Sonja Foss (1994) and Valerie Peterson (2001) deserve praise for their recent theoretical contributions to visual study, and especially their insights into postmodern rhetorical visual texts. Their work, and most notably others in the past decade (Blair, 1996; Blair, Jeppeson, & Pucci, 1991; Finnegan, 2001; Foss, 1986; Haines, 1986) have added to our knowledge of visual perception and influence. As Nicholas Mirzoeff argues, there exists in the academy a “big gap between the wealth of visual experience and our ability to analyze it” (Mirzoeff, 1999, p. 3). This paper, following the calls from Mirzoeff as well as Foss and Peterson, adds to that body of study.

The bias on the spoken and written word in Western culture perhaps partly stems from Plato’s distrust of our senses, chiefly our eyes (Collinson, 1992). Subtle and even perhaps unintended biases against the visual sneak into current texts. For example, when David Crowley and Paul Heyer (2003) discuss a particular novel, they state: “This brief glimpse of a world so different from our own will inspire you to read the novel itself – or at least rent the video or DVD” (p. 43). Crowley and Heyer’s bias towards print is typical of many in academic circles, but that mindset is waning to a great extent. Whether or not this example is valid to the reader, it is safe to say our culture has for centuries prized the word more than the image. We can now move past the redundancy of proving the existence, importance, and lack of understanding of visual texts (Amato, 2002). That lack of understanding seems most important at present as we have seen steady but unfulfilled growth in our knowledge about visual texts.

The goal of this essay is to contribute to the race to understand visual rhetoric, but not in a general sense. That would make for a daunting laundry list, indeed. A focus is needed for clarity and warranted for brevity. Paul Martin Lester (2003) says that
to fully appreciate visual communication you must be able to use some sort of critical method to analyze pictures” (p. 107). Marita Sturken and Lisa Cartwright (2001) advocate the stance that the critical approach has much to offer visual understanding, moving us beyond so much physiological study of the process of observing (seeing) to the process of making meaning from visual texts (looking). Of course, the time for generalities seems past as a mass of visual rhetorical studies can be found at almost any communication convention these days, and the studies have blossomed in the journals over the past decade or so.

Taking a cue from Mirzoeff, this essay focuses on postmodern visual culture. Mirzoeff argues that “the fascination with the visual and its effects that marked modernism has engendered a postmodern culture that is most postmodern when it is visual” (1999, p. 3). Even more powerful is Norman Denzin’s (1991) observation that postmodern theory preoccupies itself with a visual society. He adds: “Postmodern terrain is defined almost exclusively in visual terms, including the display, the icon, the representations of the real” (p. viii).

Given that language and reason in our culture are far different from our pre-oral/visual and oral pasts (Ong, 2002), it is safe to assume that the principles of language and reason in a literate age post-date a different kind of logic or reasoning. Since postmodernity criticizes present-day reason and science (Blair et al., 1991), the argument of focus for my project is strengthened. Postmodern critique attempts to step outside a socially dominant scientific mindset; likewise, visual critique must be on a different plane of perception from a rational world linguistic mindset. In short, postmodern thought and visual studies make great bedfellows.

Such justification for postmodern analyses and visual communication is not an absolute or a preferred option being promoted by me. Rather, it is a sensible union that is still being honed, and is offered by me as an insightful manner by which to understand certain selected works dubbed or thought to be postmodern. And it is this manner that this essay seeks to clarify and explain, following Foss’s (1994) and Peterson’s (2001) leads. The general, guiding question thus becomes: How can analysts better understand postmodern visual rhetoric? That question should not be accepted without presuppositions. First, rhetorical analysts need not be postmodern analysts or postmodern rhetorical analysts. The ideas offered are for a general, albeit learned body. Second, “better understand” infers we do not do a sufficient job in the first place. Peterson proved that case against Foss, and this essay carries the argument on against Peterson, though it is more than just a rebuttal piece. Finally, as for “postmodern visual rhetoric,” definitional characteristics may be proven in an analysis. Is the text possibly or surely dubbed “postmodern?” Is it primarily visual? And is it rhetorical?

