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## **Orientation: Seeing and Sensing Rhetorically**

Megan Poole

### **Abstract**

Many visual terms exist in Kenneth Burke's rhetorical schema, yet the optical implications of such terms remain largely unconsidered by rhetorical scholars. This study presents Burke's *orientation* as both a method of seeing and a way of uncovering rhetoric's relationship to sensation. Burkean orientation—deriving from ophthalmology and Gestalt psychology—brings into focus three practices of studying the senses in rhetoric: attending to lived experience, considering sensation as elemental to rhetorical work, and practicing rhetorical criticism attuned to the entrenchments and slips of the senses. Engaging the biology of vision reveals sensation as connective tissue between nonsymbolic motion and symbolic action.

### **Keywords**

Sensation; Kenneth Burke; Visual Rhetoric; Optical Science

### **Author Information**

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### Orientation: Seeing and Sensing Rhetorically

Subject to double images and left to wonder which image is “real” and which is a phantasm, individuals with diplopia often detail a disorienting experience—for Kenneth Burke, that disorientation was sensorially and theoretically transformative. Burke began seeing double in 1980, and just under a year later, near the end of an illustrative career, he would remark that “perspective,” specifically the act of seeing double through “perspective by incongruity,” was “the essence of [my] whole business” (qtd. in Skodnick 10). The adage that “a way of seeing is also a way of not seeing” (Burke, *Permanence and Change* 49) had been popularized among rhetorical critics by that time, but when Burke’s perspectival theories became actual in 1980, he realized that the sensory act of seeing—not vision as a metaphorical or abstract concept, but bodily, emplaced sight—was the core of his life’s work. Many Burkean terms, such as trained incapacity and terministic screens, could be examined for their optical implications, but vision in Burke’s rhetorical schema is here presented through *orientation*, a touchstone concept in *Permanence and Change* and a term that has recently re-emerged in posthumanist (Mays) and new materialist (Ahmed, “Orientations Matter”) scholarship. Traditionally interpreted by scholars of rhetoric as bodily habits that construct a certain way of being in the world or as a theoretical lens used to analyze artifacts, orientation, at least as researched by Burke and presented in *Permanence and Change*, derives from optical science and the study of how the biology of vision can bring unconscious biases to the forefront of attention. Orientation as seeing—and reorientation as seeing double—reveal much about rhetoric’s relationship to sensation, about how non-symbolic motion is glued to symbolic action through sensing and the orienting of self toward world.

Burke's belief that the essence of his rhetorical contribution revolved around sight, vision, and orientation has been largely unconsidered by rhetorical scholars. Exceptions among rhetorical scholars include Scott R. Stroud who has traced how orientations determine an organism's relation to its environment (48; 55) and become ossified into ways of interpreting the world (60). Ann George describes orientations as "interpretative lenses," but is careful to cite Burke's insistence that orientations are "real" and not mere conceptual apparatuses (117). To get at this "realness," I propose that rhetorical scholars consider orientation through its optical roots, as seeing and sensing rhetorically. This study of orientation opens up how this particular sensory process comes to mean, an examination that makes vision less abstract and less objective. Vision is rhetorical, then, not only when critics analyze how viewers interact with static artifacts, but also through the everyday process of seeing.

Tracing sensation's role in reorientation has particular applicability for studies in visual rhetorics and new materialist rhetorics. These two subfields meet most explicitly in rhetoric scholar Laurie E. Gries's *Still Life with Rhetoric*, in which new materialisms merge with visual rhetorics through the study of how "visual things circulate and acquire power" (85) and thus differentially come to mean as they "enter into material relations with humans, technologies, and other entities" (11). Other landmark studies expand notions of the viewer, theorizing how images train viewers to see in certain ways. In *Making Photography Matter*, visual rhetoric and photography scholar Cara Finnegan studies viewers' responses to photographs to determine that "viewers are not passive spectators with no capacity for agency" (7) but rather they develop rhetorical awareness through historical and technological pedagogies of sight. Zeroing in on the viewer, rhetoric scholar Debra Hawhee analyzes the sensory and conceptual mechanisms by which "words . . . can stand in for or facilitate vision" ("Looking" 139), an encounter that she

calls “rhetorical vision.” By concluding her study with a nod to neuroscience, Hawhee implicitly raises the question of how images work biologically. My approach to Burkean orientation turns even more fully to the rhetorical valences of sight by showing how the materiality of vision foregrounds sensation as a cornerstone of visual rhetorics.

Burke’s notion of image has less to do with how material or mental images have rhetorical effect and more to do with the rhetoricity of vision. By rhetoricity of vision I mean that seeing is an integral part of interpretation. In other words, stressing the act of seeing as much as what is seen exposes the deep roots of bias, showing how ways of seeing become rhetorical processes that are not always consciously employed. To get at this unconscious bias, I engage the biology of vision via Burke’s concept of orientation. Doing so requires following Burke in understanding vision as biological, not solely conceptual. As vision loses its abstraction, three elements for the study of image in rhetoric come into focus: an attention to lived experience, a heightened sensitivity to sensation as elemental to rhetorical work, and the practice of sense-inflected rhetorical criticism that identifies the entrenchments and slips of the senses.

