The Increased Impact of Mass Mediated Visual Imagery on Christian Oratory

Jim Schnell[*]

University of Montana, Montana, USA

Abstract: This report conveys speculations having to do with the increased emphasis on visual imagery over aural messages and the subsequent impact on Christian oratory as it relates to evangelism. As we move to being a more visually oriented society, via web based and new communication technologies, aural forms of communication that generally have more emphasis on critical thinking are being displaced by the visual domain that stresses more imaginary associations. A central finding is that the visual dominates at the expense of the aural and the imagination presides over critical thinking.

Keywords: Visual imagery, Christian oratory, mass media, evangelism, new communication technologies.

INTRODUCTION

This report offers speculations with regard to the increased emphasis on visual imagery over aural messages and the subsequent impact on Christian oratory as it relates to evangelism. As we move to being a more visually oriented society, via web based and new communication technologies, aural forms of communication that generally have more emphasis on critical thinking are being displaced by the visual domain that stresses more imaginary associations. Thus, the visual dominates at the expense of the aural and the imagination presides over critical thinking.

The study of rhetoric is associated with homiletics. Of particular relevance to the nexus of rhetoric and homiletics is the Christianization of rhetorical thought that occurred during the period between Roman times and the Renaissance. The evolution of the Christian church had a corresponding impact on applications of rhetorical knowledge. This was most notable with the four types of Christian oratory: 1) apologies - rhetoric directed toward non-Christians attempting to persuade them to accept Christianity; 2) polemics - focused their efforts on the heretics (people who actively rejected the Christian teachings); 3) sermons- a Christian message delivered to a collection of Christians (to reinforce their belief) and 4) -panegyrical sermons- a form of sermon that stressed delivery style over content.[1]

METHODOLOGY

This focus on homiletics provides context for understanding the relevance of the increased emphasis on visual imagery in that the perceptual landscape within which messages are conveyed is being altered. With this alteration comes a rearranging of dynamics and introduction of variables. Such progressions have occurred throughout our societal evolution. When these progressions occur it is relevant for us to acknowledge the transition and recognize the ramifications with evangelical presentations.

The Wesleyan tradition offers illustration for how evangelism has existed. "Our sharing and inviting others to experience the good news affirms that God loves us and invites us into a transforming relationship through which we are forgiven, receive new life, and are restored to the image of God, which is love."[2] It is worth noting that the history of evangelism is deeply rooted within the societal context within which it has functioned. "Few historical transitions have been more momentous for evangelical thinking in North America than the reorganization of higher education at the end of the nineteenth century, for this was a reorganization that saw the evangelicals, who had dominated college life to that time, utterly displaced as the intellectual arbiters of the nation."[3]

With this shift of the role of evangelicals has come challenges for what evangelism represents. "The term evangelism is laden with negative associations. It conjures up pictures of manipulative speakers,

*Address correspondence to this author at the University of Montana, Montana, USA; E-mail: james.schnell@fulbrightmail.org

[1]James L. Golden, George F. McHendry Jr., M. Elizabeth Thorpe, Jessica A. Kurr, Goodwin Berquist, William Coleman, and James M Sproule, *The Rhetoric of Western Thought* (Dubuque, Iowa: Kendall-Hunt Publishers, 2020) Ch. 5.

[2]Henry H. Knight and F. Douglas Powe, Transforming Evangelism: The Wesleyan Way of Sharing Faith (Nashville, Tennessee: Discipleship Resources, 2006) 77.
[3]Mark A. Knoll, The Scandal of the Evangelical Mind (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans Publishing, 1994) 110.

simplistic versions of the gospel, false promises of prosperity and happiness, and the exploitive use of clever marketing and communication method to 'bring home' converts."[4] The ripple effects related to these negative associations have been problematic. There are "a good many nervous Christians who are afraid that this whole thing of Christianity might fall to pieces if someone should get too critical, or if science should get too scientific."[5]

A central issue has focused on the question of relevance when evangelical pleas are equated with irrelevance. "Ritual boredom occurs when . . . .The ambience of the service seems to send a message that none of this really matters."[6] A logical approach in this circumstance is to focus more on the mindset of the receiver of evangelical messages rather than matters having to do with delivery. "Gospel preaching is hard work . . . . We must make every effort to understand our hearers, rather than expecting them first to understand us."[7]

RESULTS

This emphasis on the message receiver is worth consideration from multiple angles.