Keep in mind a paramount disclaimer: postmodern analysis means “tidiness is not to be expected” (Mirzoeff, 1999, p. 3). Postmodern thought rejects the linear beauty of modern theory and argument; it breaks from and elaborates on that departure from the norm. Ultimately, postmodern analysis of visual communication requires layers of approaches and methods (Rice, 2002a, p. 17). Robert Hariman and John Louis Lucaites (2002) suggest visual analyses necessitate a blending of ideas though
their study does not particularly sell postmodernity. And so with the disclaimer made, the gist of the project may be revealed.

This essay first highlights the shortcomings of Peterson’s work, which is built upon Foss’s visual schema. Once a need for complementing and extending their ideas as they relate to postmodern visual texts is justified, the essay moves toward a theoretical foundation that might serve postmodern visual critics well. A “method” per se is antithetical to postmodern theoretical and critical thought, as even a novice postmodern might contend. Only ideas are offered—much like a smorgasbord—which may be chosen to construct and destruct in unique and insightful ways that hold true to the postmodern notion of a disruption of the normal.

In simple terms, Foss’s schema contains three elements or steps. The critic must first determine the function of the text, which is clearly a product of the critic’s interpretation of visual data and exists independently from the creator’s intent. Second, the critic should scrutinize the composition of the visual artifact, picking apart the ingredients of the text. Finally, Foss says, the critic needs to scrutinize the function of the art, measuring its legitimacy or soundness. Obviously, the schema rests in deductive reasoning, which seems somewhat antithetical to postmodern thought since postmodernity decenters the critic and seems to promote a more inductive nature.

Peterson notes many strengths of Foss’s schema, but most of her attention is on the weaknesses of the schema, as well as her own reconfiguration of Foss’s work. There are four paramount weaknesses noted by Peterson. The first criticism deals with what Foss calls the centrality of images, whereby the critic makes assumptions about visual elements they perceive. Peterson argues, however, that the critic must put perception before interpretation. A second problem is that of circularity, which cautions against self-fulfilling prophecy of the critic. Third, Peterson criticizes Foss for too neatly severing rhetorical function from aesthetics, neglecting to account for how beauty persuades audiences. Lastly, Foss’s schema is restrictive in scope in that it is based on too many modernist assumptions; Peterson explains how Foss splits form and function as well as posits discernable purposes. Further, Foss separates form and content too much in addition to separating art from everyday life.

The alternative schema Peterson presents basically reverses the first two steps, making the sequence more inductive by analyzing the points and then determining function. Peterson spends a great deal of time, usefully and for the most part correctly, on the first stage, sensing visual stimuli. She focuses on light, line, color, scale, and other such compositional elements that help “make up the image in the first place” (Peterson, 2001, p. 23). While there seems to be nothing wrong with this change in sequence and even what she calls a “critical reconfiguration,” I am somewhat cautious about the masked objectivity of the descriptive slant. As Sturken and Cartwright (2001) explain, visual representations are subjective choices; they are subjective and rely on much framing as well as personalization. Peterson does qualify her argument by acknowledging her shift would “not eliminate problems of interpretation and vocabulary, but it would address changes of circularity and take critical disputes to a more basic perceptual territory” (2001, p. 24).
similar stance in his starting point for critical visual analysis. After taking an
inventory of all objects the critic should actively notice their composition and then
“study visual cues in-depth and the movement within the image” (Lester, 2003,
pp. 108–109). Peterson is on target with others without being too bold, yet she
hesitates, rightfully so, to say her schema is as different from Foss’s as she states early
in her essay. Rather than an “alternative schema,” as she states in her title, Peterson
seems to offer more of a “revised schema” that is useful, but has weaknesses,
especially in regard to postmodern thought and criticism, though that is purported
to be one of her strengths.

Peterson’s postmodern ideas are helpful, but they do not go far enough. Her focus
remains too concrete without a strong enough methodological explanation of how
to unearth ideology, abstractions, and historical layers in images. The re-
configuration contributes little in the way of new visual literacy especially that of a
postmodern nature. The inductive step she takes is in the right direction, back from
deduction, but she does not go far enough back. Peterson does a good job of framing
the earliest stages of a postmodern visual critique but accomplishes little else
contributing anything new from Foss’s ideas. The masked linearity of her schema
still seems like a method and postmodern criticism rejects this idea (Blair et al., 1991;
Denzin, 1991). As she says of Foss’s schema, it is a step in the right direction.
Peterson moves us a little in one direction, but she falls short from reaching the
purported destination.

