Big rhetoric: The art and rhetoric of spectacle in classical and contemporary experience

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Big rhetoric:
The art and rhetoric of spectacle in classical and contemporary experience

by

Jonathan Mark Balzotti

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in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

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DEDICATION

To my wife Mariel,
and to my children Gabriel, Nico and Alia, who are the most interesting spectacle of all
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I wish to also express my gratitude for loving parents, who taught me to value an education above all else. Most of all, I wish to thank the best friend I know, Mariel, for her constant support and encouragement during times of despair.
Spectacle earns its special status by enthralling its spectators: It "speaks" to its audience in a language of hyperbole, magnitude, and wonder. Such strategies are designed, in part, to overwhelm viewers, mythologize the subject, and brand its representations as icons of power. At the same time, however, spectacle can serve to liberate the viewer's imagination, activate a group's collective memory, and embrace viewer, subject, and the objects represented in a coherent and collective identity. I will call these strategies Big Rhetoric, a discourse of outsized objects (or texts) and overwhelming events (or performances) that operates, alternatively, to aggrandize, captivate, and ennoble its audience. My use of the term Big Rhetoric differs from its use by rhetorical scholars who refer to the “rhetorical turn” in an assortment of disciplines. My discussion approaches the study of Big Rhetoric as a type of communication and a means of persuasion. The study aims to investigate the use of scaled objects as a disruptive form of rhetoric and links the dramatic expression of big objects in Hellenistic Rome with the novel strategies of representation cultivated by the “nationalizing” spectacle of the 19th century world expositions.

In Chapter 1 the concept of spectacle is discussed based on Guy Debord’s theory of representation (having the characteristics of enslavement, domination, and separation). The underlying premise in Debord’s work is that forms of spectacle in a capitalist society attempt to separate society from the real by transforming reality into a commodity. My dissertation

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1 I use the term as a substitute for the use of oversized objects. Although the term was originally coined in Alan Gross and William Keith’s *Rhetorical Hermeneutics*, my reference is to its broadened framework in studies of architecture and size. To clarify the differences, Edward Schiappa and other rhetorical scholars distinguish between big rhetoric, which refers to everything being described as “rhetorical,” and small rhetoric, a term used to separate “rhetoric” (doxa) from epistemic ways of knowing (episteme). For a more comprehensive treatment of the popularization of rhetoric see notes below.
complicates this one view of spectacle by introducing the idea of Big Rhetoric as an expression of magnitude and as an example of disturbance. I define the concept in the introduction and then apply it in each chapter by addressing such problems as how Big Rhetoric is made, the use of Big Rhetoric by political and other social institutions, and how Big Rhetoric and the practice of speaking loudly can be used to modify and reshape the built environment. Chapters 2 and 3 answer some of these questions by exploring the strategic use of the concept in two “golden ages”: The golden age of Hellenistic Rome and the golden age of 19th century America, broadly considered. The two case studies provide especially rich sites for analyzing Big Rhetoric: these rhetorical texts upset expectations of normalcy and compensated for that disturbance with delectare (delight). For the penultimate section of this study, I provide a reading of Frank Gehry’s proposed Dwight D. Eisenhower memorial in the D.C. National Mall, which based on the previous chapters, becomes an example of the persistent use of memorials as a medium for speaking loudly in a contemporary dialect. In examining western traditions of Big Rhetoric, this dissertation advances a theoretical framework for considering the rhetorical practice of magnitude that can be utilized in future rhetorical work.
CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

BIG RHETORIC: THE ART AND RHETORIC OF SPECTACLE IN CLASSICAL AND CONTEMPORARY EXPERIENCE

The primary goal of this dissertation is to provide a rhetorical understanding of spectacle and to correct a limited earlier view held by Guy Debord and others as a means to that end. Although modern spectacle may serve to subjugate, as Debord suggests, the qualities of disturbance serve to liberate as well as to enslave, and where the boundary between the real and the unreal may be called into question, spectacles such as the one’s introduced in this discussion can awaken the imagination by disturbing our sense of normalcy. In general, then, I intend to interrogate two sets of alternatives regarding the use of spectacle—one related to audience response, the other to the treatment of the subject—both of which are variable in their use. Aristotle says in *Rhetoric* I.1 that the rhetor "may confer the greatest of benefits by the right use of [materials], and inflict the greatest of injuries by using them wrongly" (1355b). Spectacle is similarly amenable to either.

My discussion is divided into three parts. The first part will lay out the relationship between spectacle and *megethos* (magnitude) with the purpose of discerning the nature of Big Rhetoric in Alexandria during the reign of the Roman emperor Diocletian. Diocletian’s systematic approach to managing the empire is aimed at disguising the unbridled power of Rome, which I contend constituted a necessary strategy for gaining public support from vassal states that considered themselves independent of Rome. The second part will draw from personal accounts of the 1893 World’s Columbian Exposition to discuss the
opportunities Big Rhetoric provides for audience participation in defining the public spectacle. In setting up a carnival-like spectacle at the world’s fair, Sol Bloom draws upon the public’s appetite for the unexpected and the unfamiliar; his sources of inspiration range from the Giant Ferris Wheel to the provocative and controversial Algerian Belly Dancers in the Midway Plaisance. Bloom’s selections stem from a pressing concern that underlies the genre of the world exposition: to make the whole experience unforgettable in the eyes of fairgoers. Finally, I conclude with a brief look at the influence of post-modernism on Big Rhetoric in order to raise an issue for additional consideration: whether Big Rhetoric can help mitigate the problems associated with remembering the past. Specifically, can the disruptive qualities of Big Rhetoric, as shown by Gehry’s proposed memorial of Dwight D. Eisenhower, provide us a useful tool for a more refined and complex form of history-telling, one that both remembers the past but remains critically aware of the positionality of the storyteller.

**On Definitions**

It is important to clarify how spectacle and Big Rhetoric will be used in this discussion and to provide a description of the different types of spectacles examined, their different features, and their different rhetorical purposes. Originating from the Latin word *spectaculum*, spectacle is most often defined in dictionaries as a “visually striking display or exhibition.” To be a spectacle, the phenomenon must result in some kind of strong emotional response from the audience, whether it be amazement or wonder, that has disturbed the boundaries of what is perceived as normal or everyday. Although it is often created through some material presence, like a display or exhibition, according to this definition, the display
itself does not qualify as a spectacle. The audience response must be factored in when determining if the display qualifies as spectacle. Guy Debord disagrees with this interpretation that the audience participates in helping define a spectacle. He describes spectacle as an enduring condition of manipulation, a visceral experience that circumvents a community’s faculties of reason and judgment. According to Debord, in his book *Society of the Spectacle*, spectacle demands “passive acceptance” without “allowing any reply,” and in that sense it is a form of domination that “subjects human beings to itself” (12, 16). For Debord, spectacle is the opposite of dialogue; it perpetuates a great lie by society and induces a hypnotic state in the audience (17).

Thomas Farrell, like Debord, believes public spectacle overpowers its audience, and adds that it must be categorized as a deviant form of rhetoric. Spectacle should be thought of as “a weak hybrid form of drama, a theatrical concoction that relies upon external factors (shock, sensation, and the passionate release) as a substitute for intrinsic aesthetic integrity,” says Farrell (168). Because spectacle uses its size and scale to overpower the audience, creating a “passionate release,” Farrell believes it obscures the less dramatic, the less spectacular, and as a result obfuscates those things that possess “aesthetic integrity.”

While other rhetorical theorists have provided a much broader definition of spectacle than Farrell, they continue to provide anti-spectacle arguments to expose its hegemonic role in modern society. For Watts and Orbe, spectacle has no beginning and no foreseeable end, and as such the spectacle of advertising works continuously to interpolate the subject and change the way we ascribe value to the world. In this view, the task of advertisement is not so different from the public enslavement described by Debord, as both theorists see spectacle as a long-term rhetorical strategy that works continuously to affirm certain messages about
the world. In both cases, the public spectacle is a tool of manipulation used to control what
the audience thinks, feels, and believes. The argument advanced by Watts and Orbe, and by
Debord, is that spectacle uses its power of persuasion to do little more than excite and arouse,
inducing a sort of trance-like state in the audience; this definition of spectacle highlights
spectacle’s ability to stimulate human appetites, a condition Debord describes as
zombification. Debord’s zombie-like state and Farrell’s “weak hybrid” show spectacle to
have little integrity and dangerous consequences. The academic commentary on
contemporary spectacle assumes that its artificial cultivation, its rhetorical staging, is merely
visual excitability.

When spectacle is seen in this way, rules must be used to limit its use in public
discourse. The confusion surrounding spectacle centers around its particular characteristics:
spectacle displays visual expressions that stimulate the sensible experience of human
perception; it is a means of inducing a mutual reaction from the public; and is a multi-sensory
experience that may result in shock, surprise, or instant immersion. Because spectacle must
capture our visual attention in a short space of time, images are designed to stimulate
people’s visual sensory experience to make a long-lasting memorable impression.

However, for David Procter this memorable experience is a means of producing
dialogue, not silencing it. Procter emphasizes the audience’s role in public spectacle and
answers the question as to what happens—consciously or unconsciously, cognitively or
psychologically—when the audience first experiences a visually arresting display. He begins
by probing the practical or theoretical consequences of the audience’s participation by asking
what the relationship is between the private and the public, or how and where meaning is
made, authenticated, and authorized. Spectacle in this view is more than “official messages at
a court where no one else is allowed to speak” (Debord 23); it is a site of community
building, a place where the new and unexpected is discussed by those who experience it.
Spectacle in this view participates in a process of community formation. As Procter writes,
“interpretations or accounts of the event are the spectacles and within these spectacles exist
the dynamic rhetoric of community” (118). Procter argues that the interpretations of the
spectacle are the spectacle.

While broader than most notions, Procter’s interpretation still relegates the art of
spectacle to a one-to-one relationship between visual text and those persons who experience
it. However, in the case of architecture, the visually arresting structure is never separate from
its environment. Spectacles like the ones chosen for analysis in this dissertation modify
public spaces and are themselves modified by the built environment. Spectacle therefore
requires a broader definition than those offered by these theorists. Though spectacle can be
seen as "empty" or "theatrical," as secondary to other features, or as positively harmful, there
are reasons for thinking otherwise, at least in particular cases. In rhetoric, the equivalent is a
matter of “empty rhetoric,” per the sophists as Plato described them. My way of phrasing the
problem is to ask how something so big (a column, an exposition, a memorial) can also be
"empty." The pun here has the advantage of posing the question of whether scale and size of
the spectacle is really the crucial factor.

