

PART I

THEORIES AND METHODS

1. Visual rhetoric and the analysis of persuasive political communication

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INTRODUCTION

Rhetoric is defined by Aristotle as the “detection of the persuasive aspects of each matter” (1991, p. 70). While as a discipline and practice it has tended to concentrate on the power of words to persuade, consideration of the visual has played an essential part in effective rhetorical technique since its inception. The cultural and value associations that an audience might have with particular gestures, facial expressions, posture and deportment were important considerations of rhetorical delivery in the traditional oratorical contexts of political assembly, law court and public ceremony (Hall, 2007). Perhaps even more significantly, the power of imagery is central to the ways in which stylistic devices such as metaphor, metonymy, allegory, personification and anthropomorphism are used to vivify a rhetor’s arguments and to bring a topic to life before the eyes of an audience (Westin, 2017; Hawhee, 2011). As we will see, Kenneth Burke’s (1966) reframing of rhetoric as the use of *symbolic means* to induce cooperation in others inspired an increasing realization in scholars of rhetoric that the visual could be just as powerful a rhetorical tool as the verbal. Consequently, the study of visual rhetoric has flourished over the past thirty years and its application to the analysis of political communication allows us to analyse the ways in which persuasive political messaging uses the visual alongside the verbal to attempt to induce cooperation.

In this chapter I will outline the background to Western rhetoric with a particular focus on the growth of the visual perspective. I will then move on to a discussion of the visual analogues to the most common verbal rhetorical devices (as well as discussing those aspects of visual persuasion which are unique to the realm of images). I will then finish with a rhetorical analysis of the visual rhetoric of the Boogaloo Bois, a right-wing US militia group active since 2019.

THE ORIGINS OF RHETORIC

The original realms of rhetoric, as codified by Aristotle, were the law courts (the subject of *forensic rhetoric*), praise or blame at public ceremonies (termed *epideictic rhetoric*) and the political assembly (*deliberative rhetoric*). To be a technology of persuasion in such environments, rhetoric needed to consider the nature of different types of audiences and the ways their backgrounds and prejudices alter their susceptibility to particular arguments. It needed to consider the structure of *informal* argument rather than the pure forms of logic. It needed to systematize the types of proof that were persuasive in different contexts. And it also needed to address the uncomfortable problem (for an empirical proto-scientist such as Aristotle) of how exactly the strange magic of delivery, word choice, patterning, repetition and figuration can so influence the senses of an audience that they will ignore the gaping holes in an argument or the

morally dubious character of the person making it. A consideration of these subjects formed the core of Aristotle's *On Rhetoric* and they have remained the standard pillars of rhetorical instruction since.

For most of its long history, rhetoric has concerned itself largely with the verbal making of a persuasive case and its devices, vocabularies and perspectives have been founded upon a close attention to words and the powers that they can afford. However, in the late nineteenth century, just as the marketing profession began to discover in earnest the persuasive power of the image, so, too, did its political emanations – first in propaganda around the First and Second World Wars and then in the burgeoning field of political marketing (Ewen, 1996, 1999). Rhetorical scholarship, however, took time to recognize these changes in the landscape of public persuasion, and the discipline remained somewhat trapped in its textual/verbal fixation until the early 1980s. Kenneth Burke's (1969) definition of the basic function of rhetoric, for example, is "the use of words by human agents to form attitudes or to induce actions in other human agents" (p. 41). However, in examining the context for this definition, Burke talks of rhetoric being rooted in the "use of language as a symbolic means of inducing cooperation in beings that by nature respond to symbols" (p. 43) and elsewhere indicated that this language encompassed "all human symbol systems" (1966, p. 28). A broadening consideration of rhetoric as the realm of symbol systems inevitably meant that researchers would begin to examine *visual* language as part of the rhetorical enterprise, particularly given the strong turn towards the visual in popular culture. Indeed, rhetorical scholarship has become home to a tremendous burst of critical creativity embracing the aural, visual and material realms as equally foundational as the verbal in the production of persuasive discourse. Rhetoric's boundaries have been redefined to cover "any discourse, art form, performance, cultural object, or event that – by symbolic and/or material means – has the capacity to move someone else" (Ott & Dickinson, 2013, p. 2). This has meant that an extremely wide range of artefacts have already been examined from the *visual* rhetorical perspective; from the Vietnam Veterans Memorial (Foss, 1986), Bin Laden's propaganda output (O'Shaughnessy, 2002) and Shepard Fairey's iconic Obama Hope graphic (Gries, 2015) to the chart junk of corporate reports (Greenwood et al., 2019) and the empty spaces in modern print advertising (Pracejus et al., 2006).