The proposal to extend Peterson’s work is not a matter of switching around a few
parts or steps and justifying them. Peterson’s and Foss’s ideas are included in this
critical review, yet what is presented is a more radical departure from those ideas
based on other works in postmodern thought and critical visual communication
studies. The goal is to fuse a variety of ideas and schemas into a complex,
multidimensional perspective that will allow for what Denzin says postmodern
criticism should do: “produce theoretical–interpretive analysis of social
Such an undertaking will be complex and will generate contradictory fields of
experience, as postmodern thought demands.

Core elements of this omnaphistic visual schema must be presented at this point,
before the explanation of postmodern qualities that work with the schema to
ultimately offer a drastic departure from Peterson’s more linear revision of Foss’s
schema. The omnaphistic visual schema is not merely a revision or a simple
extension of that work. It is not even a reconfiguration; rather, a reconceptualization
is offered.

The omnaphistic visual schema contains two planes of perception, content and
form, that combine to make the intersection dubbed the “artifactual plane of
existence.” Content deals more with the visual stimuli, including fundamental items
like composition, materials, line, mass, color, and so on. Form is typically what
might be labeled image-making, the result of making sense out of the perceived
content in some organizational semblance. Deeper perception, beneath the surface,
is where meaning results. Following Sturken and Cartwright’s (2001) lead, post-
modernity tells us to find meaning “beneath the mask of surface appearances” (p. 234). Inventoring the content is crucial, as Peterson notes, and recognizing possibilities of form yields meaning. Taken together—because we must—content and form result in the labeling of an artifact that comes into existence for us. Peterson notes this division somewhat in that she says content must come before form to understand “what makes up the image in the first place” (2001, p. 23). While content and form are split there, conceptually and following postmodern thought, they cannot be separated so easily or clearly. Todd Gitlin (1998) argues postmodern thought infers mixtures and textuality that culminate to what Mizeroff describes in relation to visual communication as a “collective experience” (11).

The focus on achieving a place of existence, really more of a cross plane between content and form, resides in a sensory–intuitive process. Denzin says postmodern thought demonstrates tension between modernist interpretations (functional and what Foss promotes in her schema) and postmodern sensations, which describes “the search for the meaning ... [as] a study in looking” (1991, p. viii). This stance infers that the constituent elements of the visual encounter are defined by interaction between viewer and viewed (visual element) (Mirzoeff, 1999). Since postmodernity is grounded in part with symbolic interactionism, this seems logical.

More is going on here, however. These planes are premised on thought patterns that are embedded in the discussions above. Our perception and inkling of interpretation are based upon what C. S. Pierce calls “abductive thinking.” While Peterson’s emphasis on induction rather than Foss’s deductive approach is a step in the right direction, especially in regard to postmodern analysis, Peterson fails to go far enough here. J. Anthony Blair alludes, probably unknowingly, to abductive thinking when he makes the observation that there is a certain kind of “visual logic” at work in the visual communication process (Blair, 1996, p. 25).

There needs to be explanation of how abductive thinking fits into the omniphistic visual schema, how it helps integrate rational and intuitive reasoning in a way that functions within the realm of postmodern analysis. It must also be shown how Roland Barthes’s work in visual perception and interpretation accents the abductive space that surrounds content and form (Sturken and Carwright, 2001).

Sandra Moriarty (1996) argues that applying the logic about language to the logic about the visual is not as comparable. Visual communication is more arbitrary. How so? Because whereas language “is more involved with manipulating a conventionally learned code ... visual communication involves observations that lead to hypotheses about meanings” (p. 185). Moriarty suggests that critics approach visual communication as an informally learned phenomenon.

Alongside Moriarty is Eduardo Neive who, together with Moriarty in separate works, draws from C. S. Pierce’s work in semiotics to explain the false dichotomy of inductive and deductive thinking (see Moriarty for abbreviated and accurate interpretations of Pierce’s work). Abduction precedes both induction and deduction and exists as an “origin of knowing,” which begins with visual observation before anything else, such as the sense-making Foss begins with (function) or Peterson begins with (lower level sense-making of contents). Abduction offers the critic
insight into “a possible pre-existing logic linking mind and matter” (Rice, 2002a, p. 6). Simply put, abduction is a “may-be,” induction is a “can-be,” and deduction is a “would-be” (Pierce, 1976, p. 88). Abductive thinking possibly relates to what Edmund Carpenter says about “visual man” and how his visual perception of the world deals more with “inner experiences, nonrational emotions” (Crowley & Heyer, 2003, p. 251).

