

12-2000

The Widening Gyre: Images as Central to the Global Village

Mark Smith

Valdosta State University, marksmi@valdosta.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://trace.tennessee.edu/jaepl>

 Part of the [Creative Writing Commons](#), [Curriculum and Instruction Commons](#), [Curriculum and Social Inquiry Commons](#), [Educational Methods Commons](#), [English Language and Literature Commons](#), [Instructional Media Design Commons](#), and the [Other Education Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Smith, Mark (2000) "The Widening Gyre: Images as Central to the Global Village," *The Journal of the Assembly for Expanded Perspectives on Learning*: Vol. 6 , Article 3.

<https://doi.org/10.7290/jaepl6vuy>

Available at: <https://trace.tennessee.edu/jaepl/vol6/iss1/3>

This article is brought to you freely and openly by Volunteer, Open-access, Library-hosted Journals (VOL Journals), published in partnership with The University of Tennessee (UT) University Libraries. This article has been accepted for inclusion in The Journal of the Assembly for Expanded Perspectives on Learning by an authorized editor. For more information, please visit <https://trace.tennessee.edu/jaepl>.

The Widening Gyre: Images as Central to the Global Village

Cover Page Footnote

Mark Smith is an Associate Professor of English at Valdosta State University, teaching professional writing and graduate-level courses in rhetoric and composition. He has published articles in *Notes on Teaching English*, *The CEA Critic*, and has an article in the forthcoming anthology, *Teaching Vision: Language and Image in the Reading/Writing Classroom* (Erlbaum, August 2001). He is presently contributing to a study of Walter Ong.

The Widening Gyre: Images as Central to the Global Village

Mark Smith

Although Marshall McLuhan conceptualized the “global village” in 1968 to describe the electronic media’s pervasiveness, the recent and explosive proliferation of communication technologies has revived the discussion and broadened the term’s implications. In the era of the Kennedy assassination and, later, the Vietnam War, McLuhan and his peers deliberated over the emerging paradigm shift represented by television’s worldwide communications labyrinth. However, the advent of the internet and World-Wide Web has introduced a genuinely interactive paradigm, a network of MOOs, MUDs, and other reciprocal tools that suggest a Gutenberg-type paradigm shift. High-definition television and satellite uplinks further both the speed and the quality of communications, diminish the space-time-quality problems that have traditionally characterized global communications. Sven Birkerts observes: “The numbers of distance and time no longer mean what they used to. Every place, once unique, itself, is strangely shot through with radiations from every other place. ‘There’ was then; ‘here’ is now” (313).

Raymond Gozzi elaborates on the “global village”:

The phrase global village is used as a metaphor, but it is something else also. A global village is an oxymoron—two words which taken separately would contradict each other. “Global” implies a planet-wide network, encompassing thousands of miles and billions of people. “Village” implies small, face-to-face communities. (66)

The global village is one of the most pervasive outgrowths of the information revolution. Gozzi concedes that a global village does not now exist (67), but we are certainly closer to such an ideal than when McLuhan envisioned it. Indeed, as technology increases in ubiquity and sophistication, so do the possibilities of a genuine global village.

As political, technological, and market forces percolate—shaping and reshaping, fragmenting and coalescing relationships among global communities—the image is emerging as the *lingua franca* of electronic communication, much as the morpheme is to speech and the grapheme is to print. Interestingly, the primacy of images to the information revolution also reflects and extends the clas-

Mark Smith is an Associate Professor of English at Valdosta State University, teaching professional writing and graduate-level courses in rhetoric and composition. He has published articles in Notes on Teaching English, The CEA Critic, and has an article in the forthcoming anthology, Teaching Vision: Language and Image in the Reading/Writing Classroom (Erlbaum, August 2001). He is presently contributing to a study of Walter Ong.

sical model of community—this time, a *global* community, or, in Yeats' words, a widening gyre.¹ Technology's ability to create, manipulate, and distribute images simply augments the pre-literate paradigm around which oral communities rallied. As such, electronic images evince many of the characteristics of the speaker-centered, communal rhetoric of classicism. Furthermore, these classical traits carry profound implications for the teaching of writing and language.

