The digitization of images inevitably strips away their context and allows the machine, or rather its programmer, to define new contexts.

—Jay David Bolter, *Writing Space*

**Introduction**

The abilities to digitize and contextualize images on the computer required, through the late 1980s, some degree of mathematical expertise. Digital graphics are really pictures made by equations and were originally constructed piece by piece. Now, however, the ease of digitizing photographs and drawings has made the Web's graphic landscape much more accessible to the average person. Thus, the statement by Bolter that begins the chapter now has added implications. Where once only words were malleable enough to be widely wielded as a rhetorical tool, in the latter half of the 1990s the digital image became prevalent, easy to manipulate, and consequently, easy to recontextualize, meaning that now just about any image is available to any computer user for any occasion. To use Bolter's terminology, the "interpenetration" of textual and pictorial space in digital environments, especially the World Wide Web, has increased markedly, so that the predominance of the digital image now rivals that of the digital word. Indeed, a number of thinkers have noted the digital image's ascendancy in communicating information via the computer.¹ But how are we to think about, to analyze the rhetorical dimensions of these images? Both static and moving images can be intensely affective, of course, as print, film, and television have taught us; but what model can we use to assess the persuasive impact of the image in the realm of information technology—specifically, in environments like the Web, a realm where there is an interdependence between text and graphics, as well as an interactivity between reader and writer/programmer/rhetor?
Many have turned to postmodernism to theorize the digital medium in general. The gist of such theorization is that the characteristics of new media like the Web—collage, hypertextuality, multimodality, and nonlinearity, for instance—enact the postmodern texte. The focus of this thinking tends to be on aspects of chaos and fragmentation represented by such digital media. But one can also approach these media from another viewpoint, focusing on them as integrative, intertextual, and complex. Notable among those who have approached digital media from this angle are Gunther Kress, Jay David Bolter, Richard Lanham, and Kathleen Welch. The latter two authors, though they sometimes make use of postmodern theory, have successfully used classical rhetoric as their foundation for analyzing computer media. Lanham (1993) discussed digital textuality, including some focus on the digital image, in these terms back in *The Electronic Word*. More recently, Welch (1999) has explored how Isocratic rhetoric may provide a way to think about modern video-based communication, a category in which she includes computers. This chapter owes a debt to these others, and proceeds in their spirit, but focuses particularly on using classical rhetoric as a way of thinking about the persuasive power of computer-based images.

**Why Refer to Classical Rhetoric?**

There are good reasons for looking at the digital image in classical terms. In a general sense, as Lanham (1993) contends, few models provide a “frame wide enough” to explain the “extraordinary convergence of twentieth-century thinking with the digital means that now give it expression”; therefore, he continues, “to explain reading and writing on computers, we need to go back to the original Western thinking about reading and writing—the rhetorical paideia that provided the backbone of Western education for 2,000 years” (51). Because, with increasing bandwidth, images have become ever more integral to the computer-based reading and writing process since Lanham wrote this passage, I would argue that what he says applies to images, as well. Moreover, as Welch (1999) puts it, classical rhetoric is pertinent to the new communication technologies because “classical Greek rhetoric” is “intersubjective, performative, and a merger of oralism and literacy” (12), and these qualities are common to the technologies in question. I would add to her assertion that these qualities are especially common to the realm of Web-based presentation. For instance, as I shall discuss later, images on Web sites act as part of an argument by parataxis, which, as Eric Havelock has maintained, is characteristic of oral rhetoric, the heart of the classical system (see Lanham 1991, 108). Finally, there is good reason to redeploy classical rhetoric to examine the persuasive value of digital images because, as I intend to show by presenting
the thoughts of some of its most notable thinkers, classical notions provide us with excellent, codified ways to think about the persuasive efficacy of images and words as interdependent and interactive things.

The Image and Classical Rhetoric

It might be extremely difficult to have a true argument, with the give and take that “argument” implies, using only visual images. Yet the potential of the image to move its viewers was recognized by ancient rhetoricians, and thus a correlation between it and verbal imagery has been an important component of persuasion since classical times. The theoretical basis for seeing images as modes of persuasion lies in Aristotelian rhetoric, which stipulates that the speaker’s ability to arouse emotion in his audience and his ability to cultivate an impression of credibility with them are, in addition to evidence and logic, extremely important persuasive elements.

In practical terms, the precedents for the use of images and imagery to instill emotion or credibility can be found in two slightly different classical traditions. One tradition, stemming from Aristotle and continuing with the early Greek orator Gorgias, concerns the affective similarity of images and words: In his *Encomium of Helen*, Gorgias equates the emotive power of the image with that of persuasive speech. The other tradition, most famously associated with the Roman writer Horace, emphasizes how the poetic image can be persuasive: In discussing poetry’s instructional potential, Horace mentions the similarity of poetry to pictures. This Horatian idea became very popular among literary critics and rhetoricians, especially those of the Neoclassical era. In fact, as is exemplified in the theories of the eighteenth-century rhetorician George Campbell, these slightly different traditions of Gorgias and Horace appear to have mingled together over time, so that poetry, visual images, and persuasive speech and composition became interdependent. In the age of the pixelated image, which has given rise to everything from television advertisements to hypermedia, the rhetorical principles codified by Aristotle are still important: Fluency with images and their use has become crucial to controlling credibility and creating emotional appeal, and even, to some extent, logical appeal.

The Aristotelian Basis for Linking Images and Persuasion

One reason Aristotelian rhetoric provides a good basis for discussing the image as a persuasive tool is that Aristotle’s definition of rhetoric is broad enough to encourage it: He defines rhetoric as the art of finding “in any given case the available means of