**Big Rhetoric, a Useful Concept**

The primary effects of Big Rhetoric are not to persuade the audience, but, as
Longinus says in *On The Sublime*, to “transport them out of themselves.” He explains how
this effect surpasses other persuasive strategies: “Invariably what inspires wonder, with its
power of amazing us, always prevails over what is merely convincing and pleasing.” The object’s capacity to amaze exceeds simple persuasion because “our persuasions are usually under our own control, while these things exercise an irresistible power and mastery and get the better of every listener…A well-timed flash of sublimity shatters everything like a bolt of lightning” (12.1-5). The power of Big Rhetoric is located in its ability disrupt, yes, but also to break down barriers, to remake the world, not only in terms of traditional responses, but stripped of the weight of established associations. The ability of the rhetorical text to sustain spectacular effects in an audience depends on the text’s ability to convey this sense of magnification, to promise to transport the audience to someplace beyond what is known. Conversely, a text that cannot produce that world cannot produce a spectacular effect.

As Miles Orvell notes, one of the effects of using big objects in public places is found in "the discrepancy between the imagined world and the real world" (226). The discrepancy between the real and imagined has the ability to disrupt normative expectations for the spectator who is both reading the image and imagining its meaning. The important qualities of Big Rhetoric in this case are not its size but the dynamic tension it creates between itself and its surroundings. One modern example of this discrepancy can be found in the artwork of Claes Oldenburg. His famous sculpture, Spoon Bridge and Cherry, demonstrates the disruptive potential of Big Rhetoric.
The giant spoon (See Figure 1) stretches 52 feet across a small pond, creating a strange juxtaposition between the enlarged spoon and the cityscape behind. Disrupting the quiet serenity of the pond, the strategic use of bigness shows how an optic disturbance creates cognitive dissonance for the auditor. Oldenburg explains that by using familiar subjects as persuasive units (like a Greek column or a giant wheel), the artist can create a visual paradox for the spectator. The experience becomes intensified when the artist uses objects on a grand scale that are traditionally known on a small-scale from intimate situations. This scaling up of the banal forces a strange experience onto the viewer and will “reduce the scale of the real landscape to imaginary dimensions” (Artnetweb.com). By scaling-up everyday objects, the rhetor has created a discontinuity in the normal landscape and made the ordinary seem strange. By placing the large-scale object in a public space, like downtown Chicago or in a holy site overlooking Alexandria, the rhetor has made the supposed “real” seem strange and frees the auditor to question what is familiar and what is imaginary.

Rather than simply reproducing a Greek symbol on Greek scale, Diocletian in his effort to address rising hostilities in the city of Alexandria adopted a strategy not unlike Oldenburg’s Spoonbridge. Diocletian decided to blow up the symbol of the Greek column in such a way that the landscape and other artifacts around it, the reigning symbols of Alexandrian culture and religion, were reduced in the cultural imagination to echoes of their former selves. The result is a new kind of orientation to the visual experience of Alexandria.
Disruption, then, is an ‘inherent’ quality of Big Rhetoric. The rhetoric of disruption—how it is planned by the designer/rhetor, how and why it is registered by the viewer—provides a link between monumentality, public spectacle, resulting enthrallment, and the eventual imaginative, collective reconstruction. Aristotle says in Bk. II of the *Rhetoric* that all strong emotions disturb us and that we naturally seek ways to resolve that distress. If monuments / exhibits can "disturb" normative expectations, then, according to Aristotle, we will naturally seek ways to reconfigure our views in ways that accommodate the discord. This raises a point on the notion of memory and spectacle: *mneme* (Gk) was initially conceived of as not just what we recall from the past but of all that we can bring to mind at a given moment, and it operates by making experience that is distant in some way present in the mind of the viewer. The artifact elicits a package of memories, but they are our memories; and while the designer (the original rhetor) may have some *dianoia* (purpose in mind), we are the ones in the present who are engaged in the interpretation of what is before us by reference to what is in our minds.

My approach differs from Debord and Farrell in that my subject is the material text, the articulated response expressed by the audience, and the network of buildings, roads, and greenery that constitute the built environment. I wish to argue that spectacle in contexts such as these has the unique ability to invite a collective response from the audience—a response that allows auditors to participate in rather than adjust to reality. Or, to repeat myself, the monument, the viewer, and their environment, are in dialogical relation, which calls on the viewer's rhetorical capacity to speak back in response to such Big Rhetoric.

In an effort to explain how Big Rhetoric may be considered a useful subcategory of spectacle, I draw from a classical understanding of the term *opsis*, roughly translated as
visual spectacle. In Book VI of the *Poetics*, the empiricist Aristotle describes *opsis* as one of the five elements of drama. The elements include *mythos* (story), *opsis* (the seen, or visual), *melos* (music, melody), *lexis* (speech), and *dianoia* (theme). Aristotle uses the term *opsis* to refer to the visual elements of the play, its capacity to speak through the objects and backdrop on the stage. From the Greek word for optics, “appearance, sight, view,” Aristotle uses the concept to discuss the materiality of the play as separate and distinct from the story of the play: “... the production of spectacular effects depends more on the art of the stage machinist than on that of the poet” (Book 6). While Aristotle’s separation excludes *opsis* from the art of poetry, his brief discussion of the term yields some insight into how it might be seen as a useful rhetorical concept.

Aristotle explains that the visual spectacle, while less important than the words of the poet, still has the potential to generate a strong emotional response from the audience. In this way, spectacle is a kind of rhetorical force that interacts with the play but remains independent in some ways from the story and, thus, has its own dramatistic effects.

Traditionally, criticism has argued that in a well-made drama the distinction between mythos and *dianoia* (fable and idea) collapses; I am arguing this same coalescence happens between *opsis* and *dianoia*; what we see and the ideas that it arouses (via memory) are inseparable. To borrow from Coleridge, the two become "a distinction without division" (14).

The primary claim I hope to make is that these monumental texts first disrupt, then invite; they encourage audience reflection (this is especially true in the Gerhy design); and in some cases they challenge memories of the past. The experience with these large objects is a moment of disruption and deliberation that can lead to opportunities for collective creativity. Even in the case of Diocletian’s Column, the size and wonder of the column are more than a
political maneuver; they change the cultural landscape of the Serapeum by inviting the people of Alexandria to contemplate and discuss what it means to be Greek, Egyptian, and Roman.

Not unlike Diocletian’s use of the Greek column in Alexandria as a means to disrupt the traditions in Alexandria, western nations in the 19th and early 20th centuries made use of grand expositions to negotiate their position among the global elite. At the London exposition of 1851, the Crystal Palace was a colossal glass structure used to house England’s newest inventions and to communicate English ingenuity. The capacity of these rhetorical texts to transform modern life lay in their ability to provide a sense of wonder for the audience. When considered a rhetorical form, spectacles like the London exposition spoke broadly and persuasively about life as shaped by mechanized production in the new industrial age and the dream of escape from the blight of urban sprawl. Richard Atkins suggests that international expositions were intended to give form to the future: “through them the vicarious became the immediate, the theoretical and general became concrete and specific” (1). The experience of attending the fair was not only an escape from the dullness and suppression of the moment but was also a persuasive argument for its transformation. For multitudes of both literate and illiterate spectators, the world of tomorrow materialized through the spectacle of the world exposition.

From these two vantage points, I identify comparable approaches to using large objects to propagate a dialogue about the future. The expositions of the 19th century reveal the complicated ways American cultural distinctiveness and "exceptionalism" were in dialogue with a classical aesthetic, and also bring into focus the unique methods of the American cultural mission to advance its growing economy. What emerges in these pages are
overlapping, often conflicting approaches to using rhetorical means to break down barriers of past associations. From Diocletian’s pragmatic approach and Roman imperialist intentions, to the straightforward acknowledgement of American exceptionalism in the later 19th century, to Frank Gerhy’s belief in a careful democratization without Americanization, Big Rhetoric remains, crucially, contextual and situated.

**Methodological Approach**

The purpose of my work is to acquaint rhetorical scholars with the persuasive potential of Big Rhetoric. This is a complex task that involves a basic understanding of the nature of rhetoric and architecture and how to approach it. To be a work of architecture, a physical structure must be built and have some function for human beings. This structure produces a recognizable change to the physical landscape, a modification that alters the environment for a particular purpose. Flavio Conti explains, “Buildings do not exist in isolation. They not only impose their character on their surroundings but also have an incalculable effect on the lives of the human beings who inhabit them” (25). The rhetorical potential of architecture to persuade can be found in the physical structure and its ability to “impose its character” on the landscape. Structures for Conti work to modify a city or town, but they themselves are also modified by the people who use them.

The relationship between architecture and its environment is explained in more detail by the architect historian Christian Norberg-Schulz. Architecture, says Schultz, is a means by which we participate in a system, a network that is constantly being modified by human beings and their activities. Schulz believes the roads, squares, and greenery create a “network of interrelated components which are connected with practically all human activities.” The
connectivity of the different parts of the network all work in concert with one another, and at the center are the human activities that give meaning and shape to the network. Even in ancient Rome, architects like Vitruvius believed the study of architecture was also the study of humanity: students should master, in addition to drawing and arithmetic, music, literature, and philosophy.

For the purposes of Big Rhetoric, architecture will be considered a rhetorical practice of manipulating the physical environment for particular persuasive aims. Following this line of thinking, the rhetorical agent is an agent of change, someone who works to disrupt Schultz’s “network of interrelated components.” Although exploratory in nature, my discussion is based on this central premise: architecture may serve as a means of redemptive communication that has the potential to create a new reality for the spectator. To explore how Big Rhetoric accomplishes its objectives, I compare three examples of speaking loudly. This historical instrumental case study is guided by the concept-oriented approach to rhetorical criticism. Among those who use this approach in rhetorical studies, James Jasinsky stands out as an exemplary model of inquiry into the concerns that guide a new generation of rhetorical scholars. Jasinky’s essay “The Status of Theory and Method in Rhetorical Criticism” approaches rhetorical criticism from a theoretical understanding of human rhetorical behavior. His study of rhetorical criticism is immensely useful in its extensive coverage of conceptually-informed interpretive analysis. This rhetorical scholarship engages in conceptual reflection and refinement “as part of the practice of criticism” (Jasinsky 259). The objects of reflection are explored using a three-pronged approach: 1) examination of the context and rhetorical situation in which the rhetoric was performed, 2) identification of a rhetorical concept that appears most useful for the analysis of the particular rhetorical
artifact, 3) repeated close readings of the visual text, keeping the rhetorical concept in mind as it comes in contact with the artifact and the audience’s response to the artifact throughout the analysis. My framework similarly provides flexibility in the application of critical tools to the various texts and concepts I explore. I apply the critical tool most useful to explain the workings of each text within its discursive network, but my overarching goal will be to gain insight into the use of Big Rhetoric in different and often overlapping historical contexts.