Historically, pre-alphabetic cultures used symbols both individually and sequentially to convey tribal narratives and general information. Even among later cultures with standardized writing systems, images were instrumental in reinforcing both the individual and communal social structure of oral cultures, providing the gathering and identification points for communities. (Indeed, the term *signum*, from which we get the word *sign*, originally designated a standard used by the Roman army for identification [Ong 76].) Because the spoken word is temporary and fluid, an identity could be forged alongside the symbol. A visual image was, therefore, important for preserving and reinforcing a community via a lineage (coat of arms), a theology (religious icons), or a legend (statue). Symbols reflected the exteriority of the classical psyche, the external origins of sound and orality—as opposed to the silent, internal, and alienating characteristics of print.

In his address to the 1998 Rhetoric Society of America Conference, George Kennedy maintains that modern communication technologies have not nullified the precepts of classical rhetoric: "It is not clear to me that modern technology has altered the basic structures or techniques of rhetoric, whether theoretical or applied. It has not, you might say, rewired our rhetorical hardware" (57). In short, technology has merely reshuffled the rhetorical arts, revitalizing some and minimizing others. In the Information Age, images have reemerged in a neo-oral epistemology in which their functions both reflect and contrast with those of preliterate times.² Images are now used primarily as shorthand methods of representing information, and they are useful for the news media and commercial interests. The copious use of images to relay information is largely pragmatic: in a stimulus-saturated society, architects of electronic communication must depend to an increasing degree on symbols to represent information that once might have been conveyed through print. As Alvin Toffler predicted some three decades ago, "In

¹ I find the "widening gyre" a suitable metaphor for the forces shaping the global village because, as I read Yeats' "The Second Coming," the gyre represents a dynamic, expanding force that both embraces and disseminates humanity, much as the internet does today.

² Walter Ong's discussions of "secondary orality" are useful in depicting the similarities between electronic and oral epistemologies. Although Ong ceased publishing some years ago, emergent information technologies have further exemplified his theories. He addresses the topic at numerous points throughout his works; a serviceable summary appears in *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word*:

[Secondary orality] has striking resemblances to the old in its participatory mystique, its fostering of a communal sense, its concentration on the present moment, and even in its use of formulas. But it is essentially a more deliberate and self-conscious orality, based permanently on the use of writing and print, which are essentially for the manufacture and operation of equipment and for its use as well. (136)

an effort to transmit even richer image-producing messages at an even faster rate, communications people, artists, and others consciously work to make each instant of exposure to the mass media carry a heavier informational and emotional freight" (149).

Furthermore, the logistics of the internet facilitate and strengthen images' unique properties: "telecommunications all but eliminates the concepts of distance and location [. . .] resulting in a discourse that is decontextualized and often of little direct relevance to [contemporary] populations" (Strate 64). This diminution of temporal and spatial restrictions and the accentuation of the immediate, the gut reaction, places the viewer/hearer in the center of the action. In the Aristotelian context, *pathos* discourages analysis, fostering an immediacy that endures long enough to inspire one to action (or simply to purchase a product). Frozen in time and space, the image suggests a snapshot, the sum of a text. Advertising provides copious examples: Nike, for instance, has reduced its trademark to a simple check, underscored with a cryptic "Just Do It," while McDonald's has abridged its trademark to the unannotated golden arches. The goal of such presentations is to leap both syllogistic reasoning and geographical/cultural constraints and to affect the individual who is integrated into the global community. According to Roy F. Fox,

professional image makers milk perception for emotion. They care little about logic, proof, or argument and instead focus exclusively on values, attitudes, feelings, sensations, passions, and sentiments. And the golden key that unlocks each of these chambers is emotion. (77)