Although I explore these three modes of image-encounter in rhetoric through a canonical figure, I do so in an unconventional way: rather than finding the rhetorical in the scientific, I use the scientific to identify the rhetorical underpinnings of orientation. Such a methodology relies upon Burke’s forays into the biology and sensory experiences of vision, which lead him to: Gestalt psychology, a modern school of thought that emerged to examine the neurology of perception, and the work of German ophthalmologist Hermann von Helmholtz. This argument unfolds in three parts. First, Gestalt reveals how “characters” emerge from lived, experiential encounters with the material world to help interpret those encounters. Second, Helmholtz reveals how sensation accrues meaning in its own semiotic way, informing and recursively altering

humans' symbol-systems. Finally, Burkean perspective by incongruity reveals how critics might disrupt this sensory-interpretative process and allow individuals to see otherwise. In writing about the fallibility of the senses, Burke hoped to disrupt humankind's reliance on automatic interpretation. Recovering this vision-oriented orientation helps to discern how vision is a material, substantial, and vibrant element of rhetorical processes.

### **Defining Orientation through Gestalt**

Orientation is not exclusively a Burkean term. In the wake of new materialisms and other posthumanist concerns, orientation is making its way to the forefront of scholarly consideration. In "Orientations Matter," feminist scholar Sara Ahmed defines orientation as the bodily and material turning toward an object that is dependent on the *background* that enables one to make that turn (239). Ahmed uses the example of a writing table: gender is not in the table itself, but is woven into the background that informs and makes the table. In another description, Ahmed explains: "To be oriented is also to be turned toward certain objects, those that help us find our way" (*Queer Phenomenology* 1). Connecting Burke's rhetoric to posthuman thought in *Kenneth Burke + The Posthuman*, rhetoric scholar Chris Mays recovers orientation to argue that texts, too, have agency. As writers find their way through revision, Mays suggests that "orientation illuminates our understanding of the way that *writing* creates a crystallized perspective" (69), committing writers to certain patterns and ideas over others. Orientations, as both Ahmed and Mays show, are not built exclusively through human, rational channels, but are also molded through the mattering of a table and the vicissitudes of the writing process. Like these other studies of orientation, Burke's work shares that elemental commonality: sustained attention to the non-rational factors involved in making meaning of and in the world.

With orientation, Burke rooted his study of the non-rational in the sensation of vision, the sense that is perhaps most associated with abstraction and objectivity. Rhetorical scholars Sonja K. Foss and Cindy L. Griffin critique abstraction when they remark that Burke's rhetorical theory lends itself to "an objective stance" in which "the rhetor engages in rhetorical processes often as a substitute for experience," (343-4). Yet the intertwining of biology with rhetoric in his writing suggests that for Burke there was no separation between sensing an experience and being there. As Hawhee explains in *Moving Bodies*, Burke's references to the body in his writing were far from abstract and were instead rooted in his experience working in a drug laboratory and exploring bodily systems of digestion, neurology, and even dance. Such "biological processes," Hawhee notes, "are, for Burke, often and everywhere folded into interpretative, critical, and ultimately rhetorical acts" (*Moving Bodies* 91). Orientation—because of the study of optics that underpins it—turns even more explicitly to the minutiae of biological processes to explain how the body codes and responds to information through the sensation of sight.

Burke's explication of the biology of vision in *Permanence and Change* emphasizes that perspective is more than a theoretical "lens" by which to see something in a new way. Instead, vision is the sensory work of orientation. In this way, vision is rooted in lived experiences, or in certain "characters" emerge from the background of experience, a characterization that Burke derived—at least in part—from the theories of Gestalt. To define it in its scientific, Gestalt sense, orientation is the automatic grouping of disparate perceptual information into cognitive wholes. Any stimulus, word, or event that individuals encounter is filtered through their orientations: people can only see what their orientations allow them to see. Or as Burke himself defines *orientation*: a "system of meanings, an altered conception as to how the world is put together" (*Permanence and Change* 81). Rhetoric scholars have understood orientation as how a

worldview coalesces. Yet, Burke was also interested in what a worldview is *missing* when he theorized orientation. Rather than a metaphor for explaining how individuals look at the world through a certain lens, orientation is built with the Gestalt idea of the brain's mechanism for creating relationships—at the exclusion of what does not seem to belong—during sensory perception. If orientation is the brain's way of grouping information, then vision becomes a “test” to expose those grouping mechanisms, so as not to stay subordinated to them.

While Burke famously detested psychology, he viewed Gestalt, which emerged in the 1920s through the work of Wolfgang Kohler, Kurt Koffka, and Max Wertheimer in Germany, as “a more useable extension” of behaviorist experiments (Rueckert 214). Gestalt, which taught how the brain creates wholes from scattered sensory stimuli, was central to his description of orientation, as Burke regularly explained scientific experiments through the use of “characters,” or what elements are brought together into a cohesive whole. Consider Burke's “characters” as the constituents of gestalts—the parts that make the whole act that is human drama. As seen when Burke presents Pavlov's famous ringing bell experiment via Gestalt, orientation is explained as a bundle of characters:

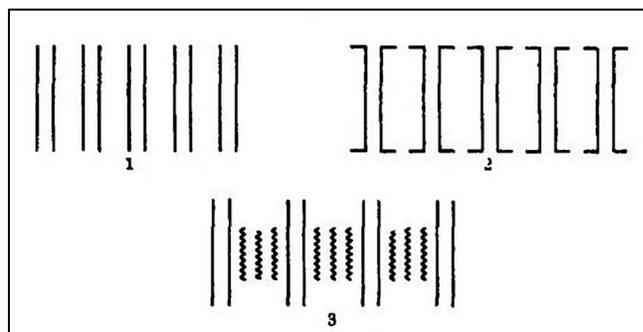
A ringing bell is a multiplicity of events interpreted as one thing [for example, various materials, component vibrations, etc.] . . . . In a general way, we might say that events take character by a “linkage of outstanding with outstanding” (as the outstanding sound of the bell, in linkage with the outstanding experience of the food, imparted to the bell a food-character for Pavlov's dogs). The accumulation and interworking of such characters is an orientation. It forms the basis of *expectancy*—for character telescopes the past, present, and future. A sign, which is here now, may have got a significance out of the past that makes it a

promise of the future. Orientation is thus a bundle of judgments as to how things were, how they are, and how they may be. (*Permanence and Change* 13-14)

Here Burke described the tendency of the brain to create “characters” and interpret experiences in relation to those characters. Notice that characters “telescope” or compress data into bundles and stand in metaphorically for orientations. Knowing that these orientations derive from the biological process of sight, we can consider them as sensory bundles that allow individuals to feel and intuitively understand instantaneous experience. For example, a spectator may arrive at a political speech and experience a bodily, affective response to the scene. Perhaps the phrases written on signs, the music playing over the speakers, the colors worn by others, the number of bodies sharing a space—not to mention the words being spoken—layer to create what will be experienced as a cohesive response. Each element is a character working together to perform the spectator’s orientation to that scene. Orientation, then, is the way that a symbol-using animal sorts information into meaningful relationships—but this sensing package (the notion of what goes with what) is not pre-determined or universal. Rather, it is created through the accrual of an individual’s bodily and sensorial experiences, which explains why two spectators can go to the same political event and have markedly varied responses. All the world is certainly a stage, and each individual is oriented to that stage through their own unique collection of characters.

Though never cited, it is clear that one particular text—Bruno Petermann’s *The Gestalt Theory and the Problem of Configuration* (1932)—influenced, and may have been Burke’s primary source of, his understanding of Gestalt “characters” as he drafted *Permanence and Change*. In a 1934 letter to Malcolm Cowley, Burke listed Petermann’s *The Gestalt Theory* at the top of a list of books that he considered to be the most neglected of the 1930s. Burke’s placing Petermann’s text at the top of his list of “neglected books” helps to explain why Burke defined

orientation so thoroughly in terms of Gestalt. A personal copy of Petermann’s book at Burke’s Andover, New Jersey estate reveals the passages Burke highlighted that explicate how vision works, or how sensory patterns—a sense of what goes with what—emerge. What Burke encountered in Petermann was a comprehensive



**Figure 1.** Replica of Wolfgang Kohler’s “Phenomenon of Closure” Sketch (Petermann 143).

overview of *many* versions of Gestalt theory, an overview that privileges the sensory and bodily implications of researchers’ results over the details of their “laboratory work.” The textual figure that garnered Burke’s attention was Kohler’s discovery of “‘gestalten’ in . . . optical perception” (139) manifested through the drawing of black lines—set apart by varying distances—on a white sheet of paper (see Figure 1). From this drawing, Kohler concludes that the brain forms groups (gestalt) even when presented with only parallel lines. In his notes surrounding this figure, Burke interpreted the findings of the three pairings as the brain’s ability to create “groups by nearness, enclosing, [and] likeness,” as seen respectively in Figure 1. This particular figure allows readers to sort differing elements into synthesized wholes at a glance. Indeed, Petermann presents *The Gestalt Theory* to explain “how it is possible for a whole to arise out of the elements” (4). *Gestalt*, in other words, is the cohering of disparate parts into a whole and the *gestalt problem* is how the brain creates such cohesion. Orientation, then, *is* a gestalt—a sensory whole—or a bundle of bias that may not so easily be changed. And as the explanation of individuals’ perceptual “whole” through which they navigate their material and symbolic environments, orientation employs the idea of gestalt, but it also contains the mechanism for identifying the automatic, and possibly problematic, interpretation therein.

With a basis in visual gestalt, orientation reveals how deeply image is rooted in experience and how such experience is key to understanding human motives. “Our orientation largely involves matters of expectancy,” Burke insists, and “the subject of expectancy and the judgment as to what is proper in conduct is largely bound up with the subject of motives, for if we know *why* people do as they do, we feel that we know *what* to expect of them and of ourselves” (*Permanence and Change* 18). A tension exists, then, at the heart of Burke’s orientation. Rhetorical critics cannot know motives without knowing why people code information as they do. But they cannot know why people code information the way that they do because such coding is rooted in past experiences. Orientation thus becomes a situated standpoint that is bound up in how one’s senses automatically interpret the world. In *Permanence and Change*, Burke further details two mechanisms that hold individuals’ orientations in place: piety and trained incapacity. Piety forces individuals to interpret information according to what fits with their present orientations (*Permanence and Change* 74). Rhetoric scholar Jordynn Jack explains pieties as “deeply entrenched embodied habits” (458), which ensure that anything incongruous to one’s orientation is considered impious. The inability to interpret information that falls outside of orientation’s purview is what Burke called *trained incapacity*, echoing Thorstein Veblen: it is “that state of affairs whereby one’s very abilities can function as *blindnesses*” (*Permanence and Change* 7, emphasis added). Essentially, past ways of understanding can prevent individuals from seeing the world anew in the present.