In considering a visual rhetoric approach to political communication, then, we might define it as the analysis of how visual elements are employed strategically for political effect – or rather more broadly, *how the visual can move people politically*. Many of the artefacts that we might choose to consider for their visual political rhetoric will be easily identifiable instances of political discourse – political campaign materials, political advertising, party political material (such as websites and mailshots), political event materials (such as annual conference design and staging arrangements), party social media communications and political memes. However, as I will show in my illustrative analysis, visual political artefacts ripe for exploration can be found in quite unexpected places and force us to consider the *material* as a medium for political messaging.

We will now move on to examine the ways in which the techniques of traditional verbal rhetoric can be applied to the analysis of visual political communication. We will also consider the possibility of uniquely visual rhetorics which are not bound by verbal paradigms.

VISUAL EQUIVALENTS OF KEY VERBAL RHETORICAL COMPONENTS

There is much to be said for the transference of verbal rhetorical paradigms to the consideration of the visual (Kenney, 2004). After all, it has become natural to refer to “visual language” and we commonly make comparisons between the elements of visual and verbal discourse (Eubanks, 1997). In the specific case of rhetoric, it seems even more attractive because significant areas of verbal rhetorical concern syntactic patterning rather than verbal semantics. And patterning is something that is easy to interpret in pictorial or visual terms. Additionally, many of the semantic devices of traditional rhetoric, such as metaphor and metonymy, are intimately concerned with the generation of *imagery* – and this makes them seem straightforward to both execute and identify in visual artefacts.

Before we advance to a consideration of rhetorical techniques, we should first consider what are called the rhetorical *proofs*.

THE PROOFS

Aristotle noted that a speech can furnish three different types of proof, or the broad ways in which we can contrive to persuade, or move, an audience. The first is termed *ethos* and relates to the “character of the speaker” or their credibility (Aristotle, 1991, p. 74). *Ethos* is generated in our speech when we give the audience some reason to trust us – perhaps through what we say, but also through the way that we deliver our speech (and even how we appear when giving the speech). The second proof is that of *pathos*, or emotion, and occurs when the speech transports the audience into a particular emotional state which is conducive to their acceptance of the argument. Finally, *logos* is the proof of logic or “real or apparent demonstration” (ibid., p. 75) and includes such forms as the illustrative example and the *enthymeme* (the street-wise cousin of the classical syllogism).

So, let us consider how the three rhetorical proofs manifest in the visual realm.

Ethos

We are, of course, used to thinking of how visual elements enhance character and credibility. Despite social censures to never “judge a book by its cover”, we constantly judge people’s character via their appearance (the clothes that they wear, their personal grooming, their posture and body language, etc.). Visual rhetorical analysis of political communication can examine the visual elements that can augment or diminish the *ethos*/credibility of the message source. So, for example, Vigsø (2017) analyses the variety of ways in which the personal ethos of a political candidate is communicated in election posters. Electricity pylons in the background to a 1965 Mitterand poster indicate the candidate’s association with “power and progress” (p. 51), and the hard-hatted Danish Social Democrat pictured in the surrounds of a construction site helps to communicate the party’s competence and industriousness. Hoffman’s (2011) study of George W. Bush’s “cowboy persona” (p. 335) notes how Bush’s adoption of cowboy visual traits encouraged Americans to associate him with the character of the mythic American cowboy, who “possesses great courage, strength, decisiveness, and strong moral values” (p. 328).