Closely related to these types of thinking is what Roland Barthes says about levels of meaning in an image. There are both connotative and denotative meanings. Connotative meaning is personal, cultural, and even somewhat historical in context. Denotative meaning in an image may reveal certain and apparent truths. There is what we may label “documentary evidence” (Sturken & Cartwright, 2001, p. 19). Denotative meaning in visual perception is agreed upon in and by community. Abductive reasoning, being more intuitive and subjective, aligns itself well with Barthes’s idea of connotative meaning. Inductive probability relies more on external variables and tests of validity, a socially constructed assessment, which aligns with denotative meaning quite well. Abductive and deductive thinking parallel greatly with connotation and denotation.

Connotative definitions exist intrapersonally, on the inside, so to speak. Denotative meanings, however, exist interpersonally, or on the outside, existing as negotiated meanings in the external world. As we examine external (denotative) meanings, we can see how there is a shift from abductive reasoning to inductive reasoning. How so? Abduction is more intuitive and personal whereas induction is more rational and must adhere to external, commonly agreed-upon standards.

Put another way, Peterson’s goal of making the critic more accountable to outside sources is refuted here and Foss’s stance embraced—but only partially. Peterson argues that Foss makes the critic less accountable to outside sources by starting with a determination of function and thus resulting in a more subjective critique. While this essay disagrees with Foss’s blatantly deductive stance, as Peterson does, the initial focus on subjective meaning is somewhat on target with abductive thinking. Subjective does not imply a personal whim, and is more in line with Michel Foucault who avoids a blatant interpretive approach in an analysis of text by seeking “to discover the boundaries of acceptability for claims to truth” (Foss, Foss, & Trapp, 2002, p. 364). While Foucault does not use the words “subjective” or “abduction” a relation exists. A critic is present in the process. There is no doubting that. We can decenter him or her as a domineering interpretivist, but he or she is still present existing as an initially intuitive being. As we seek descriptive analysis as outlined earlier here and as suggested by Foucault, we must negotiate that process with the inevitable and unavoidable process of interpretation (Foss et al., 2002). We float between the internal and external, the subjective and the objective. This follows along with the roots of postmodern analysis, symbolic interactionism, and social construction, denying the false dichotomy of subjectivity and objectivity (Denzin, 1991).

Much that has been left out up to this point that deals with postmodern qualities. One must keep in mind that by qualities I do not imply method or generic
constraints, for postmodern thought and analysis rejects such modernist notions. King (1992) speculates that it is not clear whether or not postmodern analysis possesses generic characteristics. He argues against the universal and says understanding may only come through context. Denzin (1991) focuses (strongly along the lines of Foucault) on how critics must pay attention to the control and manipulation of power. Finally, Blair et al. (1991) reject any rigid methodology and deal more with the disruption of the normal, while arguing that their aim is not to “advance a generic typology” of postmodern visual rhetoric (p. 264).

These qualities can be extensive and overlapping and some may be present while others are not. They are merely indicators of “may-bes” in postmodern analytical attempts. There is a logic to the arrangement of these qualities, based somewhat on the work on Mary McLeod, on whom Blair et al. (1991) rely. The qualities pervade the schema presented above, infiltrating and surrounding every aspect of every element.

McLeod posits three major indicators of a postmodern text: refusal of universals, attention to context, and interrogative stance. While there is nothing wrong with her work, the terms are used differently during cross-reference of the many postmodern traits and characteristics used by a variety of critics. The collection of studies from which this essay draws are important works that explore both the visual and the postmodern, although some works are used that supplement either one or the other as needed. For example, while not centered on visual rhetoric, Foucault himself suggests multiple points of analysis of postmodern criticism including issues such as: topic, site, opposites, description versus interpretation, and decentering of the author (Foss et al., 2002). The goal here is not to argue for the archetypal postmodern indicators.