From Gestalt theory, Burke learned that once a perceptual whole is established, it is unnoticeable to individuals and difficult to displace. In *Permanence and Change*, Burke offers walking as one example:

The child gradually learns certain lowest common denominators of bodily balance, certain coordinations which apply *in a general way* to any act of walking. After he has learned to walk, even many years after he has become an accomplished walker, if you put him in a new situation, the abstractness of his walking becomes apparent. He has learned *a certain kind of walking* that is adapted to floors and streets, for instance, but poorly adapted to rough mountainsides—or the skilled sailor, having learned to walk by taking the roll of a ship into account, rolls when on firm ground. (*Permanence and Change* 105)

Orientations, then, are unconscious, general gestalts that become apparent when they no longer fit present sensory experiences.

Whereas Burke later attempted to uncover the motives of systemic cultural issues, that inquiry began with an investigation into orientation, and the compression of sense-bundled characters. The minutiae of the senses becomes an integral element of any rhetorical encounter, and rhetorical analysis becomes a way to uncover all that gets lost in the translation from part to whole. While Gestalt psychology explains how the brain creates wholes, or gestalts, it does not quite determine how individuals interpret *meaning* from those wholes, a lesson for which Burke would have to turn to optical science.

### **Sensing Orientation and Helmholtz's Theory of Signs**

The precursor to vision as individual and embodied may be found in the work of Helmholtz, who Burke relied upon when he described sensation as vital to rhetorical work. Helmholtz was a groundbreaking figure of the mid to late nineteenth century whose research and inventions forever changed ophthalmological practice, cementing his status as “one of Germany’s and the world’s spokesmen of science” (Cahan xi). Perhaps his most productive

contribution to science was his invention of the ophthalmoscope, which allowed researchers to “observ[e] the living retina” for the first time, an updated version of which is still used in ophthalmological practices today (Cahan xii). Christina Walter’s *Optical Impersonality* details Helmholtz’s impact on the American scientific vernacular and understanding of the body; she suggests that Helmholtz helped to dismantle the Cartesian notion of an autonomous mind that received faithful records of visual images from the eye. By exposing the material density of the retina, Helmholtz’s research on the eye allowed “the truth of vision [to become] grounded in the density and materiality of the body” (Walter 8). Helmholtzian vision, then, marked a disorienting moment for modernist writers—like Burke—as this science of vision rooted in the body simultaneously unlocked the fallibility of the senses and the strangeness of perception. Thus, sensation becomes elemental to rhetoric in that it invites affect, materiality, and feeling into how words and other “rational” texts, speeches, and artifacts come to mean, a principle presupposed in Burke’s crafting of orientation.

The discussion of how sensation interacts with the material world in optical science speaks to the interanimation between signs and matter. In this way, *Permanence and Change* finds the source for a semiotics that rests below symbolicity in an unlikely source: Helmholtz. In his 1978 essay “(Nonsymbolic) Motion/(Symbolic) Action,” Burke cites Jeremy Bentham: “Our ideas coming, all of them, from our senses, . . . from what other source can our language come?” (812). Burke thus presents sensation as the constitutive glue that connects nonsymbolic motion to symbolic action, bringing our bodies to feel meaning and our symbols to carry affect.

Nearly fifty years prior to that essay, in *Permanence and Change*, Burke had distilled Helmholtz’s theory of sensation: each sense is defined as a “character” that plays its own partial rendition of an entire performance. Before explaining the rhetorical work of the senses, Burke

reiterates how differences come to be organized into wholes by offering the example of fires and acids: because both substances burn, we assign a “burn-character” to them, which Burke interprets as “an ideality” or “a synthesis” (*Permanence and Change* 106). The danger of this synthesizing classification system, Burke warns, is that individuals come to overlook “the many important differences” (106) between the separate elements. He further offers the example of the litmus test that “judges whether a chemical is acid or alkali by registering red or blue” (106). Because of its automatic classification system, the litmus test “*can classify in no other way*” (106). Importantly, this limiting process derives from language. To classify “acid” or “alkali” by “red” or “blue” is to apply humanly constructed symbols onto natural phenomenon; once these symbols come to represent “acid” or “alkali,” scientific observers register information no other way. In this way, Burke demonstrates how language restricts individuals’ understanding of the world: because symbols inevitably classify information, we can never know what exists outside of these classifications.

These classifications, however, are not limited to symbol systems; they are embedded into bodily habits at the level of sensation. Relating the way that the senses classify information back to the litmus test, Burke explains:

Our senses themselves are similar abstractors, abstracting or interpreting certain events as having a sound-character, a taste-character, a heat-character, a sight-character, etc., for as Helmholtz pointed out, our very sensory equipment is a set of recording instruments that turn certain events into a certain kind of sign, and we find our way through life on the basis of these signs. (*Permanence and Change* 106)

In this passage, Burke distinguishes sensory signs from linguistic symbols, yet he determines that “signs” at the level of sensation commit the same errors as symbols: they classify by discarding, missing, or overlooking much of what is perceived. To reiterate his point, Burke closes this discussion of signs by ruminating on sensory excess. “There are events,” Burke explains, “*not interpreted at all by our sensory equipment, ultra-violet rays for instance*” (*Permanence and Change* 106-7, emphasis added).