Pathos

While we might like to imagine otherwise, the truth is that “democratic politics is, undoubtedly, an emotional business” (Martin, 2014, p. 107). Aristotle (1991) notes that “things do not seem the same to those who love and those who hate, nor to those who are angry and those who are calm” (p. 141). So, in attempting to persuade an audience to perceive an issue in a given way it follows that we will need to use words and imagery to place an audience in the most appropriate emotional frame – and that will often mean moving them from one emotional state to another. Martin’s (2014) discussion of Tony Blair’s televised speech on the death of Princess Diana, for example, notes how the Prime Minister “acknowledges the initial shock and confusion” felt around the country and then channelled this “towards a process of shared remembrance”, restoring “the lost Diana as a public object, emotionally orienting the audience away from shock and horror towards a sense of itself in mourning” (p. 122). In visual terms, there are a wide variety of devices which can be used to influence the audience emotionally. Symbols such as national flags (and the colours from which they are composed), depictions of emotions on exemplar figures (hope or lack of hope on the faces of the populace illustrated in campaign advertising, for example), images that serve to remind the audience of important historic events that can release target emotions, visual signs of appropriate virtues (pride, humility, etc.) – visual appeals to pathos are myriad in their variety and their ubiquity in modern political communication. Perhaps one of the most common rhetorical tools for the generation of emotion is the metaphor, which can be equally powerful when instantiated verbally or visually, and we will discuss this in greater depth below.

Logos

The last of the three rhetorical appeals is *logos*, or the consideration of how we persuade through demonstrative proofs. Aristotle was quite aware that the ways in which a philosopher might construct a watertight dialectic argument (through the careful building up of a syllogism, for example) were not appropriate in the rough and tumble of rhetorical persuasion. Rather, rhetoric relies upon two major forms of demonstration – the *enthymeme* and the example. The first term refers to “arguments with gaps to be filled in by the participation of the audience” (Blair, 2014, p. 52). In other words, where a classical syllogism would have a major premise and a minor premise leading to a conclusion, an enthymeme will just have two of these components – a premise that leads immediately to a conclusion, with the supporting premise to be supplied by the audience. This makes the argument a lot easier to construct and also has the benefit that “the audience believes they have arrived at the conclusion on their own, rather than because of an argument supplied by the orator” (Charteris-Black, 2018, p. 13). Much of the details in enthymematic argument therefore “remain tacit or unexpressed” (Blair, 2014, p. 52) and this makes such argument highly conducive to visual framing. For example, the 1996 Saatchi & Saatchi ad on behalf of the Conservative Party that depicted a smiling Tony Blair with a set of red demon eyes visually makes the argument that if you strip away the glossy surface of New Labour you will see the untrustworthy evil that lies beneath.

The second form of rhetorical *logos* is the inductive proof of argument from example. Imagery, of course, is perfectly suited to provide this form of reasoning because it can be used to *illustrate* examples. Modern advertising (both commercial and political) is stuffed with visual inductive argument – the depiction of a happy consumer using a product functions as an

example of what a prospect can expect if they, too, consume the same product. Confident families surrounded by prosperous farmland can act as examples for what voters may expect from their lives if they vote for the political party that is using those families as visual arguments in their communication. The same persuasive power can be generated through the depiction of negative examples to illustrate what can happen if the opposition is afforded power.

The three forms of rhetorical proof, then, can be expressed in visual forms as well as verbal forms. Many of the ways in which ethos, pathos and logos are communicated visually rest upon the use of rhetorical devices such as metaphor, anthropomorphism, ellipsis and hyperbole, all of which can be generated visually just as easily as verbally.

This chapter is unable to indulge in a complete cataloguing of all such visual instantiations of rhetorical devices (I would direct the reader to Mariani, 2019, for an insightful attempt at such a task). However, we will examine some of the most common forms encountered in visual political communication. Before doing so, it is worth quickly discussing the division of rhetorical devices into *schemas* (schemes) and *tropes*. Lanham (1991) summarizes the broad weight of opinion on this matter in the following manner; a *trope* is a figure “that changes the meaning of a word or words”, while a *schema* is “the placing of a word in a highly artificial pattern” (p. 155). In the context of visual rhetoric, tropes would involve mutations and transformation of the meaning of imagery (through creative juxtaposition or comparison), whereas a schema would depend on the creation of meaning through some form of visual patterning (sequences, repetitions, mirroring, etc.).