"In the end it doesn't matter what you say, it only matters what they heard. Communication is about what gets transmitted to other people."[8] Even with the aforementioned challenges there is promise for the role of evangelism and how it correlates with notions of drama that have historical foundation. 'The power of drama is such that lasting images are seared into our brains."[9] The new communication technologies offer opportunity for applications of such dramatic appeals. "Keen observers of media raise the point that media of any kind indelibly shape the gospel even while facilitating its communion and circulation . . . . how to utilize the prospects of media for evangelism while minimizing its pitfalls and perils."[10]

In *Digitizing Race: Visual Cultures of the Internet* Lisa Nakamura (2008) stresses "experiences of the image are now defined by their mediation by machines. The Internet is a visual technology . . . ."[11] and she goes on to assert "Digital visual capital is a commodity that is not freely given to all; as has always been the case with capital of any kind, it must be negotiated and at times actively seized by those to whom it would otherwise not be given."[12] Thus, meanings evolve through a process of negotiation and renegotiation.

As such, consumers of mass mediated messages are active participants with the creation of meanings associated with such messages via interpretive processes. "Meaning is not 'received' in a unidirectional flow from elsewhere: the audience creates and recreates it."[13] Hansen goes on to use advertising as an illustration by stressing "advertisers have to tap the reservoirs of social and cultural knowledge maintained by audiences, and transform this material into the message."[14]

A key premise in this process is that technology is not neutral. In *The Vanishing Word: The Veneration of Visual Imagery in the Postmodern World*, Arthur Hunt states "Contrary to popular thinking, technology is not neutral. When Johann Gutenberg introduced moveable type in the fifteenth century, a whole new world opened up—liberty, freedom, discovery, democracy. The printing press allowed ideas to be put in black and white so that anyone could analyze them. To a great extent, America was born out of a print-oriented culture."[15] This correlates with the evolution of evangelical applications. As media practices evolve, the social order evolves and evangelical practices will evolve in commensurate terms.

Hunt contrasts the founding days of U.S. culture with the present day. "One distinguishing feature of the postmodern era is that human beings gain their knowledge of the world through pictures. The image has replaced modernism's dependency on the written word."[16] He stresses that this scenario should give us reason to worry. "There is a big difference between processing information on a printed page compared

[4]Darrell L Guder, The Incarnation and the Church's Witness (Eugene, Oregon: Wipf & Stock Publishers, 2004) 7.
[5]E. Stanley Jones, The Christ of the Indian Road (New York: Abingdon Press, 1925), 131.
[6]Ronald P. Byars, The Future of Protestant Worship: Beyond the Worship Wars (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2002) 22.
[7]Derek Prime and Alistair Begg, On Being a Pastor: Understanding Our Calling and Work. (Chicago, Illinois: Moody Publishers, 2004) 138.
[8]Richard Peace, Holy Conversation: Talking About God in Everyday Life (Downers Grove, Illinois: IVP Connect, 2006) 38.
[9]Daniel Buttry, First Person Preaching: Bringing New Life to Biblical Stories (Valley Forge, Pennsylvania: Judson Press, 1998) 8.
[10]Priscilla Pope-Levinson, Models of Evangelism. (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Academic, 2020) 159.