Indeed, even though the brain registers only a sliver of the information the senses receive, individuals feel as though what they experience is an all-encompassing representation of reality. As Helmholtz states, “This daily verification by our other senses of the impressions we receive by sight produces so firm a conviction of its absolute and complete truth that the exceptions taken by philosophy or physiology, however well grounded they may seem, have no power to shake it” (130). That is, individuals trust what their brains tell them about what their bodies experience. Helmholtz was adamant that the senses do not give a true representation of the external environment; rather, they fill in gaps to create a synthesized whole (165). This representation of reality is an abstraction, Helmholtz explains, and people form this abstraction because the brain registers sensory information by generating hypotheses about incoming information then testing those hypotheses in conjunction with the other senses. Because hypotheses are constantly tested and confirmed in the waking world, individuals come to assume, rather unconsciously, that their senses are infallible in representing the material world. In Burkean terms, orientations are neurologically rooted and shape how individuals navigate their daily experiences.

Burke acknowledges that the brain creates unique signs for each sense, but for him this acknowledgment indicates that the source of our faulty perception is not in the material world

but with the mechanistic way that the brain creates signs. Helmholtz insists that signs are only effective when they denote constants; a good sign, then, must “be constant,” “always denot[ing] the same object” (168). This idea of constancy matches up with Burke’s assignment of each sense with its own “character.” Though Helmholtz and the Gestalt theorists in Petermann’s text championed the brain’s ability to receive all of the contradictory information from the senses and then to unify this information into a whole that the brain could easily process and understand through signs, Burke did not. Rather, he uses this aspect of the brain to reinforce his thesis on orientation: when the brain creates a whole, it fails to examine the many parts comprising this whole, disabling individuals from learning new things and altering their perspective of the world.

Orientations, then, are certainly partial, but they inevitably construct the bodily, cognitive, and cultural system through which we communicate (and miscommunicate). For Burke, when the brain’s system of signs work, they serve to help individuals see the world in new ways and communicate their discoveries with others; when they falter, only classifying information in rote constants, they work as neurological ruts. Further, once these ruts have been established, the brain can “classify in no other way” (*Permanence and Change* 106). Working with Helmholtz’s definition of signs, Burke observes that “we find our way through life on the basis of these signs” (106). In other words, people understand the world via signs that are full of incongruities. The problem is not that they have these incongruities—Helmholtz proves that these will always exist within the senses—but that they do not *realize* they have these incongruities, leaving them unaware of the shortcomings inherent to their signs. The brain, then, is the structure holding individuals’ orientations in place, presenting the world as a performance never called into question. Unless, of course, the automatism can be stopped through some disruption of the senses.

### Perspective by Incongruity as a Reorientation Tool

Precisely because orientation is a way of seeing, it can only be discovered through the same process of seeing. This attribute of Burke's orientation, as Stroud explains, has troubled rhetorical critics: why place the mechanism of change within the system filled with incongruities? (62). Burke explained the answer, defining "perspective by incongruity" as the antidote to his diplopia back in 1980:

I diagnosed the situation thus: When speculating on the resources of the term "double vision" at the same time that I was shifting my perspective on my own books on perspective, I began seeing double . . . I clearly "solved" the dizzying formal problem [with] the Nietzschean theme of "transvaluation" [the basis of perspective by incongruity] . . . . My recovery followed forthwith—and you can't imagine what a truly sybaritic delight it was, to look down the road and see just one car coming. (*Attitudes Toward History* 399)

The ailment was his orientation as a rhetorical critic. Becoming enmeshed in the fallibility of the senses and performing rhetorical analysis to investigate how signs and symbols work in and on the body had altered his eyesight. Perspective by incongruity is often taught as a tool of rhetorical analysis or a rhetorical method to influence others, but Burke's lived experience argues for its use as a method of self-reflection necessary for the rhetorical critic, defined broadly here as any analyst of a rhetorical encounter. If rhetorical critics are to view the bias of their own senses, then such revelation must come *through* their senses. The key has to do with the nature of attention. We are always embedded within a sensory scene; we sense that scene in new relief when we shift our attention. Burke's diplopia is one such example, and throughout *Permanence and Change* trauma and irony are presented as other such sensory shifts. In other words,

perspective by incongruity's role in rhetorical criticism requires feeling one's relation to world, a type of sense-inflected self-reflexivity.

Rhetorical scholars have understood how perspective by incongruity works conceptually, but not quite biologically—a difference that translates perspective by incongruity from a universal rhetorical tool to an intimate encounter rooted in self-reflexive praxis. Recent studies of perspective by incongruity have considered how the term might be used beyond Burke's original intentions. Communication scholars Lacy Lowrey, Valerie R. Renegar, and Charles R. Goehring use perspective by incongruity's traditional definition of “verbal atom cracking” to present comedian Sarah Silverman as one who embodies “non-verbal atom cracking” that offers social critique without confusing literal messages with personal points of view (64). Lowrey et al.'s description of perspective by incongruity can be applied as either a critical heuristic or rhetorical strategy. Michelle Gibbons proposes a third use for the term, as a “resource for theoretical reflection” (7), which fits with its ties to optics, or with a consideration of perspective by incongruity as a way of discovering the self's sensory biases.

Considering that for Burke orientation is so heavily rooted in Gestalt psychology and optical science, it is not surprising that Burke defines perspective by incongruity as “a way of seeing two ways at once” (qtd. in Skodnick 10). To put it another way, perspective by incongruity is a productive disorientation of the senses designed to break apart the seemingly automated interpretation process of the brain's ability to form gestalts. Burke's intent with this system of incongruous juxtapositions is that it would expose the brain's entrenchments. He designed perspective by incongruity to function as a mental heuristic capable of breaking apart individuals' neurologically entrenched orientations (a process he calls disorientation) and rebuilding a better worldview (reorientation).