METAPHOR

Metaphor is the “bringing over a term from an ‘alien’ lexical/semantic field to create a novel pairing that expresses a point trenchantly” (Fahnestock, 2011, p. 104). To illustrate the trope, Fahnestock (2011) uses US President Kennedy’s 1961 speech referring to West Berlin as “an escape hatch for refugees” (ibid.), and we can see how that phrase manages to magically compress into a small number of words many associations and even arguments that otherwise might take hundreds of words to communicate. The lexical field of an “escape hatch” has been fused with the new, previously unrelated field of West Berlin to bring about an enlightening, rich, new understanding of what “West Berlin” *means*.

The ability of our languages to adequately represent our varied, changing lifeworlds is greatly dependent upon metaphor – “we are necessarily creatures of metaphor” (Leary, 1995, p. 267). Yet, metaphors are not something restricted to our *language* – they “are pervasive in our ordinary everyday way of thinking, speaking, and acting” (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980, p. 453). So, just as Trotsky can use words to create the powerful metaphor of the “dustbin of history”, or Marx can construct the conceptual reading of religion as the “opium of the people” through lexical juxtaposition, so, too, can *visual* metaphor “use images to present two objects for association and comparison” (Phillips, 2003, p. 298). In a political context, much work has been done on examining the visual metaphors expressed in political cartoons which can gain striking effect through the ease with which they can surreally combine very disparate imagery (Alousque, 2013; Krstić et al., 2020; El Refaie, 2003; Silaški & Đurović, 2019). Kjeldsen’s study of a single Social Democrat Party poster (featuring an image of a bicycle helmet) from the 1998 Danish general election demonstrates just how complex visual metaphors can be and how dependent their full interpretation is upon temporal and cultural situational contexts.

At the same time, sometimes metaphors are strikingly simple, relying upon deeply engrained visual symbols that work across a wide variety of demographics – the UK Conservative Party campaign advert referred to earlier, portraying Tony Blair with demon eyes, is a simple visual metaphor which brings the “alien” lexical field of horror films and broader illustrations of witchcraft and demonology to the realm of contemporary political personalities.

REPETITION/PATTERNING

The other branch of stylistic devices used in rhetoric belongs to the *schemes*, tactical changes to the (aesthetically and/or grammatically) expected sequencing of words. Alliteration is perhaps the most popularly known schema – in normal speech we do not experience an extended sequence of words all starting with the same letter, therefore when we do our attention is drawn to it and it can make a phrase appear more significant (as well as more memorable). There are a host of similar devices, such as *anaphora* (the repetition of a word at the beginning of successive phrases or sentences), *polysyndeton* (the overuse of conjunctions such as “but” or “and”) and *chiasmus* (where the word order of the first part of a sentence is then reversed in the second half – Kennedy’s “Ask not what your country can do for you, but ask what you can do for your country”). At the root of all rhetorical schemes is the concept of pattern – manipulating words and word order in order to bring patterns to the attention of the audience. Something that attracts attention is something that we already begin to judge as more significant than the other things that surround it and the *patina* of significance is one of the most valuable things that schemes bring to the persuasive enterprise. So, while we might not be able to use the gamut of verbal schemes in a one-to-one mapping upon persuasive visual patterning, we can most certainly study how the aesthetic and rhetorical responses to visual patterning act as “attention structures” (Lanham, 2006, p. 21).

It is with the schemas, then, that we can see the limitations of bringing the framework of traditional verbal rhetoric to the definition and categorization of visual rhetoric. While there are many points of similarity between the two, verbal and visual persuasion also have some substantial differences. Consequently, an increasing amount of work has sought to delineate the unique nature of visual persuasiveness, to inductively *generate* the rhetorical nature of the visual rather than deductively *apply* the rhetorical to an analysis of the visual (Foss, 2004). Foss (1993, 1995, 2004) has perhaps been the most concerted in her theory-building, seeking to develop a “rhetorical schema for the evaluation of visual imagery” that provides us with “a richer and more comprehensive understanding of rhetorical processes” (1995, p. 213). Foss distinguishes between the aesthetic response to visual elements, which consists of a viewer’s “direct personal encounter with the sensory aspects to the artifact” and the rhetorical response where “meaning is attributed to the artifact” (2004, p. 306). The broad framework that Foss has advanced for the study of visual rhetoric covers three main areas: the *nature* of the artefact (its “components, qualities, and characteristics”, p. 307), its (communicative) *function* and, finally, how we *evaluate* or assess the artefact.