[11]Lisa Nakamura, Digitizing Race: Visual Cultures of the Internet (Minneapolis, Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 2008) 202.
[12]Ibid, 206-207.
[13]Anders Hansen, Mass Communication Research Methods (Thousand Oaks, California: Sage Publications, 2008) 111.
[14]Ibid, 111.
[15]Arthur Hunt. The Vanishing Word: The Veneration of Visual Imagery in the Postmodern World (Wheaton, Illinois: Crossway Books, 2003) 14.
[16]Ibid, 189.

with processing data conveyed through a series of moving pictures. Images have a way of pushing rational discourse—linear logic—into the background . . . . Reason is replaced by emotion."[17] The matter of emotion replacing reason is a central idea of this report.

Mass media theorist Neil Postman developed this phenomenon. "We know how to analyze what people say to us. How to measure the truth or falsity." He goes on to explain challenges to the social order because of this. "There's no way to assess images the way we assess statements, literal statements." Postman speculates about the road ahead in saying "We're out of the realm of logic and into the world or aesthetics."[18] When we move beyond emphasis on logic and to emphasis on aesthetics we can see how this will modify rhetorical objectives with evangelistic presentations.

A central premise with the aforementioned position is that, as we proceed through stages of the information age, there has been an increased emphasis on visual messages at the expense of literal messages. Sonja Foss clarifies that "not every visual object is visual rhetoric . . . . three markers must be evident for a visual image to qualify as visual rhetoric." She goes on to explain the image must be symbolic (involve a system of signs), evidence human intervention (i.e. in the creation of the image), and there must be a presence of an audience that is an intentional recipient of the image.[19] These parameters help outline how the evangelist can most effectively frame his/her messages in desirable terms.

Mass media theorist Marshall McLuhan described how forms of mass media convey meaning in and of themselves aside from the explicit meanings that senders seek to present. As the rhetorical means of communication are modified then, in turn, what it means to be human is ultimately modified. McLuhan stated that "the 'message' of any medium or technology is the change of scale or pace or pattern that it introduces into human affairs."[20] Hence his finding that the medium is the message. "After three thousand

years of explosion….we have extended our central nervous system…abolishing both space and time….we approach the final phase of the extensions of man—the technological simulation of consciousness."[21]

Thus, in returning to the initial premise, as we have an accelerated emphasis on visual culture we will have a corresponding emphasis on visual aspects of the human condition. Life will become more and more of a visual experience. Sight, as one of the human senses, will have dominance over the other senses. The implications of this will continue to unfold into our individual lives and societal existence. Evangelistic processes and the entire nature of evangelism will be impacted by this. Standards for the depiction of truth and fact will go through modification. We may see shortcomings in this regard now but if society demands more accountability we will most likely see that accountability evolve with the next generation of technological invention.

DISCUSSION

What is offered in this reporting is not a message of despair. Rather, it is encouragement that we go through our evolutions with our eyes open in a way that allows us to impact the direction of the road we are taking and not be victims of the technologies we have created (and will continue to create). Technological developments, and subsequent effects with modification, are part of the history of the world. We impact our environment and we are, in turn, impacted by it. The evangelical landscape offers useful illustration. This holds true for all contextual settings to include rural, urban, suburban etc. It has broad application.

Jesus often spoke in parables as means for conveying lessons. In Mathew 13: 10-17[22] we see emphasis on the purpose of parables. The parables were used as illustration to better exemplify the lessons that Jesus was teaching. He could have merely stated the points he was seeking to make but parables offered means to illustrate his points. In a similar vein we see that the new communication technologies offer means to better illustrate points that are being stressed. Such contemporary illustrations use increased emphasis on visual images. It is relevant for us to grasp this

[17]Ibid, 21.
[18]Neil Postman, "Consuming Images." In Bill Moyers (ed.) The Public Mind (Boston, MA: Public Affairs Television, Gail Pellett Productions, 1989).
[19]Ken Smith, Sandra Moriarty, Gretchen Barbatsis, and Keith Kenney. Handbook of Visual Communication (Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Publishers, 2005) 144.
[20]Sue Thornham, Caroline Bassett and Paul Marris. Media Studies (Washington Square, New York: New York University Press, 2009) 24.