Consider the example of a soldier who experiences heightened sense attention and subsequently a change in perception upon first entering combat. As Burke details, “The grass became a more vivid green; each flower he passed seemed unusually beautiful; the song of birds took on a new, more penetrating sweetness; and the clouds were not merely white, they were miraculously white” (*Permanence and Change* 141). Other feats of physical and emotional endurance are met with the same sensory shifts: mountain climbers report experiencing visions as they approach the edge of an abyss, which Burke interprets as not generating merely from the view, but from “the constant dread that animates them” (141). This is perspective by incongruity not because the soldier or the mountain climber misremembers their experience; instead, it has to do with the way that they are sensing the world in the first place. “The matter may not be one of *active forgetting*,” Burke explains, “but may involve *the nature of attention* in the first place. We are proposing that the metaphor be tentatively shifted from a legalistic one suggesting repression to an *optical one* suggesting focus” (141, emphasis added). Terror and dread, for Burke, are heightened emotions that can shift an individual’s attention, creating an experience of double vision in which terror is met with beauty. Other examples of perspective by incongruity throughout *Permanence and Change* include Surrealist art and Gothic literature, all of which suggest that perspective by incongruity deals rhetorically in affective shifts rather than only rational or logical appeals. Perspective by incongruity has been located in texts, speech, and body language, but this reorientation device also appears in everyday encounters, in any event that makes individuals pause, stare, reorient.

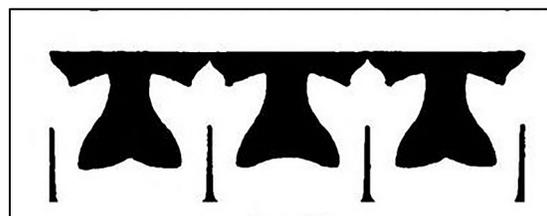
A return to archival evidence from Burke's marked up copy of Petermann's *The Gestalt Theory* reveals the visual example that inspired Burke as he drafted *Permanence and Change*. Figure 2 shows Petermann's representation of the "inversion phenomenon" as an example of the way that the brain transitions focus between the "figure" and the "ground" (160). Petermann explains:

This figure reveals very impressively how at one time one can see a row of black T's, and how thereafter, with a sudden reversal, a row of white leaves on a black background, can appear. Titchener's "explanation" of this phenomenon makes use of the *differentiation of various degrees of consciousness, which is related to the old-fashioned concept of Attention*. In his opinion, the emergence of the T's has a very simple cause: "The black T's are on the upper level of consciousness, while the rest is at a lower level"; and so, also, he imagines the reversal to be easily explained; all that has occurred is merely a change in that "level." (163)

**Figure 2.** Example of the Inversion Phenomena (Petermann 163).

When Burke annotated Petermann's text, he noted that "the nature of appearance [is] *voluntarily* changeable" and that an individuals' "disposition and *attention* [affect] perception of gestalt."

Perspective by incongruity, then, functions as a tool that allows the rhetorical critic to lose focus of the dominant view (the T's) for a brief moment in order to view an alternative interpretation (the



leaves). In other words, perspective by incongruity brings a different view to the forefront of attention, changing whether we look at the figure or the ground, the T's or the leaves.

Reorientation asks the rhetorical critic to practice diplopia, double vision for the sake of not being beholden to a single orientation. We are never *not* oriented, but rhetorical critics should never be oriented without purpose, without awareness of placement. The role of perspective by incongruity is that we need orientation to get beyond orientation, or to orient otherwise. For Burke, vision becomes rhetorical when it calls into questions our sensory paradigms and reveals our orientations, when it asks the rhetorical critic to discover to what and to whom they are oriented. Perhaps the most important element to becoming a rhetorical critic is attuning ourselves to our biases—not knowing them objectively or ideologically, but feeling them sensorially.

### **Implications and Conclusion**

I began this essay with the following question: how might we understand the materiality and sensation of vision as rhetorical processes? Answering this question through Burkean orientation has shown that thus far in rhetorical theory vision has been at its most rhetorical when it lapses or slips. And rhetorical strategies like perspective by incongruity become tools for inducing such lapses, forcing us out of neurotypical ruts, asking us to see and feel otherwise if we are to be otherwise. Rhetoric scholar Jenny Rice, echoing Hawhee's premise in "Rhetoric's Sensorium," has made clear why rhetorical critics must attend to the senses, describing sensation as "vital connective tissue within the act of communication" (35). My study of the biology of vision further emphasizes the relationship between rhetoric and sensation, showing that orientations unveil the connective tissue that is our senses. Rhetorical criticism is often about understanding, if not unhinging ideological biases; my argument has been that it does so only by getting in touch with the sensations and feelings that uphold those biases.

Although this study has centered on Burke's foray into the science of orientation in the 1930s, recent scholarly and scientific studies of image confirm the foundational principles of

Gestalt theory and the sensory semiotics of Helmholtz. In a review of neuroscience research, visual communication scholar Ann Marie Barry reveals that images are processed more quickly than words in the brain, which means that images are experienced emotionally or affectively before they are known rationally (*Visual Intelligence* 18). In fact, as neuroscientist Michael Gazzaniga explains, everything that is seen is actually fifty milliseconds old: “What we see is not what is on the retina at any given instant, but is a prediction of what will be there. Some system in the brain takes old facts and makes predictions as if our perceptual system were really a virtual and continuous movie in our mind” (75). The affective and rational interpretations of image are interrelated, of course, as the brain categorizes images according to past experiences, or the memories of image that exist in the mind (Barry, “Perception” 93). Our instantaneous reactions to images, then, have more to do with affective emotions sticking to past images, and subsequently symbols, than with a present critical evaluation of what is seen. To put it another way, while people may interpret symbols in similar ways based on shared sociocultural assumptions, their affective attachments to those symbols are highly individualized and personal. Sensing is an ongoing rhetorical encounter that occurs in non-rational channels, and rhetorical criticism that is attuned to interpretation at the level of the senses must unpack the affective connective tissue between non-symbolic affect and symbolic interpretation.