Overall, I intend to address one primary comprehensive question: what are the inherent qualities of Big Rhetoric? The dissertation does not seek to examine the historical accuracy of the Roman occupation of Alexandria, nor does it attempt to examine the physiological process of remembering. Instead, it serves to document particular instances of Big Rhetoric and the ways in which these events disrupt, alter, and in some cases liberate our memory of the past and our views about the future. The study is spread across three genres of representation—monuments, expositions, and memorials—because I saw common features of Big Rhetoric through spectacular effects shared across a variety of forms of visual expression. These case studies endeavor to expose how the brilliance of Big Rhetoric works to awaken the imagination and disturb our senses.

The concept of Big Rhetoric is viewed in this study as a phenomenon that awakens our consciousness by generating a strong emotional reaction in the audience. Spectacles from this point of view are not simply visual extravagance that dampen our capacity to speak back. This definition of the concept stands in contrast to Debord’s notion of spectacle and a society governed by commodity. Debord insists that spectacle stimulates our desire to consume, concentrating on fantasy rather than direct experience and forcing us to participate in the cult of consumerism. However, a spectacle is not merely a fantasy of consumerism, but a social
relationship of people mediated by visual expression. It is a worldview explored and negotiated in something physical and substantial. Contemporary examples of Big Rhetoric offer new forms of visual experience that have the capacity to respond to users’ reactions. The surface of contemporary memorials and monuments, like the Gehry design, can be made up of images that appeal to the senses and ignite the viewer’s imagination. By re-defining the role of spectacle in this way, urban spaces can produce long-standing memorable interactions that penetrate the environment in which we live.
NOTES

Many in the field of rhetoric debate the idea of big versus small rhetoric. Rhetoric and media studies scholar Edward Schiappa noted,

Within the journals and conventions of members of the National Communication Association (NCA), popularization is often characterized by studies of the form “the rhetoric of X,” where X could literally be anything. Outside of the NCA-defined parameters of communication studies, popularization is evidenced by the apparently ever-increasing ranks of scholars who use “rhetoric” as a relevant and important term of art within their scholarship.

Most scholars who discuss the popularization of rhetoric include some discussion of the communication scholar Dilip Gaonkar and his critique of the “globalization of rhetoric.” Gaonkar explored globalized rhetoric in "Rhetoric and Its Double: Reflections on the Rhetorical Turn in the Human Sciences" (1990) and "The Idea of Rhetoric in the Rhetoric of Science" (1993). Schiappa observed,

Gaonkar suggests that the quality of rhetorical scholarship suffers from popularization. According to Gaonkar’s history of rhetorical criticism, “neo-Aristotelianism sought to integrate a critical vocabulary derived from Aristotle with a program of historical research.” The results, he claims “were dismal” and a “massive failure” (1993, 262; 1997b, 31). Following the “collapse” of neo-Aristotelianism, two sorts of critical approaches emerged. One approach was committed to viewing rhetoric broadly as “symbolic inducement.” Gaonkar proclaims that the “critical studies inspired by those
theoretical perspectives [phenomenological, structuralist, dramatistic, etc.] were as a whole no more insightful than an average neo- Aristotelian study” (1993, 262).

Gaonkar begins in “Rhetoric and its Double” to suggest that a global definition of rhetoric “propels rhetoric to confirm its presence in the discourse of other disciples” (344). His argument focuses on the disciplinary integrity of rhetoric, and Schiappa sees a sense of “embattlement and fear” in these claims, a preoccupation with academic turf. The separation between Gaonkar’s vision for rhetorical studies and a group of rhetoricians interested in the discourse and rhetoric of science is his most well-known and comprehensive critique of globalized rhetoric. Herbert Simons maintains,

Gaonkar had built his critique of a globalized, hermeneutically oriented rhetoric on an infirm foundation…Gaonkar’s use of rhetoric of science as the test case for “Big Rhetoric” was also fallacious in the formal sense, for it assumed that failure to meet what was alleged to be the toughest test would thereby invalidate the entire globalization project – this through a kind of reversal of the *a fortiori* argument.

In “Rhetoric and its Double,” Gaonkar argues that Aristotle’s available means of persuasions is a process of making “knowledge more readily comprehensible and acceptable in the domain of civic discourse” (344). But rhetoric by itself cannot produce knowledge. It serves, says Gaonkar, to supplement knowledge—accommodating, adjusting, and redefining—but never discovering the nature of things (346).
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CHAPTER TWO: DIOCLETIAN’S VICTORY COLUMN: MEGETHOS AND THE RHETORIC OF SPECTACULAR DISRUPTION

Modified from a paper to be published in Rhetoric Society Quarterly

Jonathan Balzotti¹ ² and Benjamin Crosby

Abstract

This essay explores how the powerful system of cultural references in the architecture of Alexandria is disrupted by Roman visual rhetoric. Specifically, the essay closely analyzes Diocletian’s Victory Column, a monument to the third-century Roman ruler who put down an Alexandrian uprising. The authors argue that Rome employed a visual rhetoric of spectacular disruption as a means to insert itself into the city’s historical identity even after its siege created widespread disease and starvation. The essay builds on the substantial scholarship on public memory by describing a kind of rhetoric that poses a political, existential challenge to a reigning cultural identity. As rhetorical scholars continue to study public memory and the persuasive powers of designed space, the notion of megethos appears to be uniquely and increasingly relevant.

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² Author of correspondence.
Introduction

After three days of travel, a Greek writer in the 2nd century, Achilles Tatius, conveys a first impression of Alexandria:

I entered it by the Sun Gate, as it is called, and was instantly struck by the splendid beauty of the city, which filled my eyes with delight. From the Sun Gate to the Moon Gate...led a straight double row of columns...I tried to cast my eyes down every street, but my gaze was still unsatisfied, and I could not grasp all of the beauty of the spot at once; some parts I saw, some I was on the point of seeing, some I earnestly desired to see, some I could not pass by; that which I actually saw kept my gaze fixed, while that which I expected to see would drag it to the next. I explored therefore every street, and at last, my vision unsatisfied, explained in weariness, “Ah, my eyes, we are beaten.” (Tatius, The Adventures of Leucippe and Clitophon 5.2-24)

Tatius’s descriptive account reconstructs the visual landscape of Alexandria for modern readers and highlights the persuasive power of the city’s design. It is evident from the description that the landscape to which the writer responds is designed not only to engage viewers, but also to overwhelm them. The city’s beauty, scale, and unique repetition of Greek forms deluge the spectator’s vision until he and his eyes acknowledge surrender. As Tatius continues his narrative, he shifts his attention away from the architectural wonders of the city to the evening’s festivities and the many torches that lined the square: “The sun had gone
down; but there was no sign of night—it was as though another sun had arisen.” The square will soon be filled with spectators and citizens in anticipation of the great procession celebrating the Egyptian god Serapis. The torches, Greek architecture, and procession all combine to communicate a powerful cultural persona, blending Egyptian and Greek identities into a tensely unified whole. As Tatius puts it, “It was the greatest spectacle I ever beheld.”

As scholars in rhetoric continue to devote considerable effort to the study of public memory and the persuasive potential of designed space, Tatius’s account, with its explicit reference to the concept of spectacle, suggests an opportunity for further scholarship. Alexandria makes for an especially interesting case study because it is a city that has been much contested by competing historical, political, and cultural interests. Afflicted by resentments, rebellions, and wars, Alexandria is the strategic object not only of rival armies, but also of competing symbolic systems. Though founded by Alexander the Great in the fourth century BCE, the land was already home to an Egyptian city, which was absorbed by Greek development and later became Alexandria’s Egyptian quarter. Alexander’s appointees and successors aggressively expanded the city’s size and influence, determined to make it a Hellenistic center. Within a century, Alexandria became the largest city in the world, and it was remarkably diverse.

Although Alexander and the Ptolemaic dynasty that succeeded him ensured the city was unmistakably Hellenistic in its planning, administration, and aesthetics, Alexandria still existed on an “alien landscape” that was home to “a native Egyptian population with its own culture, history, and traditions” (Erskine 42). Andrew Erskine observes that the Greek domination of the landscape and culture “masks a fundamental insecurity” over the city’s essential identity. Nevertheless, the Egyptians and Greeks maintained a relative stability,
even if that stability was marked by an undercurrent of Egyptian exclusion and resentment. To maintain that delicate equilibrium, Greece employed a sophisticated symbolic strategy in which Egyptian and Greek sacred symbols were meshed as a means of grafting the two cultures. The result is a rich, public memory landscape marked by complex symbolic battles and alliances, and a tense, often failed, sense of civic order.

This volatile relationship between imperialism, insecurity, domination, and memory renews itself with the advent of the Roman Empire, and Diocletian specifically. In this essay, we explore the way Alexandria’s rich system of Greek and Egyptian cultural symbols is disrupted by a new imperialist rhetoric. Specifically, we perform a close analysis of Diocletian’s Victory Column, a monument to the third-century Roman ruler who put down an Alexandrian uprising. We argue that Rome, like Greece, used a strategy of symbolic meshing but embodied that strategy within the architectural amplification of its own power. Diocletian’s Column simultaneously reflects, appropriates, outsizes, and disrupts Alexandria’s symbolic identity. We argue that this strategy reflects Rome’s goal to insert itself into, and ultimately to dominate, the city’s public memory—even after its violence against the city created widespread disease and starvation. We build on the substantial scholarship on public memory by describing a kind of visual rhetoric that poses a political, existential challenge to a reigning cultural identity. First, we introduce the historical context surrounding the construction of Diocletian’s Column and review some of the literature on public memory and monuments. Next, we explain how the Serapeum, home to the column, is a site of rhetorical contest and cultural fusion. Then, drawing on Burke, Blair, and others, we analyze Diocletian’s Column as an example of how the Greek idea of *megethos* can be used as a disruptive rhetoric that alters the landscape of public memory. More specifically,
megethos represents a scaled up rhetoric that manages to overcome a paradoxical exigency – namely, how an imperial power simultaneously achieves consubstantiation with and dominance over an existing cultural identity. Finally, we discuss implications for future rhetorical scholarship.