[21]Ibid, 27.
[22]Common English Bible (Nashville, Tennessee: Common English Bible, 2021) Ch. 13.

increased emphasis on visual images and how it impacts our understanding.

We as consumers of mass mediated messages are not helpless in this evolution. With the increased emphasis on visual images at the expense of aural messages there is less of a standard for truth because subtle visual images are more seductive in their claims. They do not explicitly make claims as happens with aural spoken messages. Thus, we are more challenged in this regard in that we need to engage our critical thinking skills without any prompting from the senders of such visual images.

For instance, if a person contacts us and states "Please vote for candidate X on election day" we are prompted into critically analyzing the request and asking ourselves varied questions. "Who is the candidate? What are his/her positions on major issues?" However, when visual images are conveyed in our direction there usually is nothing alerting us that we are being influenced. The influence process is far more subtle. Thus, we need to get into the habit of instinctively alerting ourselves so we (as individuals) critically analyze such visual images and their overall context, speculate on the desired aims of the image sender, decide if those aims are commensurate with our individual value systems and then respond accordingly.

We can do this with commercial images, political images, evangelistic images and other forms of contextual images that we are exposed to. For instance, when we see a visual advertisement on the internet we sometimes can feel particularly focused on the human models used and less on the product. We can observe unique types of posture, expressions, graphics and colors. Thus, we are often being influenced not only by the overt request to buy a product but are also being influenced by the subtle visual claims that we, as consumers, can also be like the character depicted in the advertisement if we use the product (in ways totally unrelated to the product usage).

In a chapter titled "All Photos Lie: Images as Data," Barry Goldstein expresses "The photograph has an added realism of its own; it has an inherent attraction not found in other forms of illustration . . . . Viewers should not approach an image with the assumption that it represents reality . . . .The most trivial reason that a photograph can never represent reality is that it's a two-dimensional representation of a three-dimensional

world."[23] Thus, when we view any kind of photograph we need to remember we are engaging in a highly interpretive process when we assign meaning to it. This interpretive element is significant with evangelical scenarios in that the message receiver has a considerable role with how an evangelical message will be retained.

When we observe a photo collage of John McCain as a former prisoner of war, shaking hands with Ronald Reagan, posing with his family, speaking to the U.S. Senate and standing among a collection of U.S. flags we can understandably experience influence resulting from the visual image conveyance that "John McCain was a dedicated American who was appealing as a war hero, family man, politician and visionary." It is at that point we need to instinctively prompt ourselves with the questions "What claims are being made and are they legitimate? Would they stand up to scrutiny if they were verbally stated?" Associations with evangelical settings will have commensurate outcomes.

CONCLUSION

Thus, we need to learn to consistently see ourselves as consumers of images we are exposed to via mass mediated channels. Mere exposure is enough in this regard. We do not have to be specifically targeted by the image source. Anytime we feel ourselves being influenced we should instinctively query ourselves regarding what influence we are feeling, how that influence is occurring and ask if the claims we are digesting are rational.

The more we engage in this process the more we can be startled by the findings from such analysis and this can act as reinforcement for developing the habit to view visual images in such a manner. Although this practice addresses new communication technologies the perspective being stressed grows out of an emphasis on standard critical thinking orientations. It is from this perspective that such interpretive practices by individuals, as consumers of evangelical images, can be instinctively embraced. We are accustomed to emphasizing critical thinking in other areas of our lives and this application is an extension of that framework.

Taken together, these processes involve addressing many abstractions and thinking through many

[23]Barry Goldstein. "All Photos Lie: Images as Data," In Gregory Stanczak (ed.), Visual Research Methods: Image, Society and Representation (Thousand Oaks, California: Sage Publications, 2007) 64-65.

assumptions with regard to evangelical contexts. It is not a clear path and there are many detours. It is an approach that will be distinctly unique for each individual in that each individual builds upon a unique frame of reference. It involves an abundant fund of varied considerations and this report is intended as a contribution to that fund.

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