The theoretical discussion of sensation and rhetoric raises the question: how might understanding the materiality and sensation of vision alter rhetorical criticism? Only by attuning to the sensory underpinnings of orientation can rhetorical critics consider the affective weight that sticks to certain symbols over others and repetitively brings them to the forefront of attention. Take, for example, one visual artifact of President Trump’s campaign rallies—red trucker hats—as a helpful distillation of how this science of orientation might alter a rhetorical

analysis of presidential visual rhetoric. In his review of how visual images function in political communication, communication studies scholar Dan Schill indicates that visual analyses of presidential and political images have focused primarily on prearranged snapshot moments and contextual analysis of why those moments have public impact. In this vein, rhetoric scholar Keith V. Erickson's landmark study of the visual turn in presidential rhetoric traced Clinton's visual snapshots at Monticello, the Lincoln Memorial, and the Liberty Bell prior to his inauguration (141). Such visuals "synoptically link a president to sites, rituals, and occasions that serve as markers of culture, power, and/or authority" (Erickson 141). Although contextual analyses of the cultural weight of the sites and symbols appearing in political and presidential visuals is still necessary, this study of orientation asks critics to consider more minute, repetitive details—such as the red trucker hats—that jump across visual snapshots and contexts, details that enter our rhetorical purview less from their contextual weight and more from their sensory affect.

When Trump's red trucker hat with the slogan "Make America Great Again" first hit the campaign trail in July 2015, it was considered mostly as a joke. That season *The New York Times* Style section gave the hat its due, dubbing the "old-school, wide-brimmed rope hat" as "the ironic must-have fashion accessory of the summer," an artifact that was showcased during Fashion Week but whose appeal none could seem to describe (Parker). Then, *The New York Times* predicted that the red trucker hat would "go the way of 'on fleek'" (Parker), but four years later the hat maintains a prominent role in the Trump presidency's visual archive. The red hat, of course, cannot be divorced from its memorable slogan, which Schill and Rita Kirk have linked with nostalgia, citing a focus group of undecided voters polled during the 2016 election (1066-1067). Yet the hat exceeds the rationality (or lack thereof) of Trump's campaign, being purchased and worn by both Trump supporters and leftist critics "as a joke" (Cochrane).

Understanding this visual artifact requires the rhetorical critic to query the non-rational minutiae by which such hats appeal to the senses. Barry explains that “such simple stimuli as color alone . . . can create emotional bias before conscious judgment is formed” (*Visual Intelligence* 21), and ophthalmologists Michael F. Marmor and James G. Ravin conclude that the eye’s primary interpretative trait is to code on contrast. Rather than registering the actual brightness of objects, the eye quickly analyzes edges and judges what objects contrast most starkly with others (Marmor and Ravin 31). In this way, a red trucker hat stands out in stark contrast to other now muted colors of a scene. Or to use Gestalt terminology: when the eye codes the visual field into perceptual wholes, the red trucker hat almost instantaneously emerges as what does not fit with the rest of the scene. Color psychologists denote the color red as evoking feelings of energy, strength, and aggression that demand a physical response, raising the pulse and activating “fight or flight” instincts (Clarke and Costall 407; Labrecque and Milne 714; Valdez and Mehrabian 407-408). And whereas such research reveals shared sensory reactions to the red trucker hat, it also leaves room to consider the individualized affective responses such a visual artifact might evoke.

Observing the rhetorical affect of color through this particular visual artifact is in keeping with communication scholars Brian L. Ott and Greg Dickinson’s call to analyze the Trump presidency according to the rhetorical canon of style. Because Trump fails to issue logic-based rhetorical appeals, Ott and Dickinson propose that rhetoric scholars must study style’s affective appeals, which are “rooted in aesthetic expression and direct sensory experience rather than symbolicity and representational systems of thought” (3). Moments of rhetorical style, they further insist, create an “affective invitation” to which each individual body responds differently based on “that body’s memories and tendencies” (Ott and Dickinson 4). The affective

dimensions of Trump’s rhetoric explain how the bodies of Trump followers experience different visceral reactions than Trump dissenters to visual artifacts like the red trucker hat. The hat, communication scholar Anna M. Young argues, becomes a visible marker of in-group membership that transfers the “Trump brand” experienced at campaign rallies—which entails but is not limited to a “negative view of diversity and a fear of immigration”—to the wearer (28; 32). Political theorist William E. Connolly further details that the “affective contagion” of Trump’s rhetoric produced during these rallies does not provide the same “visceral register” outside of those crowd settings (29). In other words, the red trucker hats accrue their affective contagion from the style of the rally and, when worn, transfer Trump followers back to their collective rally experience. Dissenters, as Young explains, experience quite a different visceral response: “Like the MAGA red hat, these rallies are not for everyone. Some look at these rallies and see and hear echoes of other demagogic leaders and incitement to violence. Others, though, see America as they remember it or as they wish it to be” (34). Burke himself reminds that “orientation can go wrong” because “the devices which we arrive at a correct orientation may be quite the same as those involved in an incorrect one” (*Permanence and Change* 6-7). The ability to reorient requires not just interpreting the signs around us, but to “interpret our interpretations” (*Permanence and Change* 6), to observe how and why our senses are coding in the way that they are.