A Context for Diocletian’s Theatrics

Diocletian’s Column, erected some time between 284 and 385 CE, and the events surrounding its conception reflect Alexandria’s history of physical and symbolic violence. Alexandria was an essential node in the empire’s economy. It was a conduit for one third of the empire’s grain supply and the main portal through which it conducted its trade with the East. It was also remarkably wealthy in its own right, but its critical economic output was counterbalanced by its history of rebellion and its ongoing resentment for Roman rule. As Christopher Haas puts it, the city “had witnessed a number of imperial usurpations” in the third century, and Diocletian knew well the danger that Alexandria would pose if it were to “persist in rebellion” (21). Its situation was complicated. Alexandria was at once necessary, volatile, and rebellious. Samuel Sharpe points out that a core concern for Diocletian was the Egyptians’ deeply rooted “hatred of their rulers and the belief that they should then be able to throw off the yoke.” To put down the Egyptian rebellions once and for all, Diocletian relied on a long-term siege campaign during which he surrounded the city with “ditch and wall, and turned aside the canals that supplied the citizens with water” (240). The siege lasted for eight months, causing the Alexandrians to suffer terrible privations and ultimately to surrender.

Given the delicate nature of the Alexandrian problem, Diocletian treated the post siege period with unusual nuance. When those responsible for instigating the rebellion were
either captured or killed, including Achilleus, on whom the Alexandrians had pinned their hopes for liberation, Diocletian’s soldiers began burning and plundering the city. Diocletian, however, abruptly halted the spoil, citing a sign from the gods. As Sharpe explains it, when Diocletian entered the city with his troops, “the horse on which he sat stumbled” (240). Diocletian interpreted this event as a call to preserve what was left of the city. He further demonstrated his munificence by presenting the city with a large portion of grain that was scheduled for Rome. He also exempted the people of Alexandria from paying taxes for a time. So whether Diocletian truly feared divine retribution or pragmatically recognized an opportunity to subdue the volatile city through his generosity, his act of restraint suggests a symbolic act worth exploring.

There are important contextual reasons for why Diocletian might have taken this approach to dealing with the Alexandrian aftermath. As we have established, Tatius’s account of the spectacle during the celebration of Serapis focused largely on the Greek architectural elements of the scene. This small observation is symbolic of the profound and complicated cultural tensions in Alexandria between the Greeks and the Egyptian Copts and Arabs who reluctantly allied with them in the rebellion. Although the Egyptian citizens had been burned by Greece’s historical offenses against them, they knew that the Romans nursed profound anxieties regarding their own relationship to the Greeks. They at once emulated and dominated the Greeks, absorbing many Greek contributions to culture while at the same time insisting on imperial control. Romans also recognized the Greeks as the cultural heirs of Alexandria who were entitled to certain political privileges (“Roman Egypt”).

The Egyptians knew, therefore, that forming an alliance with the Greeks under the leadership of Achillius would provide the best possible leverage for victory. According to
Sharpe, Diocletian deliberately resisted inquiring just how far the Alexandrian Greeks had gone in their alliance with the Egyptians because he knew that such knowledge would only exacerbate an untenable situation, requiring ever more military and diplomatic resources on an increasingly complicated scale in order to govern northern Africa (see 240 – 243). In short, Diocletian knew it was in his best interest not to provoke further Greek resentment lest he create grounds for an even stronger alliance between Greek and Egyptian rebels in an already difficult and remote region of the empire.

Diocletian’s Column was erected as a tribute to the ruler’s supposed mercy during this period. Mistakenly believed by Middle Age crusaders to be a tribute to General Pompey, the column is now widely known to be a salutation to Diocletian following his historic siege.\(^1\) Sharpe even suggests that a bronze statue of the horse whose stumble was so significant once stood atop the column. So although Diocletian’s massive siege effectively ended “the bright days of Egypt as a Greek kingdom,” the column was erected as a token of gratitude to the conquering ruler. In the past, it was argued that the column was erected by grateful citizens (see Sharpe 242). But this claim, which is more than a century old, lacks the full context. In fact, it is now well understood that the prefect of Rome – that is, the Roman ruler in Alexandria, is responsible for erecting the column. So the notion that it was the will of the people that the column be erected must be complicated, as it overlooks evidence that the column is the result of an executive decision by the rulers themselves. The translation of the inscription at the base of the column seems to support this view: “To the most just emperor, tutelary of Alexandria, Diocletian, the Invincible, Posthumus, the Prefect of Egypt (has erected this monument)” (Taylor 262 - 263). If the Roman prefect, an underling with whom

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\(^1\) To this day, the column is often misleadingly called “Pillar Pompey’s.”
Diocletian would have been familiar, was behind the column’s construction, the decision was likely a political one, and the column’s placement at the center of the temple of Serapis suggests it was designed mostly as a statement to—not from—the Alexandrian people and only nominally as a tribute to the conquering emperor.

Our speculation here is supported by historical profiles of Diocletian and his methods. Diocletian’s early classical and Byzantine biographers diverge widely in their assessment of his rule, and they tend to be motivated by their own passionate prejudices (e.g. Rees 12). Nevertheless, taken together, these early sources paint the picture of a remarkably effective, if dangerous, leader, whose violence is counterbalanced by his “shrewd,” “cunning,” and “subtle” ways (99). Indeed, if we are to believe Aurelius Victor, “[Diocletian] was the first to introduce regal custom rather than Roman liberty, and he demanded that he be worshipped where all previous emperors had been greeted. He ornamented his clothes and shoes with jewellery, where before the badge of imperial office was only the purple robe and everything else was ordinary” (qtd. in Rees 99 – 100). Although we cannot take as fact such contemporaneous assessments of Diocletian’s rule, any objective review reveals a leader who was adept at symbolic influence—an expert in war, to be sure, but one who also marshaled more subtle tactics to assert political control and establish lasting reform (see, e.g., Mackay 294 - 295). Edward Gibbon corroborates this view when he argues that, unlike Augustus, Diocletian was more interested in the theatrical display of Rome’s power than in actually brandishing the sword of Rome: “the state maintained by Diocletian was a theatrical representation . . . It was the aim of [Diocletian] to disguise . . . the unbounded power which the emperors possessed over the Roman world” (206).
So given the complicated historical context of Alexandria and Diocletian’s history of theatrics, we argue that Diocletian’s Column is part of a symbolic, rhetorical strategy to restage public memory. The column becomes a means to remake the city’s memory of the siege by focusing on the merciful and divinely inspired acts following the siege. Later, as we analyze the column itself, we consider its placement at the enter of the Serapeum, originally an Egyptian holy site central to the city’s identity; its fashioning as a scaled-up Greek column; its singularity as a vaguely obelisk-like structure; and its overall message of Roman symbolic dominance, a way of merging subdued cultures into an oversized imperialist structure. While these claims move towards generalization, we recognize there are limits to the close reading of a single artifact. We do not argue, then, that the column represents a universal strategy for Roman dominance, or that it captures the essence of public memory rhetoric in some always replicable way. Rather, we analyze the column as a single, symbolically rich response to a complex exigency. We argue that this response has at least two important payoffs. First, it provides critical insight into the way Diocletian’s column functions persuasively, using subtle, symbolic mechanisms to achieve its desired end. Second, we show how a particular theoretical concept, megethos, allows an imperial power to participate in, disrupt, and overcome the arc of the dominant public memory. Before that analysis, however, we review some of the literature on public memory.

Public Memory and Monuments

Public memory implies, in Steven Browne’s words, “a shared sense of the past, fashioned from the symbolic resources of community.” The shared memory is also subject to that community’s “particular history, hierarchies, and aspirations” (248). Browne’s idea
emphasizes how shared memory, or public memory, is distributed to the public by “symbolic resources” that are subject to the particular social context in which they were created. Given these characteristics, it is not surprising that public memory has become a robust subfield within the broader discipline of rhetoric. As Dickinson, Ott, and Aoki argue, the creation of public memory depends upon certain rhetorical resources that shape consciousness, including “structural elements, arguments, tropes, narratives, justifications,” and so on (“Memories for Sale” 13). So public memories are rhetorical constructions designed to create a shared sense of identity for a particular group of people.

This idea of a shared identity points to Burke’s notion of consubstantiation, a process by which rhetoric is deployed to bridge the divide between separate entities (22). Rather than merely persuading spectators to adopt a particular behavior, public memories invite them to assume a particular identity that they hold in unity with other members of their public. This unity performs important functions. R.H. Fuchs, for example, describes society’s “collective dream,” which “is never just an absolutist gesture by a ruling class towards its subjects. It also reflects how a people or a community wishes to see itself—a collective dream on a national fulfillment and honour” (97). So the power inherent in a shared memory does more than just establish unity, or “communal identification” (Blair, Dickinson, and Ott 27); it also binds a public to certain interpretations of the past and aspirations for the future (see, e.g., Stob 253; Blair and Michel “Contemporary” 33; Jorgensen-Earp and Lanzilotti 151). That is, the creation of a shared memory hails spectators into a new interpretive space in which they form new habits of orienting themselves to the world.

Interestingly, implied in this reorientation is a process of displacement. As Maurice Halbwachs points out, remembering and forgetting are coconstitutive processes; each is
essential for the other’s existence. Therefore, rhetorical scholars should be aware that drawing collective memories from symbolic resources requires some process of forgetting individual experiences. Carol Blair makes a similar assumption when she asks, “What does the text do to (or with or against) other texts?” (30). Our own argument relies on this assumption. The creation of a public memory implies a negotiation with or reinterpretation of the past. Public memory thus carries the potential for violence, a disruption of one narrative as it gives way to another. This potential is exacerbated by the fact that only certain invested actors have access to the resources necessary to establish public memory. Michael Kammen, for example, points out that many of the social institutions that impose particular public memories may be controlled by a select few, a dominant group that promotes particular ideologies not necessarily endorsed by “ordinary people” (10). These collective interpretations may not benefit all groups equally. Diocletian’s Column, after all, appears to be the product of a tiny, elite team of Roman leaders who have devised a way to shift the collective, public interpretation of their violent acts of social control.