From cross-referencing, there really seem to be four indicators of a postmodern visual text, especially when coming from a communication, specifically rhetorical, point of view. All indicators have text as a base, but emphasize other communication elements. For example, the first indicator, oppositional elements, is really more than just a refusal of universals. Refusal is part of it, as a refusal implies a rejection of one by another, thus an opposition. But opposition is larger than refusal; it can deal with other forms of tension and “sides.” Oppositional elements deal with conflicting styles, generic violations, juxtaposition, paradox, irony, contrasting ornamentation, and other oppositional ideas (Berger, 1998; Blair et al., 1991; Denzin, 1991; Newton, 2001). This element is at the most basic level of perception, parts and meaning, and has at its center the text with the critic, or any receiver, at the periphery.

As a brief and albeit chosen example of how this indicator might be used the fictional film The Believer, a story about a young self-hating Jewish boy who becomes a Nazi skinhead, helps illustrate the point. The boy is in a constant state of tension, torn between ideologies and depicted to us visually between iconographic ornamentation of Judaism (for example, Torah and yarmulka) and the skinheads (for example, shaved heads and Nazi symbols). Obviously, the conflicting styles and content violate cultural generic norms, such as the expectation that Nazis and Jews cannot be together. It is ironic in that sense, paradoxical in the sense that there is
a contradictory nature exploited as a seemingly false yet true account. And we find psychological juxtaposition—as well as plenty of visual ones—that depict opposites side-by-side. The context of the story and the visual elements are shaped (form) in a multidimensional way that may be presented in more descriptive terms, abduction, and then carried further into inductive probabilities and the denotative realm of meaning. This postmodern indicator, oppositional elements, has at its core parts of the text.

A second indicator, co-constructed elements, has both text and audience at its center. Co-constructed elements are those qualities that function to explain the exchanges between text and audience, with audience beyond just the critic. Postmodern critics use qualities that fit within this indicator including: multi-vocal, close to the human lifeworld, hyperreal, simulation, co-authored between work and audience, engagement, open system, intersection of gazes, fusion–synthesis, interactive between viewer and viewed, and rejection of metanarration (Sturken & Cartwright, 2001). McLeod neglects really to differentiate this indicator, which seems paramount to postmodern thought as its roots lie with symbolic interactionism (Denzin, 2001). The text–audience ratio in the co-construction element of a postmodern artifact ultimately projects multiplicity and negotiation, and is at most an elementary description. The notion of real versus reproduction is crucial here, for as Sturken and Cartwright state, “Most of us come to know icons, paintings, etc. via visual reproductions” (2001, p. 12). Increased verisimilitude, or even what Walter J. Ong calls being “closer to the human lifeworld,” (2002, p. 42) is important to unearth at this stage of analysis. Postmodern thought is more constructivist than mimetic. Postmodern texts are created and create more than they merely suggest.

For example, to provide a brief sketch, a critic might approach the Apartheid Museum in South Africa as a postmodern artifact that exhibits a co-construction. The museum requires visitors to choose placards at the start of the tour, one reading “White,” the other “Black.” Those card choices dictate which hall of the museum one enters. While viewers see the same exhibits, a chain link fence separates them from each other based on the race card they chose. How does this museum function as a co-construction? Because not only are there different stories of apartheid atrocities told in assorted texts with exhibits, but viewers are drawn close to what discrimination feels like—what it is like to be separate from others and separated even from your own kind, as described by the color classification of the apartheid system. The museum demands engagement and ultimately ends in an open room for all to intermingle and learn about an end of division by arbitrary decision. The closed-to-open system forces an interactive experience. A single story is not present, as multiple stories are told, and even a visitor’s own story is created as he or she becomes part of the experience. There exists more of a simulation with audience participation, what Baudrillard calls the focus on “hyperreal” (quoted in Sturken & Cartwright, 2001, p. 237), a mark of postmodernity. Audiences are not necessarily told how to think, but are goaded into becoming part of the exhibit and interacting with the viewed. Verisimilitude is an obvious trait as well, and results from the interaction between viewer and viewed, through an intersection of gazes (Sturken & Cartwright, 2001).
While the attempt here is not a full-blown analysis of the Apartheid Museum, the example illustrates how the co-construction dimension of postmodern thought works. Similarly, text is at the center of the third indicator yet it is joined not so much by audience but by context. Contextual elements, the third postmodern indicator, illustrate how text and context may relate in a variety of possibilities. We look for how history is punctuated in the here and now, realizing that historicism operates above individual human agents. Denzin (1991) says there is a conservative longing for the past, coupled with an erasure of the boundaries between past and present in postmodern works. Echoing this is Berger (1998), who says postmodern texts view time as nowhere in particular. Beyond historicism and exact temporal disregard, postmodern contextual elements also deal with a cross-cultural dimension, exhibiting eclecticism. We learned in indicator two that a postmodern experience is collective and, as such, as Mirzooff (1999) argues, this collectivity is a varied mixture. Visual culture, specifically, illustrates how people define their identities; it is transcultural. The sociocultural–historical context is “what gives an image value” (Rice, 2002b, p. 20). Of course, all of this is layered, intertextual, and intercontextual. We must look for those points of intersection, or what Foucault might call “breaks of self-evidence” (quoted in Foss et al., 2002, p. 363).