Peterson (2001) has critiqued Foss’ project for “beginning with the ‘image’” rather than with the “building blocks” of “sensory visual stimuli: light, line, color, perspective, shading, volume, scale, etc.” (p. 23). Peterson argues that “starting the critical process with visual elements and not larger complexes at least potentially expands and democratizes critical discussion” and “visual elements offer sensory starting points and a firmer (though not solid

or indisputable) basis for criticism” (p. 25). So, the de-emphasis of the aesthetic in Foss’ early approach to the visual can privilege thinking about the image and its context over its components. We will be able to examine this distinction in the case study that follows. Useful reviews of other important theoretical discussions in the visual rhetoric field can be found in Rice (2004), Olson (2007) and Hawhee and Messaris (2009).

CASE STUDY: THE BOOGALOO BOIS

The following analysis is designed to function as an example of the sorts of questions that a visual rhetorical approach might ask in a political context. The artefact chosen is not a “typical” political visual artefact (such as a campaign poster, a broadcast of a speech at a party convention or a party’s website) – it is, instead, something which is undeniably visual and political but also *material*. And this allows us to examine a number of interesting intersections that a consideration of the visual in the political can uncover.



Sources: From top clockwise: TPA/MediaPunch, Jeff Kowalsky/Getty Images, Chip Somodevilla/Getty Images.

Figure 1.1 *Images of the Boogaloo Bois from 2020*

Figure 1.1 is a montage of three separate photographs used in the media to illustrate stories relating to the presence of representatives of the Boogaloo Bois at various protests in the US during 2020. The Boogaloo Bois are “a loose collective of anti-government individuals, who are calling for a second civil war or preparing for the collapse of society” and who have “been seen at anti-lockdown and Black Lives Matter protests across the country, dressed in military-style gear and Hawaiian shirts and carrying firearms” (Palmer, 2020). The top image was taken in Louisville, Kentucky on May 30, 2020 and was used to illustrate a story on Insider.com entitled “Who are the Boogaloo Bois? A man who shot up a Minneapolis police precinct was associated with the extremist movement, according to unsealed documents” (Goggin & Greenspan, 2020). The Boogaloo Bois, then, are an extremist political grouping. There are obvious *visual* components to their identification as a specific group (distinct from other US militia groups or anti-gun-control factions in contemporary US politics) and this will be the focus of this analysis.

The top image in Figure 1.1, as well as that in the bottom right, display armed men wearing colourful Hawaiian shirts. The shirts are worn in combination with other elements that produce a striking juxtaposition. The pattern of shirt wearing is also made clear by the image – there are a number of men gathered together who are wearing similar styled shirts – this repetition draws attention to the shirts.

The juxtaposition of the shirts, the combat clothes, the masks and the automatic rifles works to influence the ethos and pathos of the men. The Hawaiian shirt carries associations of Pacific Island holidays, relaxation, beach life and a flamboyant lightness in attitude. Its typical colours are bright reds, blues, greens and yellows. These connotations and physical characteristics place them in tension with the firearms and combat wear (trousers, gloves and boots) that the men utilize in the rest of their attire. Taking a deductive (Foss, 2004) approach and seeking to apply the framework of traditional rhetoric to this situation, we might identify a visual *antithesis* here. Fahnestock (2011) argues that antithesis “takes pairs of terms opposed as contraries, contradictories, or correlatives and puts them in parallel pairs” (p. 232). Mariani (2019), though, would prefer to see this sort of visual inversion as an *anastrophe* and notes its common usage in the street art of Banksy. Whatever term we use to identify the device, it is its persuasive function that interests us here. From the perspective of ethos generation, the sartorial antithesis of the Boogaloo Bois can be said to have a number of functions. Firstly, it indicates to those who are part of the group that they are members of that group – this can have a practical advantage for the mustering of individuals in a busy, perhaps chaotic outdoor space. However, the antithesis also works on those who are outside of the group to try to help in generating a sense of alterity – “we are not your usual militia”. The conceptual lightness of the Hawaiian shirt undercuts the ability of onlookers to make a judgement based upon their existing knowledge of visual dress codes in the protest movements. These men look like typical right-wing, 2nd Amendment, “don’t tread on me”, militia members, but the shirts invite viewers to hold off in this judgement, provoking a second-guessing. It can therefore be seen as a device to strategically imply some sort of disavowal of membership. The signs of the shirt confuse judgement. The whole material artefact of the group of Boogaloo Bois clustered together on a street corner is, therefore, a visual argument which we might render in syllogistic format in the following way:

Premise 1: the firearms and combat gear indicate that these men are representatives of the right-wing militia that the viewer is already familiar with.

*Premise 2: the Hawaiian shirt is an inversion of the visual patterns displayed by such groups.
Conclusion: these men are not typical right-wing militia.*

The “conceptual lightness” of the Hawaiian shirt then contributes to the reframing that the antithesis suggests to onlookers. Rather than aggressive, tactical clothing, the relaxed, holidaymaking connotations of the shirt suggest to viewers that these men should not be feared or avoided as holders of serious, extremist views but rather treated as light-hearted, relaxed “bros”. This rhetorical dynamic can be described as an interesting visual self-application of *bathos* (the bringing low which inspires laughter rather than transport, to use Lanham’s, 1991, description) in order to project a more universally appealing ethos, less concerned with the generation of gravitas and more focused on a strategic softening of character to produce a less-threatening Other.

Turning to a more focused consideration of the distinct visual components – the patterning of the Hawaiian shirt reveals an even more nuanced “riffing” on the ethos generation strategy. These shirts display repeated motifs – obvious, bright patterns that are the polar opposite to the deliberately broken, pseudo-random sequences of camouflage and deceptive pattern material that are associated in the public mind with US right-wing extremists, paramilitary groupings, survivalists and those seeking to protect the 2nd Amendment. Furthermore, the repeated motifs of the Hawaiian shirt tend to be (as they are in Figure 1.1’s examples) floral and vegetal in substance – just as camouflage and DPM varieties also use floral and vegetal inspirations but in a reversed motivation. The Hawaiian patterning, therefore, serves to rhetorically subvert, or play with, the normally camouflaging, deceptive focus of militia uniform fetishes. It signals a rejection of camouflage – while simply being *another form* of camouflage. This visual instantiation of rhetorical *apophosis*, or denial (the politician’s figure of choice – “I will not talk of my opponent’s recent arrest for indecency”), demonstrates just how useful a consideration of the visual components of an overall image can be.

The images of the morale patches in the two bottom photographs of Figure 1.1 allow us to expand our analysis a little before we draw to a close. They are from two different occasions (that on the left taken at a gun rights rally in Richmond, Virginia, January 20, 2020 and that on the right taken at a rally outside the Michigan State Capitol in Lansing, on October 17, 2020). Both morale patches share a number of visual components – the predominant colours of purple, yellow and green and the figure of a setting sun. The setting sun and colourway are redolent of the OutRun aesthetic – a syntagm of visual components that emanate from a 1986 video arcade game of the same name that has since gone through numerous console and PC variations. This aesthetic is itself linked to a number of other subcultural genres such as synth-wave music. The linking theme across all of these, though, is a form of hyperbolized nostalgia for certain aspects of 1980s pop culture. OutRun visual assets include palm trees, Pacific/tropical beach life and the bright colourings which, of course, are shared also with Hawaiian shirts. These morale patches therefore indicate a further attempt to generate recognition and respect (ethos) in wider communities than those traditionally supportive of right-wing, tactical/tacticalool militia. The OutRun aesthetic also contributes to the sense of disorienting tension between aggressive visual components and light-hearted, even ironic, popular culture signs.