Most of the rhetorical scholarship on public memory focuses on physical places of memorialization or commemoration. Blair, Dickinson, and Ott call them “memory places” because they cultivate and sustain “communal identification” (27). Blair and Michel add that such places are significant because “they select from history those events, individuals, places, and ideas that will be sacralized by a culture” (“Public Memorializing” 377). In other words, the material construction of memory has at least two major rhetorical advantages: It allows rhetors to sacralize certain narratives, events, and values, and it enables them to sustain that sacralization with an indefinite material presence. As Benjamin Crosby argues, these spatial sacralizations are designed to maintain the rhetorical charge of certain “kairic” moments in
history (139). Such places therefore can speak and reaffirm messages to multiple audiences over extraordinarily long periods of time. For this reason, rhetorical scholars have studied everything from Central Park in New York City (Rosenfield) to the Buffalo Bill Museum in Wyoming (Dickinson, Ott, and Aoki) to the Memorial Aids Quilt (Blair and Michel “Aids Memorial”) to the Viet Nam Veterans Memorial (Blair and Michel, “Public Memorializing”) to the Memorial to Robert Gould Shaw and the Massachusetts 54th (Stob) to the National Cathedral (Crosby), and the list goes on. Each one of these places represents what some invested and empowered group deemed essential to a shared public identity that serves to fulfill and sustain some rhetorical vision of the past, present, and future.

Like the scholars we have referenced, we argue that memory places do more than simply remind their audiences of important events in history. Memory places are dynamic and dialogic. They interact with their audiences, erasing and replacing memories and implicitly calling for assent on a particular, active, publicly shared identity that spans time. Kathleen Lamp underscores these particular functions in her essay on the Roman Emperor Augustus’s famous building campaign, which allegedly—if mostly metaphorically—transformed Rome from a “city of brick” to a “city of marble.” Lamp points out that Roman monuments in honor of Augustus were designed “not only to celebrate Augustus’s successful campaigns (in) Spain and Gaul but also to garner public support for Augustus’s heir and the process of dynastic succession” (172). From the beginning, then, the Imperial Roman project was designed around rhetorical space through which the past is interpreted and upon which the future is poised. For Augustus, as for his heirs, the function of monuments was to “gain and maintain power” (172). So Rome’s methods of conquest, despite their heavy military overtones, demonstrate a remarkable grasp of the rhetorical power of the visual landscape.
And it is clear that Roman leaders routinely availed themselves of their physical environment when they made speeches, often gesturing to monuments, statues, and other surroundings in an effort to move audiences. So while Diocletian appears to be unique in the extent to which he believed in the power of symbols to serve the cause of imperial stabilization and reform, he is not essentially different from his predecessors. His methods highlight and expand the well-established Roman practice of building rhetoric into the physical landscape.

As Diane Favro notes, the Roman way of remembering speeches was often tied to architectural features in public buildings. Speakers linked parts of a speech, for example, to specific parts of a famous public building, and this linking helped them to move from one part of the speech to another. This mnemonic strategy was so ingrained, in fact, that architects began to design structures with it in mind. More and more Roman buildings took on features “that were unusual in scale, color, or form” in an effort to give the public more distinct ways of recalling arguments and narratives – especially narratives with a distinctly Augustan vision of the city and its history (see Lamp 187; see also Favro 233). Both Favro and Lamp are suggesting, then, that Roman structures served to support the more traditional medium of speech, but they also reveal that such structures were independently rhetorical (see also Aldrete and Vasaly). These structures spoke with their own voices, and as they grew in scale, form, and complexity, they took on the potential to speak more loudly than other voices, thereby disrupting competing narratives.

The importance of scale to disrupt competing narratives and to speak more loudly than other voices might be understood better through the lens of megethos, a Greek concept that simply translated means magnitude. In book I of the Rhetoric, Aristotle uses megethos to describe the role of amplification (auxesis) in epideictic speech:
In general, among the classes of things common to all speeches, amplification is the most at home in those that are epideictic; for these take up actions that are agreed upon, so that what remains is to clothe the action with greatness [megethos] and beauty [kallos]. (1.9.1368a.26-30)

Here Aristotle articulates greatness as action clothed in the grandeur and beauty of lexical devices. *Megethos*, in this tradition, prioritizes the subject—“and the term ‘more’ signifies here not only ‘to a greater degree,’ but also (a logical or axiological) priority” (Chroust 33). As a product of amplification, *megethos* establishes the subject’s superiority by virtue of the way it outsizes other subjects. The use of *megethos*, in other words, sways judgment as it reorganizes the landscape. Existing subjects are now understood in relation to the new, ostensibly dominant subject.

However, ancient scholars and philosophers dispute Aristotle’s claim that amplification alone produces *megethos*. Pseudo-Longinus in the text *On the Sublime* says amplification refers merely to amount and that redundancy and quantity produce a sort of long-winded verbosity.

I must first remark that I am not satisfied with the definition of amplification generally given by authorities on rhetoric. They explain it to be a form of language which invests the subject with a certain grandeur [*megethos*]. Yes, but this definition may be applied indifferently to sublimity, pathos, and the use of figurative language, since all these invest the discourse with some sort of grandeur. The difference seems to me to lie in this, that sublimity gives elevation to a subject, while amplification gives extension as well. Thus the sublime is often conveyed in a single thought, but amplification can only subsist with a certain prolixity and diffusivity. (Longinus
12.1-5) 

*The Sublime* holds that the single idea may be made great if one can establish some singular quality of grandeur. Granduer, in this sense, lies in enhancing the subject, not merely amplifying its size or scale. Longinus conceives of *megethos*, in other words, as the raising of the singular idea. If *megethos* is achieved through a process of distinction, it cannot be produced without the singular idea being elevated above other ideas. This reading of *megethos* is central to our argument of Diocletian’s Column, because for Diocletian to achieve greatness, he must elevate the very idea of Rome in the minds of the Alexandrian people in such a way that Rome becomes the singular idea. We are not arguing that Rome achieves this distinction merely by crushing the opposition, but by enrolling itself into the city’s own symbolic structure, and then asserting control of that symbolic structure by scaling it up to recognizably Roman dimensions. Thus, the city’s symbolic landscape is preserved, but it has been hierarchically altered. As Longinus says, the goal is “not to persuade the audience but rather to transport them out of themselves.” So the effects of *megethos* require some change from low to high, small to large, some transfixing experience that repositions the spectator in relation to his or her own cultural memory. For the purposes of our argument, this dynamic can be found in the tensions between the memory of what is known and the recognition of how that memory has been modulated to comply with a new dominant power.

**The Serapeum as Site of Cultural Contest and Fusion**

Historians argue that the location of Diocletian’s Column, the Serapeum, used a predominantly classical aesthetic, not Egyptian (McKenzie, Gibson, and Reyes). Nonetheless, the site must be considered a cultural fusion of sorts, as it contains many
Egyptian symbols, including cult statues and other religious artifacts. Before the Greek structures were erected, the local Egyptian population came to the high plateau to worship the popular statue of Serapis. The site therefore has a rich history of cultural negotiation, combining political and religious practice and uniting Greek architecture with Egyptian religious symbolism.

The blending of Egyptian and Greek culture appears to have been part of early efforts to make the Serapeum a highly significant cultural site for the city. McKenzie, Gibson, and Reyes explain that the Serapeum had two primary purposes for Alexandria: to reinforce Greek identity and to incorporate the artifacts of Egyptian worship into a Greek aesthetic. So although the site largely favored Greek interests, it embraced and sacralized Egyptian elements as part of the city’s core identity.

A total of 15 plaques were found in the Serapeum, inscribed with both Greek and Egyptian hieroglyphs (82). The two languages on the plaques reveal that both Egyptian and Greek practitioners used the structures and that a largely unproblematic union was maintained between them. Thus, the Serapeum served as a symbolic anchor for the cultural fusion for which Alexandria was famous.

The topography of the Serapeum helps explain how Diocletian’s Column participated in this visually rich rhetorical site. In addition to the temple dedicated to Serapis, the Serapeum contained a colonnade court with over 400 columns. Also in the Serapeum were
two other buildings, a Stoa-like structure and a T-shaped building (See Figure 1). Both buildings connected under the courtyard by a secret passage. But archaeologists suggest that the Serapeum was used by earlier Ptolemaic kings even before these formidable structures were created. For example, Ptolemy 1 erected a sanctuary dedicated to the Egyptian goddess Isis and the Greco-Egyptian god Serapis. Also found within the Serapeum was an altar dedicated to Ptolemy 2 and his wife Arsinoe. Although it was eventually replaced by the main Temple of Serapis, the altar demonstrates a lengthy tradition of political messaging in concert with the worship of religious deities. Ptolemy 4’s construction of a temple dedicated to Harpocrates (Harsus, son of Isis) further illustrates this point. The plaque on the temple reads, “King Ptolemy, son of Ptolemy and Queen Bernice, the Beneficient Gods, to Harpocrates by order of Serapis and Isis” (McKenzie, Gibson, and Reyes 84). The bilingual inscription tells the Egyptian and Greek audience that the great gods Serapis and Isis have communion with Ptolemaic kings. They have, in fact, ordered the king Ptolemy to act on their behalf and construct this temple, a story not unlike Diocletian’s experience with his horse. In both cases, the rulers use communion with the gods as justification for their political power. Because the Serapeum is a recognized site of rhetorical contest and cultural evolution and fusion, it is a fluid space that becomes repeatedly redefined by the presence of new political interests and rhetorical artifacts.