To illustrate the contextual postmodern indicator, let us revisit The Believer, a movie that exhibits multiple contextual elements. Visual objects pervade the movie and illustrate the historical conflict between Nazis and Jews. The old man who lectures the young boy Danny represents a longing for the past—not for Nazi prison camps, but for a definitive religious belief that gave comfort, while at the same time caused imprisonment. Yet there is no clear delineation of past and present as both the old man and Danny are in the scene together, fused together in a cross-generational and cross-cultural shift (Danny’s religious and cultural abandonment). Even the editing, or form, of the film manipulates context somewhat, especially in the scene where the skinheads ransack a synagogue. Of course movies like the recent Memento are especially contextual in terms of temporality and historicism when focusing on form. The structure of Memento is basically told in reverse through a character who only has brief spans of short-term memory and must piece together a suspenseful series of events that break the narrative norm. Such films are effective representations of the contextual postmodern indicator.

The final postmodern indicator is one which engulfs McLeod’s criterion of interrogative stance. While the questioning, engaging quality is not disputed here, more may be going on that warrants a broader heading. Many postmodern theorists and critics build their propositions around challenging ideological elements, the fourth indicator. It is under this heading that critics find how a postmodern construction politicizes, humanizes, undercuts rationality, rejects technology, rebukes objectification, and unearths ethics (Blair et al., 1991; Denzin, 1991). While questions arise for us at this level of postmodern experience, the questions flow from our own ideology, by which we experience postmodern expressions meant to turn us on ourselves to help understand power structures and knowledge in human relations. Interrogativity is the method and the end, ideological criticism.
Foucault posits that knowledge and power are co-joined and that power—specifically—is not a thing but more a matter of relations (Foss et al., 2002). Ideological critique is the tool with which to reveal how universal norms and individual expressions clash as depicted, for instance, in postmodern artistic expressions. Interrogativity is vital to this process. Sturken and Cartwright (2001) note that questioning is a vital dimension of postmodern analyses. They suggest we question the master narrative, linear progress, authenticity, and presence. In particular, they stress how the visual consumption of postmodern images sparks these questions.

Images and ideology go hand in hand. Blair et al. (1991) note many of the specific characteristics I revealed above (such as rebukes objectification), which all seem to support the ideological proposition. Ideology is, in general, common values that allow us to “live out our complex relations to a range of social structures” (Sturken & Cartwright, 2001, p. 21). Visual perception does not escape such filtering, demonstrating perhaps how we negotiate from abduction to induction and even to deduction. Postmodernism suggests a blankness, says Berger (1998), which requires us to step out of our ideological biases and notion of truth. This blank experience allows us to be self- and other-reflective, which is integral to understanding ideology, knowledge, and power. In particular, postmodern critics of visual art find how such art “mirrors life, structures and reproduces it” (Denzin, 1991, p. ix).