Others study the new electronic images as reflective of the classical arts. Richard Lanham discusses the computer's facility to model reality—what he terms the "dramatizing of experience"—which represents a revival of declamation. Both declamation and computer modeling create archetypes of knowledge, one oral and aural, the other visual. Lanham says that

[t]he world of electronic text has reinstated this centrality of modeled reality. The computer has adopted once again, as the fundamental educational principle, the dramatizing of experience [. . .]. Today we model everything digitally, and usually visually, before we build it, manufacture it, or embrace it as policy or sales program. (47)

As such, the modern technologist emulates the rhetor, constructing a visual representation just as the skilled classical declaimor recreated an event, his success determined in part by his performance's mirroring reality. Similarly, technology allows for the increasingly authentic and seamless portrayal of reality as seen in applications of virtual reality and computer-aided drafting, what Lanham calls "visual *topoi*" (76).

Moreover, Kathleen Welch suggests that oral epistemologies resurrect the art of *delivery*, the fifth canon of rhetoric. Welch asserts that electronic discourse

erases, or appears to erase, the “lag time” that is inherent in written or printed texts:

Disembodied communication [literacy] has been reembodyed through visual mechanisms such as video monitors and film screens. This technology gives the fifth canon of delivery [medium] the urgency of simultaneous communication. The lag time of print *seems to disappear*. (153, my emphasis)

This literal collapsing of time and space combines the portability of printed characters and graphics with the immediacy of the spoken word. As history has proven, the success of any new technology—from the steam engine to the integrated circuit—depends upon a suitable marketing scenario. In this case, we can now accommodate the mass production and worldwide distribution of images.

Complementing immediacy of images is the media’s use of repetition (*conduplicatio*) to decontextualize an image, broadening its appeal to a global market. Susanne K. Langer depicts the static symbols that emerge when *acts* become *gestures*—that is, when a human action becomes abstracted through repetition—and “they are no longer subject to spontaneous variation, but bound to an often meticulously exact repetition, which gradually makes their forms as familiar as words or tunes” (*Philosophy* 152–53). We can envision Langer’s gestures as repeated images that have separated from their antecedents, becoming what Stewart Ewen calls “provocative surfaces [which speak] to the eye’s mind, overshadowing matters of quality or substance” (224). Langer also refers to an intrinsic compulsion to identify personal contexts through a “conceptual frame [of] a world much larger than the environment we sensuously perceive . . .” (*Philosophical* 129).

One might find contemporary exemplifications of Welch’s *delivery* and Ewen’s “provocative surfaces” in any number of contexts, but I am particularly reminded of professional wrestling, a public spectacle whose survival depends on readily defining and reiterating images to establish community. Borrowing more from heavy-metal rock than from athletics, the wrestlers’ face paint and provocative pseudonyms support a youthful subculture, complete with performer/audience cues and responses. Audiences, their disbelief suspended, engage in self-conscious and deliberate hysteria.

But the most compelling characteristics of this spectacle involve performance and gesture to sustain the ritual between the performers and audience. Although competitive sports—especially professional sports—have become increasingly ritualistic, with fans emulating the world’s Michael Jordans and Dennis Rodmans, sustained adoration ultimately depends upon an athlete’s statistical success. However, because professional wrestling is largely contrived, athletic ability is tertiary to performance, specifically, the ritual between the wrestler and the audience. This ritual often begins with an outrage at a slight or dismissal from a rival. The outrage is cultivated in the public arena over time, with the matter finally settled in the ring. The true appeal, however, comes from the ability to identify with a favorite character, to engage in a familiar routine of cues and responses in which the audience projects its collective identity into a face, a sur-

face. The matches themselves are pure performance grounded in feigned spontaneity. Lanham describes such interaction as characteristic of secondary orality: "The ritualistically silent audience of the nineteenth century was an audience of 'readers' observing a print convention. The rowdy and involved audience [. . .] is an audience from what Father Ong would call 'secondary orality.' The electronic audience is radically interactive" (76).