The Roman phase of the Serapeum appears to have continued the Greek effort to appropriate, rather than replace, the symbols of cultural identity. But as architectural historian Christian Norberg-Schulz points out, the Roman strategy differed from the Greek architectural style in one primary respect: The Roman strategy used “subordination” to
communicate the Roman system of governing. Norberg-Schulz explains that the use of size and scale to create this effect was a prominent feature of the *Idea Romana*:

A relatively simple play of forces is expressed this way, which represents a new kind of relationship between the parts of a building. They act together, not as individuals but as parts of a system, each part being subordinate to the superior idea of the system. In contrast to Greek architecture, where every part contained the immanent character of the whole, the single part in isolation does not tell us anything about the building as a whole….Its basic intention is to characterize space as the stage of god-inspired human action. Space becomes the varied and dynamic, but ordered stage where history takes place. (92)

Norberg-Schulz’s notion of Roman building design stands as a metonym for the Roman system of politics and government. The iconic symbolism inherent in classical design, in the Greek architectural forms, does not explain Rome’s use of magnitude and the dynamics of space to project “god-inspired human action.” Roman architecture differed from Greek design primarily in its impulse to cause disruptions in continuity without explicitly antagonizing that continuity. Through powerful visual texts, like Diocletian’s Victory Column, Rome both subsumed and outstripped the symbolic power of competing cultures.

**Diocletian’s Column**

Selecting Diocletian’s Column as a representative artifact raises the question of whether or not it is unique. One may wonder, in other words, whether there is anything philosophically or rhetorically unusual in its construction. In our contextual analysis, we
argued that the delicate historical and economic conditions of Alexandria rendered it unique, at least in degree, to the extent that Diocletian did not ultimately plunder the city into oblivion. In fact, he compensated the citizens with spectacles of generosity: grain, tax exemptions, and so forth. We further argued that he did so because he believed that Alexandria should not be provoked to further resentments and rebellions lest it might occupy all of Rome’s resources to subdue in perpetuity. Diocletian, we concluded, engaged in a sophisticated symbolic campaign to ease Alexandrian passions against him post siege.

As further evidence of this psychological campaign, consider the inscription at the column’s base. We noted earlier that the translated inscription reads, “To the most just emperor, tutelary of Alexandria, Diocletian, the Invincible, Posthumus, the Prefect of Egypt (has erected this monument).” To be sure, there is nothing unique about a Roman emperor being honored with a triumphal column. Such honorifics were part of Roman custom from Rome’s regal period through its republican period and into its imperial period. Conquering leaders were regularly honored with monuments, often free-standing columns, for their military victories. More often than not, these monuments were celebrated with elaborate rituals and parades (see Versnel 95 – 96). A typical inscription on such a monument would be an epic description of the leader’s military accomplishments in subduing a foreign enemy and protecting the empire. In short, such monuments were built in order to “glorify military victory and the values underpinning that victory” (Beard 4).
A prime example of such triumphal columns is that of Trajan, erected around CE 113 in honor of the emperor’s victories over the Dacians. The column, which is built of individually sculpted drums that were hollowed out to accommodate a spiral staircase inside, is massive in scale. The inscription winds around the column, describing in epic language the military victories of Trajan (see “Trajan’s Column”). A column dedicated to Marcus Aurelius is of similar design and purpose. Diocletian’s Column, then, appears to be somewhat unusual, because it does not explicitly commemorate a military victory; instead, it honors an act of conciliation towards fighting rebels. It makes no mention, whether in text or visual reliefs, of the extraordinary siege required to subdue the Alexandrians, suggesting that Diocletian’s purpose was far more sensitive rhetorically than the most well-known triumphal columns would suggest of other emperors at other times. For this reason, Diocletian’s Column makes for an especially revealing artifact. Traditional triumphal columns were certainly acts of public memory building, but they were designed primarily as commemorations of past victories. Diocletian’s Column is more clearly part of an ongoing rhetorical project to infiltrate and colonize a competing culture’s memory.
The column’s visual and material presence is broadly consistent with other traditional triumphal columns, which are designed as landmarks that help to organize physical space (see Figure 2). The addition of Diocletian’s Column to the Serapeum, then, is of particular significance, because it insinuates itself into the city’s central holy site. It does more than just add a structure to a generic public space; it realigns the city’s sacred center. Located in the southwest corner of the Serapeum, the giant column dwarfs other monuments, scaling up the Alexandrian world’s own cultural and religious identity in the form of a Roman monument. Consider the words of Rufinus of Aquileia (c. CE 373-80), a classical historian who describes the Serapeum:

And in the centre, there rises a column of surpassing height that renders the location recognizable—someone leaving would not at all know where he was heading, were he not to use the column as a reference-point for his journey—and the acropolis visible to land and sea. The “beginnings of the world” (archai ton onton) are positioned around the capital of the column. (Aphthomi, Progymnasmata 12)

Rufinus’s words underscore at least three of our points in this analysis. The column (a) redefines the landscape and, in so doing, redefines the visual experience of the city; (b) disrupts and supplants the prior memory of the city; and (c) reorganizes the Alexandrian world according to a Roman hegemony that, short of erasing the previous visual experience, insinuates itself into it and begins the process of subordinating public memory to a new interpretation.

In further considering the column as a visual rhetorical artifact worthy of analysis, we rely on Blair and Michel’s work on rhetorical materiality (“Contemporary”), in which they
outline a heuristic for analyzing memorial sites. Although their work specifically concerns contemporary U.S. memorial sites, much of what they discuss applies across history and culture and is relevant to our questions about Diocletian’s Column. Blair and Michel consider five categories of inquiry: the text’s “material significance,” “durability,” “possibilities for reproduction or preservation,” effect on “other texts,” and effect on “persons.” We focus here primarily on two categories that seem most relevant to our claims regarding the disruptive nature of Diocletian’s Column. Namely, we are mostly interested in the column’s material existence and relationship with other texts. We give some consideration to its durability, effect on persons, and possibilities for reproduction or preservation. In considering these categories, we place particular emphasis on the column’s use of scale and subordination, a distinctly Roman principle of critical importance that runs throughout this analysis.

Blair’s argument that “architecture, like natural language use, expresses degrees of significance not just through its symbolic substance but by its very existence” highlights one of the central rhetorical strategies behind the erection of Diocletian’s Column (“Contemporary” 34). The column actually alters, through its objective material presence, the landscape of the Serapeum. As a Roman triumphal column erected in honor of the Roman victory over the Alexandrian uprising, the pillar is the largest of its kind outside of Rome or Constantinople. And standing at well over 100 feet tall from base to capital (roughly 10 stories) and nearly 15 feet wide at its base, the column is one of the largest ancient monoliths ever erected. At 285 tons, it is also one of the heaviest. Unlike most of the columns in Alexandria, this is a “monolithic” column, so rather than being built of sections, or drums, it is built of a single piece of stone, the kind of column that might be reserved for temples and other holy sites.
Corinthian in design, the column’s capital is ornate and eye catching. Its shaft is made of a fine, red Aswan granite, which appears grayish from a distance but assumes a more refined and distinct appearance the closer one gets to it. Situated at the top of a limestone bluff, the column’s base is a square block of marble, stone, and lead that is about 60 feet in circumference. By itself, the base is more than 12 feet tall. The impact of these material dimensions is significant. Blair and Michel point out that the choice of materials is essential to the rhetorical strategy of a monument. Some materials, for example, are designed for endurance, to withstand weather, vandalism, gravity, and so on. A message made in granite suggests cross-generational permanence, and “such longevity is granted to texts that communities see as more important than others” (“Contemporary” 37). Texts, in other words, have built-in “degrees of durability,” and these degrees are put on display in the materiality of the given artifact. It is not difficult to conclude that Diocletian or, more accurately, his Alexandrian representative, had clear intentions as to the degree of durability of the text that is communicated by the column. It was to become a permanent and essential fixture in the landscape and consciousness of Alexandria.

Notions of durability slip easily into considerations of a text’s “possibilities for reproduction or preservation.” But Diocletian’s Column reveals that the durability of the text comes not from the way the text was copied, preserved, or reproduced but from the way it copies, preserves, and reproduces prior texts. As we have pointed out, the column is hardly a new form of architecture at this stage in Greek or Roman history. Indeed, the choice of this particular genre of monumental architecture seems to be a conscious decision to copy, reproduce, and preserve the cultural symbols of Alexandria. For not only does the Roman triumphal column reproduce a well-known Greek symbol of sacred architecture, but as a
lone-standing structure, it also seems to echo, or reproduce, the symbolic power of an Egyptian obelisk. Reproduction, Blair and Michel claim, is also a form of intervention, and “it is important to grapple with the degrees and kinds of change wrought by it” (38). In reproduction, an artifact might be captured “outside of its original context” (Hess 822). Thus, reproduction has the potential to reproduce and contest simultaneously. As a reproduction of a form, Diocletian’s Column derives from recognizable political and religious contexts in Alexandria. Memorialization, after all, is a way of pointing to shared origins. But because of the centrality of its location and the massiveness of its scale, the column also challenges the form’s context, inviting the viewer to experience it in a new way.

The column, therefore, is a deliberate material disruption of the landscape. By its very material presence, it reorganizes space, and it does so on a bold scale. Unlike other objects within the Serapeum the column becomes what Mircea Eliade might call an axis mundi, a sacralized center around which an entire world is defined and organized–or in this case, redefined and reorganized–in response to the threat of chaos (63 - 64). Blair and Michel provide further language for considering the way links are created between texts, and the column clearly employs a variety of the methods that they identify. It appropriates familiar forms while it also competes with and even silences other texts in the Serapeum. As Blair and Michel point out, the presence of multiple memorial sites in close proximity represents a competition not only for viewership but also for the right to frame or reframe history itself. Like the Vietnam Veterans Memorial, which physically changes the context in which it resides (i.e., alters the message of the surrounding memorials), Diocletian’s Column is not meant to be an isolated symbol. It participates in, physically alters, and culturally challenges the human landscape.
The primary claim we hope to make is that these monumental texts first disrupt then challenge the audience’s memories of the past. The experience with objects such as Diocletian’s column is a moment of disruption and reflection that can lead to group identification. In the case of Diocletian’s Column, the size and wonder of the column are more than a political maneuver; they change the cultural landscape of the Serapeum by inviting the people of Alexandria to contemplate what it means to be Greek, Egyptian, and Roman.

The primary effects of megethos are not to persuade the audience, but, as Longinus says in *The Sublime*, to “transport them out of themselves.” Longinus explains how this effect surpasses other persuasive strategies: “Invariably what inspires wonder, with its power of amazing us, always prevails over what is merely convincing and pleasing.” The object’s capacity to amaze is more powerful than something which convinces us of its veracity, “For our persuasions are usually under our own control, while these things exercise an irresistible power and mastery and get the better of every listener…A well-timed flash of sublimity shatters everything like a bolt of lightning” (Longinus, 4.1-10). Disruption, then, is one of the "inherent" qualities of megethos.

