) metonymy (Bonhomme), syllepsis (Ruprecht)...;

- the enunciative regimen of vision and the forms of surveillance and control that many works employ, exploiting technological innovations;
- impetus for transformation that the rhetoric of images can have on beliefs and knowledge, both through a shift in the field of that which is significant (Lotman) and the change in *doxa*.

Given some important discussions and publications (Rhétoriques du visible, *Protée*, 1996; “Semiotica e Retorica generale”, Urbino 2002; *Argomentare il visibile*, Esculapio, Bologna 2008), the time has now arrived to explain the dynamics of visual rhetoric, thus developing upon and enhancing the organon of maxims and rules we apply in semiotics.

The Conference is organised by the ISLAV, International Semiotics Laboratory Venice.

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**IMPORTANT DATES AND DEADLINES:**

\* December 15 (2009): Paper proposal deadline (max 500 words);

Please email proposals, in English, Italian, French or Spanish, as a word doc, to [aisv10@gmail.com](mailto:aisv10@gmail.com)

\* January 15 (2009): Communication of the paper proposals accepted/rejected (or to be reviewed) and opening of online registrations;

- \* February 28 (2010): Registrations deadline (required for all presenters);
- \* March 10 (2010): Final draft of the organization of each thematic session;
- \* March 15 (2010): Publication on the website of the final Conference program.