Attuning to sensation in rhetorical criticism in this way asks that we acknowledge all rhetorical critics as sensory beings, beings who are never abstract, theoretical observers but always bodily, sensory participants with individualized affective responses. Rhetorical criticism committed to studying individualized, affective responses discloses the critic’s own orientation and thus reaction to the object of study, so as not to reinforce the idea of critical perspective as

critical distance. To be clear, this disclosure is not the critic's situated identity but affective reaction to the work. In the case of Trump's red trucker hat, I am certainly not immune. On a recent family visit to southern Louisiana, I spent five full minutes in a restaurant line staring at a tall white man wearing a red hat in front of me. This hat excited a visceral response—I have no doubt my blood pressure rose as my “fight” instinct kicked in. Anger and frustration increased as I debated whether I was complicit for not saying something, for not visibly showing my disgust. It was then that he turned around and revealed a hat with “Tamko” (a roofing company) stamped on the front. This moment revealed some of the sensory responses inherent to my orientation—in this case, a response that led to a faulty conclusion. For others, the visceral response may have been pride, a shared identification with Republican red. The point is that the eyes may lead us to a place where the mind may not necessarily follow, and it is the job of rhetorical critics to consider how perceptual coding may lead to conceptual slips. Through this revised theory of orientation, this example shows how elements that appeal to the senses like color can contain the shifting, oscillating meaning of symbols.

Such querying of sensory orientations to possibly reorient ourselves requires the act of critical imagination. Presenting new tools of feminist rhetorical analysis in *Feminist Rhetorical Practices*, Jacqueline Jones Royster and Gesa E. Kirsch describe “critical imagination” as a method that allows rhetorical critics to “think between, above, around, and beyond [existing] evidence to speculate methodically about probabilities” (71). In doing so, critical imagination teaches us to “attend to our own levels of comfort and discomfort . . . to attend the twofold challenge of being aware, not only of what enters our field of vision—what we see and recognize—but attuned also to our blind spots in order to consider with critical intensity what may be more in shadow, muted, and not immediately obvious” (Royster and Kirsch 76). In a

continual querying of the senses, returning to a scene to ask which sensory details may have been overlooked, unnoticed, discarded, or—as is the case with the red trucker hats—which sensory details are most pronounced across snapshot moments, rhetorical critics ensure that critical imagination may reorient us, pulling us from perceptual biases. Reorientation, then, requires a perceptual rupture, a suspension of perceptual automatism, making vision at its most rhetorical when it alters the sensory makeup of our orientations and allows us to code otherwise. That reorienting moment may come with the viewing of a roofing hat or through something more deliberate like knitted pink “pussyhats” that emerged in the 2017 Women’s March on Washington. Serving as a foil to the red trucker hats, the pink pussyhats produce the “simultaneously unifying and antagonistic” effect as its counterpart (Kurtzleben). Because the volatility of the present political climate extends beyond words into visual artifacts—artifacts not relegated to monumental sites but that appear in everyday encounters—rhetorical critics must attune themselves both to the colors, affects, and sensations that bring meaning, symbolic and otherwise, to those artifacts and to the orientations from which those sensations arise.

Orientation is a promising term already in our rhetorical vocabulary that speaks to the affective milieu in which sensory and symbol systems are bound. But we need not approach orientation—and sensory elements like color to which it draws our attention—only through Burke. Orientation is a Gestalt term, a feminist term, a posthuman term that stems from the non-rational. Rhetorical scholars may have an orientation towards Burke, but we can learn to see otherwise *through* that orientation. We might now follow orientation’s other roots to trace how objects come to acquire their affective appeals, to consider how to access more fully feelings and affect in scenes of visual rhetoric, to query further how vision might function differently in rhetorical studies if rooted in biology and disconnected from its abstract connotations. We might

stop to feel how it is our sensory reactions to the material world connect body to word, motion to action, feeling to meaning.

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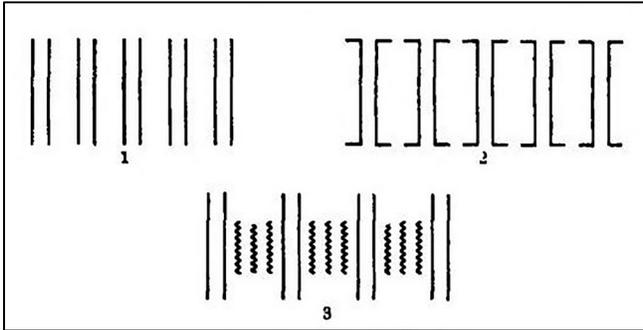
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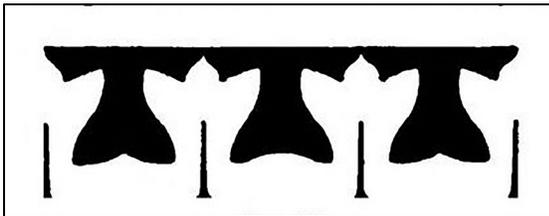
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## Figures



Caption: **Figure 1.** Replica of Wolfgang Kohler's "Phenomenon of Closure" Sketch (Petermann 143).



Caption: **Figure 2.** Example of the Inversion Phenomena (Petermann 163).