In constructing Diocletian’s Column in Alexandria (Fig. 2), Rome deliberately appropriates a symbol shared by both cultures, the Corinthian column. It further stages the column in the same way an obelisk is staged, singularly, not as a pillar supporting anything in particular but as an axis point around which a whole landscaped is organized. The Roman architects erected a recognizable symbol of Alexandrian memory. But rather than simply reproducing the Alexandrian symbol on an Alexandrian scale, they blow up the symbol in such a way that the landscape and other artifacts around it—the reigning symbols of
Alexandrian culture and religion—are reduced in the cultural imagination to echoes of their former selves. The result is a new kind of orientation to the visual experience of Alexandrian culture.

The rhetoric of disruption—how it is planned by the designer/rhetor; how and why it is registered by the viewer—provides a link between monumentality, public spectacle, resulting enthrallment, and the eventual imaginative reconstruction at the collective level. Aristotle says in Bk. II of the Rhetoric, that all strong emotions disturb us and we naturally seek ways to resolve that distress. If monuments such as Diocletian’s column have the power to "disturb" normative expectations, then, according to Aristotle, we will naturally seek ways to reconfigure our views in ways that accommodate the discord. The ability of the rhetorical text to produce megethos therefore lies in its’ ability to generate disturbance, to communicate wonder, and to transport the audience away from the familiar. Conversely, a text that cannot produce that effect cannot produce megethos.

**Conclusion**

We began the essay with Tatius’s descriptive account of the spectacular Alexandrian festival honoring the god Serapis. The entire city was in the thrall of a sacral celebration emanating from the temple across the landscape and mindscape of the public. Such experiences overwhelm partly because they tend to collapse time itself, providing linkages between past, present, and future. These links are often anchored in specific spaces and celebratory rituals that are designed to reaffirm communal identities. What makes Diocletian’s Column a uniquely complex and rich artifact for analysis is the way that it both celebrates and disrupts the identity of the targeted public. The Serapeum is a stage on which
the people of Alexandria memorialize and perform their cultural values. The column is a monument erected by and to a conquering power. We have attempted to argue the column exists as a strategic disruption in memory. Knowing that producing spectacles of punishment in response to the Alexandrian uprising would be costly and ineffective, Diocletian chooses instead to insert himself into the community’s sacralized landscape. He carries out this strategy first by performing benevolent acts of kindness (diverting the grain for Rome back to Alexandria and forgiving the tax payments) and then by memorializing his kindness with an equally memorable symbol, erected on the most sacred ground in the province. In brief, the column is a rhetorical effort to insert Rome into the historical identity of Alexandria and wed it more firmly to the Roman collective.

Research is not clear about whether the column was immediately and fully embraced by Alexandrians. Unfortunately, we cannot perform any reliable and detailed reception analysis of the artifact. We do, however, have the advantage of a long, continuous history throughout which the column stands, and its persistence suggests a remarkable success. Diocletian, as we have pointed out, put down a serious revolt in the city by ordering Alexandria to be besieged. After eight months, the city finally gave in, but it was stricken with disease and famine. Still, the column was built, and it has remarkably outlasted its counterparts in and near the Serapeum, most of which are discernable only in trace ruins, if they are discernable at all. Even the great temple to the god Serapis is now badly damaged, and it was repeatedly attacked during Jewish revolts at the time of Emperor Trajan and subsequently destroyed shortly after the advent of Christianity. Even its ruined remains, then, are copies of the original. Meanwhile, Diocletian’s Column stands mostly intact.
The columns’ geographic reorganization of the landscape is part of its symbolic gesture. We have argued that the column disrupts the reality of the Alexandrian narrative by blowing it up into Roman proportions, and the consequence of this use of scale is an irresistible visual subordination, a dwarfing of the other sacred artifacts in the Serapeum and a fundamental reorientation of the Alexandrian landscape. Diocletian’s Column becomes arguably the most recognizable landmark in the Serapeum, which is to say, it materially changes the way the land is seen and understood. This change is essential to the notion of megethos. Diocletian’s Column appears to be scripted as a gesture of goodwill, a reminder of a ruler’s generosity and merit in the form of a familiar architectural symbol. We hope to have shown that this column it is not merely a commemorative monument designed to celebrate commonly held identities, but uses magnitude as a means to disrupt those same identities and, in their place, insinuate Roman hegemony.

We have only scratched the surface of the theoretical possibilities of disruption as a rhetorical concept. Although we have identified a useful, historical artifact that embodies and communicates rhetorical disruption through the use of public memory and megethos, we want to pursue the implications more deeply in future work. What other successful disruptions might be useful as objects of analysis? Are all monuments, in some sense, disruptions as well as commemorations? Examining the purpose of Diocletian’s Column provides access to an important architectural object with abundant historical and rhetorical intentions. In the process, our analysis of the column has also pointed to a productive interaction of rhetoric and history in reading monumental cultural artifacts. These objects are more than static tombstones named for dead kings; they are actors who speak to their audiences with unrivaled power about the most pressing social, political, and cultural issues
of the moment. It seems likely, then, that there are opportunities for additional research into the disruptive nature of such memory places.
Works Cited


CHAPTER THREE: DEFINING FERRIS’S GREAT PLEASURE WHEEL: RHETORIC, SPECTACLE, AND CULTURAL POLITICS AT THE WORLD’S COLUMBIAN EXPOSITION

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ABSTRACT

This article explores the audience’s reception of George Ferris’s Great Pleasure Wheel at the 1893 Columbian Exposition in order to reflect on the politics of public spectacle. Noting that the exposition was articulated quite differently by different cultural groups, I explain how organizers of its “Amusement Zone” used the rhetoric of public spectacle to challenge the educational model imposed on the exposition, establishing a rhetorical text that was subjective and personal, and creating opportunities for public reflection and imagination.

Focusing on the disruptive qualities of public entertainment and public spectacle at the 1893 exposition rather than understanding the 1893 exposition as purely a vehicle for disseminating conventional mores can furnish complex points of view on the experience of audience members, and engaging with the ubiquitous public response in this way can strengthen the project of rhetorical analysis.
Introduction

At midday, May 1, 1893, President Cleveland pressed the "magic Electric Button" to ignite the great Allis Engine in Machinery Hall and officially open the World Columbian Exposition. The spark from Cleveland’s magic button caused a fair that had for months lain dormant to suddenly spring into animated existence, sending geysers of water to a height of more than seventy feet. The 25,000 spectators in attendance reported hearing a great “clatter of machinery” all across the fairgrounds, which caused the crowd to cheer in unison. Since the stunning London Great Exposition in 1851, world’s fairs have used public spectacle to dazzle spectators and to attract large crowds to the fairgrounds. These public spectacles often commemorate some historical events. The opening of the Columbian fair in Chicago, for example, was intended to coincide with the 400-year anniversary of Columbus's discovery of the new world. The ceremony was in fact one year late of its historic deadline; however, even with these delays, the colossal buildings and overall grandeur of the fair captured the public’s imagination and helped communicate the status of the United States as a rising economic force. As Cleveland’s opening address asserted, “We stand today in the presence of the oldest nations of the world and point to the great achievements we here exhibit, asking no allowance on the score of youth” (“Columbian Exposition” 14).

As inspirational as Cleveland’s words sounded to those in attendance, the country was far from universally in support of the historic day being celebrated by a sprawling Midwest city. East Coast newspapers, no doubt jealous that the honor was given to Chicago,
predicted a “cattle-show” in the “porkpolis” (Monroe 218). Compelled by an anxiety over Chicago’s provincial reputation, in addition to providing an answer to Paris’s Exposition Universelle, the organizers of the fair used a utopian White City to recast the image of their city as a flourishing civilization, reflecting the values and aesthetic of Western Europe. But worries over low attendance created a pressing need for something novel and exciting to generate public interest. Paris had three years earlier unveiled Eiffel’s colossal tower to the world. So the organizers would need to devise not only an argument for America’s sophistication but message that would match the novelty of Paris’s inventive and daring architectural experiment. As lead architect Daniel Burnham put it: Chicago needed something that would “out-Eiffel, Eiffel.”

The answer to Burnham’s pressing dilemma would come from a young American bridge builder named George Ferris. Ferris’s proposal promised to create a truly transformative experience: a great wheel that would transport fairgoers high above the dingy streets of Chicago, carrying over 2,000 passengers at a time some 300 feet in the air inside carriages the size of streetcars. The movement and speed of the Great Ferris Wheel contrasted the unchanging architectural ideals of Burnham’s neoclassical faux structures of plaster and wood. While the civilizing power of the White City communicated American Victorian sensibilities or “high culture,” George Ferris’s Great Pleasure Wheel embodied its opposite: the spectacle of exposed steel and steam engine technology.

One way to read the world’s fair, perhaps the one most easily adopted, is to see the exposition as a site of ideological domination, which manifests itself overarchingly in the visual repertoire of bourgeois representations of high culture. The growing literature on world expositions has focused on issues of representation, colonialism, and power. In this
analysis the ideological function of the exposition genre is to interpolate or inscribe audience into a conventional subject position. The role of expositions is to frame their subjects and define their social existence by assigning them a particular place in society. A good example of this kind of analysis is Robert Rydell’s discussion of the hegemonic function of the fair’s “symbolic universe.” The argument works well with the utopian artifacts that Rydell selects for his analysis; they are distinctly hierarchical and serve to legitimize racial dominance.

To study the first is to study the bourgeois imagination, the institutional mechanism used to reform and regulate public values. But rhetoric calls for a reading of these events that also assesses their reception and response. As a quintessential dialogical discipline, the reception is our obsession and a statement is only half completed by itself; it needs its rejoinder to have cultural meaning. The general point I wish to make is that the exposition, not unlike other forms of public entertainment, is not a monolithic site of symbolic interpolation into conventional mores. It is also a space of actual people and places, a site easily obscured by agendas and established frameworks. Therefore, to gain some sense of how fairgoers both experienced and challenged the rhetoric of the World’s Columbian Exposition, this article examines the popular and public response to the fair. In other words, it examines the public sphere and its articulated response.