In addition to supporting Langer's concepts of surface and ritual, the allure of public spectacles represents the reconfiguring of the self that is at the forefront of electronic and symbolic culture. While Kenneth J. Gergen describes this "self" as something postmodern, I am also reminded of Cicero's citizen-orator, communicators whose education prepared them for the public sphere. Various nomenclatures describe this global citizen: Gergen offers the term "multiphrenia" to describe the multi-faceted self that is a construct of external entities (50). New technologies both engender and satisfy the need for self construction:

In an important sense, as social saturation proceeds we become pastiches, imitative assemblages of each other. In memory we carry others' patterns of being with us. If the conditions are favorable, we can place these patterns into action. Each of us becomes the other, a representative, or a replacement [. . .]. [A]s the century has progressed selves have become increasingly populated with the character of others [. . .]. [W]ith social saturation, each of us comes to harbor a vast population of hidden potentials—to be a blues singer, a gypsy, an aristocrat, a criminal. (71)

From a sociological perspective, electronic communications networks and the ensuing revival of the public spectacle (rhetorical performance) have eroded localized identities and value systems—from the loss of the agrarian identity to the diminishment of the traditional family—and have opened a void that has nurtured the proliferation of electronic symbols. The ascendancy of the scripted television lifestyle over the traditional inherited narratives of family and geographic community avails symbols as a suitable source of personal identities. The notions of pluralistic cultures and integrated selves have been discussed copiously as to their influences on political and literary affairs.

That said, we can understand that the electronic symbol is particularly pertinent to the multiphrenia of the contemporary global culture. While advertising has long employed and exploited images to establish their interests in the public psyche, the internet now furnishes transferable and moveable symbols that can be arranged on a personal home page (the repository of the electronic self) or otherwise situated to establish an identity. Furthermore, electronic artifices expedite the construction of a self in a global context. If television pioneered a means of accessing global intelligence, the internet now facilitates both distribution of and interaction with an integrated self, the face of which is subject entirely to the whims of the builder. It is, thus, the ideal vehicle for performance on the global stage.

A microcosm of the possibilities of a global village can be found in developing countries where capitalism coexists with a solidly traditional culture, resulting in juxtaposition of a highly literate, technically-adept community alongside

one largely grounded in orality. In her study of the media in Iran, Annabelle Sreberny-Mohammadi points out that “in Iran, as elsewhere, nonliterate clearly coexist with literates in a typographically complex environment of street signs, advertisements, newspapers and magazines, bus tickets and political leaflets, letters, legal documents, and books” (142). Such a culture has access to television and computers, exposing the populace to symbols. Sreberny-Mohammadi complements her argument by pointing to James W. Chesebor’s position that easy access to such technology has smoothed the cleft between primary orality to electronic literacy, skipping the intermediary typographic literacy. She posits that “it certainly appears from the immense popularity of television across the developing world that the grammar of television is a comparatively easy one to learn, certainly easier than the grammar of print” (144). As such, cultures which had formerly lain on the periphery of the global mainstream are now situated within the global village through the world-wide “grammar” as conveyed through symbols.

As Sreberny-Mohammadi’s observations suggest, the emergence of an image-based, global culture augurs changes in the way language and writing are perceived and taught. As one considers the post-literate epistemology depicted in this discussion, one may be reminded of some of the characteristics of classical rhetoric. Indeed, as electronic communications enters a new generation with internet technologies, the insight of classical rhetoricians will again become increasingly relevant. The reemergence of interest in classical rhetoric—most notably marked thirty years ago by Edward P. J. Corbett’s *Classical Rhetoric for the Modern Student*—has, to a great extent, paralleled and reflected the proliferation of electronic media. Corbett obviously recognized the utility of classical precepts in an increasingly pluralistic and complex context heavily influenced by unbridled, technologically enhanced stimuli. In the most recent edition of the book, Corbett added an analysis of the text and images in a typewriter advertisement, illustrative of classical rhetoric’s pervasiveness in modern advertising. Although Corbett’s discussion is not primarily about the images, the fact that he included such a discussion in a revised edition of a landmark textbook is indicative of the indelible relationship between electronic images and classical rhetoric. As teachers of writing consider the challenges of teaching in an electronically-determined context, they may consider the complexities of classical rhetoric. Just as classical orators thought and composed in a non-print context, so does contemporary communication have less to do with the printed word than with symbols and hypertext.