Nostalgia and a focus on restoring historical rights are an important component of much US right-wing militia rhetoric (Mulloy, 2004). Appeals to the foundational nature of the constitution and its amendments, as well as a deeper yearning for the revival of a form of “rural American masculinity” (Kimmel & Ferber, 2000), mean that much US militia discourse is

either concerned with protecting perceived foundational elements of US identity from further erosion or promoting ways to speed up the destruction of the federal state so that those foundational values can once more be re-asserted (accelerationism as a precursor to a return to an idyllic rural past). However, the militia and Patriot movements of the US reflect a “mish-mash of interests” (Gallaher, 2016, p. 295, n2) that can often make the motivations and goals of individual groups difficult to confidently discern. An anti-government focus has become a common-denominator across disparate groups that can be based upon, or contain varying elements from, the protection of 2nd Amendment rights, white supremacy, sovereign citizen beliefs, religious sectarianism (the Christian Identity movement, or breakaway Mormonism, for example), anti-Semitism, survivalism, etc. The Boogaloo Bois represent both a continuation and an evolution of this “mish-mash” of interests – accreting online around the “/k/” weapons enthusiasts message board, their discourse has tended towards the promotion of armed protest against government (particularly law enforcement) overreach rather than the more typically racism-drenched accelerationism of online venues dedicated to right-wing politics (such as the “/pol/” board). This has meant that significant voices in the Boogaloo Bois community saw the murder of George Floyd as a “call to arms”, “adding George to the movement’s list of martyrs” (Evans & Wilson, 2020), and there have been recent indications that there are sections of the Bois who favour a form of agora anarchism that seeks to unite left- and right-wing opposition to the US government (Newton, 2021). In other words, the “mish-mash” of interests that has often typified the American militia movement seems to have evolved even further in the Boogaloo Bois, making it difficult for outsiders (and perhaps, sometimes, even insiders) to fully parse. Added to the mix is the ironic discourse style that has come to suffuse right-wing political communication with links to imageboard (4chan, 8chan, etc.) culture. This is illustrated by the origins of the movement’s name, which references a longstanding internet meme whereby the second iteration of anything is given the subheading “Electric Boogaloo”, invoking the low-quality 1984 dance film sequel, *Breakin2: Electric Boogaloo* (Newhouse & Gunesch, 2020). For the Boogaloo Bois, it is the impending armed insurrection against the US government that will be their sequel to the American Civil War. The comical, self-deprecating nature of the name can be seen as a form of verbal camouflage that deflects and confuses observers. Indeed, this has become even more the case as major social media players such as Facebook and Twitter have attempted to track and restrict the Boogaloo Bois’ activities on their platforms. In order to circumvent automated blocking of posts and accounts mentioning the Boogaloo Bois, the movement has adopted a series of surreal alternative titles, usually based on vague homophonic relationships, such as the Big Luau and the Big Igloo – these are then enthusiastically adopted into the visual rhetoric around the movement, resulting in a florescence of confusing and bizarre imagery (for example, a version of the US flag with an igloo substituting for the state stars and Hawaiian shirt patterning for some of the bars). While standard US militia nostalgia around the Constitution and the Founding Fathers still persists in Boogaloo rhetoric, it is juxtaposed with the sort of 1980s nostalgia imagery, itself a form of “ironic consumption” (Klein, 2001, p. 76), that can both appeal to a much wider, meme-savvy audience and serve to camouflage the more well-known, red-flag iconography of the US right-wing. It scatters, alludes, denies and fragments – seeking to confound observers, commentators, opponents and law enforcement while at the same time positioning the movement as “not just another right-wing militia”.

The self-presentation of the Boogaloo Bois provides an example of the part that visual rhetorical analysis can play in the interpretation of persuasive political communication. It demon-

strates how complex relationships between levels of visual signification and verbal/visual associations and symbolisms can be used for strategic advantage in the uncertain, dynamic communicative terrain of online communities, news sources and social media. Consequently, for the analyst of political communication, a rhetorical approach to political imagery can provide the researcher with a well-provisioned, evolving and nuanced analytical toolbox that is concerned directly with examining the interplay between textual, visual and material attempts to move audiences.

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