To offer an example here, as with the previous three indicators, is not simple. This indicator must be saved for last. It serves as a culminating experience for the critic. Rather than focus on core elements of the experience, this indicator is far more abstract and links elements of text, audience, context, and critic as the composite rhetorical force. To simplify, oppositional elements focus primarily on text with the unavoidable yet subordinate presence of the critic. The co-constructed element focuses on text and audience equally, while the contextual element focuses on text within context. Ideological indicators focus on text and all its surrounding elements, which results in a revelation of rhetorical power. The critic would need to carry out a full exploration of the previous indicators to find out what would be discovered. If we were to explore fully the Apartheid Museum from a postmodern perspective, we might find how the forced separation and classification of visitors, combined with the interplay of an, at first, closed system with an open system at the end, are positioned within a physical and more importantly, social place that cultivated cultural barriers in its past. Such an analysis—in initially more abductive and then predominantly inductive modes of thinking—may and can lead to ideological critique about political power, humanity, technology, flaws of rationality, objectification, and ethics. I hesitate with my suggestion here for fear of claiming to represent modernity and deduction. That is not my point.

At this juncture, the reader may have a number of questions. How exactly do all of these indicators come together with the omniphistic visual schema? How might this schema be used to explicate artifacts? And how does this work situate itself in Foss’s (1994) and Peterson’s (2001) race to formulate visual rhetoric theory?

First, the schema and indicators do not come together in a nice little flowchart or graphic representation. The schema was developed with a postmodern visual rhetori-
eral approach in sight, thus explanations of the postmodern in relation to the visual became a natural extension. But what in all of this may the utilitarian critic find, the one who wishes to analyze a text with the ideas presented here? Foucault comes to mind for an answer. He states: “All my books are, if you like, little tool boxes” (quoted in Foss et al., 2002, p. 362). Foucault suggests we use what we want—pick and choose—and thinks that is, “Well, all the better” (p. 362).

Second, these ideas about postmodern visual rhetoric may be applied by approaching text as something that has content, form, and a culminating fusion of visual experience. Each element could be analyzed in terms of oppositional, co-constructed, contextual, and ideological elements. However, a critic might well approach the text first from a postmodern slant, keeping in mind the four indicators, and then, for example, analyze the contextual elements in terms of content, form, and fusion. These choices may best be determined according to the subject under scrutiny. In the spirit of Foucault, we might be reminded that if some small part of the ideas aids in the analysis and understanding of text, so much the better.

The word “method” is not used on purpose in this essay. If pressed, Burke’s “terministic screen” would be more accurate (Burke, 1986). The use of “omniphistic” intends to make many ideas about the visual and the postmodern come together in balance. Lester (2003), of course, uses omniphism as a particular vein of visual study utilizing an eight-step personal impact assessment (PIA) approach. The present use of the term should not be confused with Lester’s usage.

Third, and simply put, Foss was broad in conception, while Peterson was only slightly less so. Analogically, Foss shot wide, Peterson used a smaller gauge, and the approach taken here is more of a rifle approach as the essay aimed at the large and still hard-to-hit bull’s eye of visual rhetorical theory. Only a ring of the target, the postmodern, was hit. Foss and Peterson cumulatively drew closer to that ring, but that is all that was aimed at here. Why? Visual rhetorical theory represents a growing body of study in the field, but we may be served well by more studies in the particulars than by studies in general.

We have known and studied for a long time the relationships between words and pictures (see the notes on I. A. Richards in Bizzell & Herzberg, 2001). We know visual communication leaves more for us to do and we are trapped by our language to describe the impact of an image. The present theoretical contribution about the visual experience contains obvious epistemological implications as it generates a more guided and precise form of talk about the experience of the visual rhetorical process. There are also ontological implications. Pierce, Moriarty, and others provide crucial foundational ideas that explain our forms of experience. How we come to be affected by the visual is crucially important, and those ideas, couched within postmodern indicators about the visual, combine to give us vehicles for expression about the very experience whose power and potential for study by rhetorical scholars we are just now realizing.

Note

[1] “Omnaphistic” means “all in balance” and is described by Lester (2003) as a theory of visual communication. On page 109, Lester explains how it combines rational and intuitive aspects
of the mind into a balanced whole. The eight steps, Lester explains, of this type of analysis are modernistic in approach, too modernistic for any strong correlation to this study. Lester’s steps greatly resemble a cluster-agon analysis, to use Burkean terms, in regard to visual analysis. My use of the term is much broader and not nearly modernist in conception.

References