Technology is moving modern rhetoric into a grammar of non-alphabetic symbols. The beginnings of a print-based epistemology began in the nineteenth century with the diminishment of classical, Latin-based education. This, coupled with the emanation of technical and vocational interests, helped foster a typographic, print-based epistemology. However, the advent of electronic communication—beginning with the television and moving through the personal computer and to the internet and individual satellite communication—has, in some respects, moved rhetoric full circle.

Although McLuhan’s global village has yet to evolve into its fullest and most complete incarnation, we find ourselves almost daily salvoed with the images that will, ultimately, transcend geographic and cultural boundaries. As we grapple

with the political, technological, and educational implications of the new modes of expression, we will also find ourselves participating in the communal experiences enjoyed by those for whom orality has been the norm. In our case, however, we will find ourselves ensconced within the widening gyre, one in which temporal and spatial restrictions are virtually eliminated, where the rich possibilities of instantaneous, shared communication compel us to capitalize on the egalitarian potentials of wisely used technology. ☹

Works Cited

- Birkerts, Sven. "Into the Electronic Millennium." *Composing Cyberspace: Identity, Community, and Knowledge in the Electronic Age*. Ed. Richard Holetton. Boston: McGraw, 1998. 311-22.
- Corbett, Edward P. J. *Classical Rhetoric for the Modern Student*. 3rd ed. New York: Oxford UP, 1990.
- Ewen, Stewart. *All-Consuming Images: The Politics of Style in Contemporary Culture*. New York: Basic, 1988.
- Fox, Roy F. "Where We Live." *Images in Language, Media, and Mind*. Ed. Roy F. Fox. Urbana: NCTE, 1994. 69-91.
- Gergen, Kenneth J. *The Saturated Self: Dilemmas of Identity in Contemporary Life*. New York: Basic, 1991.
- Gozzi Raymond. "Will the Media Create a Global Village?" *Etc.; A Review of General Semantics* 53 (1996): 65-68.
- Kennedy, George A. "Rhetoric and Culture/Rhetoric and Technology." *Rhetoric, the Polis, and the Global Village: Selected Papers from the 1998 Thirtieth Anniversary Rhetoric Society of America Conference*. Ed. C. Jan Swearingen, and Dave Pruett. Mahwah, NJ: Erlbaum, 1999. 55-61.
- Langer, Susanne. *Philosophical Sketches*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins, 1962.
- . *Philosophy in a New Key*. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1942.
- Lanham, Richard A. *The Electronic Word: Democracy, Technology, and the Arts*. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1993.
- Ong, Walter J. *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word*. London: Methuen, 1982.
- Sreberny-Mohammadi, Annabelle. "Media Integration in the Third World: An Ongian Look at Iran." *Media, Consciousness, and Culture: Explorations of Walter Ong's Thought*. Ed. Bruce E. Gronbeck, Thomas J. Farrell, and Paul A. Soukup. Newbury Park, CA: Sage, 1991. 133-46.
- Strate, Lance. "Post(modern)man, or Neil Postman as a Postmodernist." *Etc.; A Review of General Semantics* 51 (1994): 159-70.
- Toffler, Alvin. *Future Shock*. New York: Random House, 1970.
- Welch, Kathleen E. *The Contemporary Reception of Classical Rhetoric: Appropriations of Ancient Discourse*. Hillsdale, NJ: Erlbaum, 1990.