To pursue this analytic agenda, I examine in detail both the Midway Plaisance and Ferris’s Pleasure Wheel as subversive spectacles seen through the eyes of actual fairgoers. The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines spectacle as a “specially prepared or arranged display of a more or less public nature (esp. one on a large scale) forming an impressive or interesting show for those viewing it” (“Spectacle”). Given this definition, it is not surprising that the idea of spectacle is essentially linked to theatricality and, more specifically, to
stagecraft. Discussions of spectacle are not uncommon in theater studies, and some of these scholars locate the root of spectacle in Aristotle’s notion of *opsis* as found in Book VI of the *Poetics* (see, e.g., Carlson; Walton; Pavis). This article will unpack *opsis* as a concept that roughly translates as spectacle, and Aristotle’s brief discussion of it yields insight into how it might be reframed as a useful concept in contemporary rhetorical theory.

In the following discussion I consider the concept of spectacle more closely, but I should affirm up front that Aristotle’s notion of *opsis* highlights one of the key claims that I develop. Spectacle, as a principle of stagecraft, may speak more loudly than plot, character, and script. Just as the backdrop for a theatrical dialogue can help to transport the audience, so a monumental rhetorical object can help to transport audience members to a place of wonder and, in the process, invite them to participate in redefining the rhetorical text.

These grand spectacles were transformative in that they did more than just represent reality; they ruptured reality and enabled spectators to exercise the psychic force of their imagination. That is to say, spectacles, like Ferris’s Pleasure Wheel, were integral to what Gaston Bachelard called the “function of the unreal”: the rhetorical process of breaking free and creating the new (31). According to Bachelard’s *Poetics of Space*, the real and the unreal, the actual and the imaginary coexist, and “the imagination is ceaselessly imagining and enriching itself with new images” (32). The function of the unreal is to unlock the individual’s capacity to participate in defining what is real. The imagination is a place in which the individual is able to access remote regions where “memory and imagination remain associated, each working for their mutual deepening” (5).
The “Amusement Zone”

At the World’s Columbian Exposition, the Amusement Zone (also called the Midway Plaisance) had numerous consequences on the fair’s reception. Like previous fairs, the Zone would bring a surge of working-class spectators and new understanding of the fair and its purpose. When the Amusement Zone for the Chicago fair was originally conceived by acclaimed Harvard anthropology professor Frederic W. Putman, it was intended to provide instruction on subjects such as ethnography and human development. The villages would give fairgoers a glimpse of Putnam’s “primitive societies,” a depiction that was no doubt in sharp contrast with the civilization narrative on display in the White City. Spectacles like Buffalo Bill Cody’s *Wild West Show* were summarily rejected from the Plaisance because they were not in keeping with its elevated tone. Thus, in its original inception the amusement zone would function to affirm the cultural message of the fair. But Putnam’s lack of showmanship and understanding of public interest forced fair officials to eventually hire a 27-year-old impresario named Sol Bloom.

Bloom’s approach was quite different from Putman’s and drew from his experiences at the famous Universelle in Paris where he learned to dramatize recent discoveries of indigenous cultures. Bloom used the dramatic to create exhibits that were more about character and display than archeological reality. Bloom states that he came to realize in the course of his preparations “that a tall, skinny chap from Arabia with a talent for swallowing swords expressed a culture which to me was on a higher plane than the one demonstrated by a group of earnest Swiss peasants who passed their day making cheese and milk chocolate” (qtd. in Patton 46). This departure from the ideals of Western Europe begins to communicate a very different rhetorical message than the one envisioned by Burnham and his associates.
The Amusement Zone in Chicago draws from and embellishes aspects of the Paris Amusement Zone and while it comes close to the Paris schema, it is not a direct reproduction: what made Chicago’s Amusement Zone different is that it existed separately from the rest of the exposition. It was a fair within a fair. Phil Patton describes this separation as a “motley set of entertainments encamped like Huns before Rome” (46). The whole of the fair occupied some 630 acres, but the Plaisance was only a strip of land running between 59th street and 60th street, extending west from Stony Island to Cottage Grove Avenue. The goal of this separation was to distance the noise and distractions of the Amusement Zone from the “public education” going on in the celebrated “Court of Honor” and other state buildings.

Organizers like G. Browne Goode and Wilbur Atwater highlighted the educational agenda of the fair—to guide humanity, to instruct the public in Victorian ideals. Goode, a Smithsonian official, explained the museum’s involvement: “Though the Museum undoubtedly loses much more than it gains on such occasions, the opportunity for popular education is too important to be neglected” (Rydell 7). Atwater, a politician from the Department of Agriculture, added this explanation: “The exposition should not be merely a show, a fair or a colossal shop, but also and pre-eminently an exposition of the principles which underlie our national and individual welfare, of our material, intellectual and moral status” (qtd. in Rydell 7). Both men argued for the fair’s role in elevating mankind, as a site of public education and an “exposition of principles.”

The Amusement Zone in many ways stood in stark contrast to the cultural tenets that Goode and Atwater exposed. In addition to Bloom’s menagerie of sword swallowers and fire-dancing pigmies, the Plaisance contained magic shows like “The Houdini Brothers,”
replicas of distant lands, giant amusement rides, an ostrich farm, Hagenbecks’ animal side show, and an assortment of exotic villages and displays. “A Street of Cairo” and Ferris’s Great Pleasure Wheel were among the most visited sites at the Plaisance. One of Bloom’s primary attractions on the “Street of Cairo” was the “Algerian Dancers of Morocco” (See Figure 1).

**Danse Du Ventre**

Introducing Americans to the provocative *danse du ventre* (dance of the belly), Bloom’s dancing spectacle both intrigued and outraged Victorian audiences, producing a moral backlash:

Fatima, the girl in blue, doesn’t prance up and down the stage, or go into mad gyrations, or try to kick a hole in the ceiling. She keeps time in timid little steps, and occasionally sidles about the stage in slow, gliding circles. It seems to be her pet ambition to disjoint herself at the hips, though a man in yesterday’s audience thought she was suffering from an overdose of green apples. At any rate, her anatomy below the waist and the knees performs a series of violent tremors, spasms and contortions. (“Poetry of Motion” 13)
A heavy footed and heavy featured girl, who takes a few short, labored steps, snaps her fingers and accomplishes a muscular contortion not unlike that of the Newfoundland when, after a swim, he shakes his shaggy coat, is, to our eyes, an absurd and ugly spectacle. (“La Danse du Ventre” 2)

When spectators returned with stories of Bloom’s danse du ventre, one of the first things that newspapers like The New York Herald did was to publish the reaction of those morally outraged: “It was downright indecent. I saw women go out after the creatures had begun what they call their dance. I did not stay it through. I just couldn’t” (“Anthony is Shocked” 10). A headline in Minnesota’s New Ulm Review read “ANTHONY WAS SHOCKED.” Anthony Comstock, a self-claimed moralist and censor, was a vocal critic of the dance, which he famously named the hoochie coochie. “To think of it,” said Comstock, “those young girls who were supposed to represent the essence of what is entertaining to some of those other southern countries—It is shocking! shocking!” Comstock believed that Bloom’s spectacle was a blemish on the magnificent fair. Echoing comments made by Goode and Atwater, Comstock said this of his experience watching the dance:

the fair is magnificent and I was greatly impressed with its marvelous beauties and educational capabilities. After seeing what I saw no man with a conscience, no one with any love for the young and the innocent, no one who desires that our children shall grow up pure and undefiled…can rest while that vile sink of sensuality is in existence. (“Anthony is Shocked” 1)

While attendance at the Plaisance actually increased as a result of Comstock’s review, for the fair officials, Comstock and other members of the Society for the Suppression of Vice
represented a significant problem. The reporter for the *New Ulm Review* said that a secret meeting was soon arranged between Comstock, several fair directors, and The Board of Lady Managers to address the issue. According to the article, the fair directors and the Lady Managers shared Comstock’s apprehension about the dance “and promised to purify the atmosphere of the Midway Plaisance” (“Anthony is Shocked” 2).

The fair’s committee for decorum and modesty (The Lady Managers) decided to launch a full investigation of Bloom’s public spectacle. Mr. Debbas, the dancer’s manager, was frustrated by what he described as the Lady Managers’ duplicity, making the following complaint to *The Philadelphia Inquirer*:

They go to the park and say my entertainment is vulgar. They say no good woman should countenance the dancing of my lovely girls. But they come again the next day and sit for hours in the best seats in my theatre and drink my coffee and applaud my dancers…

Then they go out, and when they get to the entrance of my theatre they put into their looks disgust and outraged modesty. (“Mr. Debbas and the Lady Managers” 4)

The dancers in Bloom’s show represented a stark contrast to the tightly corseted ladies of the Victorian age. For many, the *danse du ventre* was both morally reprehensible and slightly captivating. Michelle Harper explains that what fascinated Victorians most was

the joy and freedom that count its expression in belly dance, which is mostly improvisational—very unlike the formalized steps of most dancing of the time. The direct gaze and uninhibited happy smile of the dancer was something fresh, unexpected, and frankly scandalizing to a society where the rules of decorum and modesty for women were firmly established. (“Hoochie Coochie”)

Harper explains how some women appreciated the dancers but were afraid to state their enjoyment publicly. On the one hand, the public spectacle of *danse du ventre* provided a unique and celebratory movement, an opportunity to free the body from the material restrictions that hinder expression. But on the other hand, Victorian ideals were in direct contrast to the exposed midriff and belly-dancing rhythm of the hoochie coochie.

**Ferris’s Great Wheel**

Another star attraction of the Plaisance was of course George Ferris’ Great Pleasure Wheel. When Ferris first introduced his idea of a 250-foot tall observation wheel, Burnham responded with deep concern: “Your wheel is so flimsy it would collapse, and even if it didn’t, the public would be afraid to ride in it.” (“George Ferris’ Engineering Marvel” 47). Ferris argued that the wheel would not collapse and that he understood his own trade. Eventually, Burnham agreed to present the idea to the board of directors, who subsequently approved the daring design, most likely because of time constraints. The Ferris wheel then became one of the most visited and profitable elements of the fair. Of the 20 million fairgoers, 1.45 million of them paid an additional 50 cents (same as the fair’s admission price) to see Chicago from a height greater than that of the Statue of Liberty.
The first known American pleasure wheel is believed to have been built over 30 years earlier, for the New York State fair, by Samuel Hurst and James Mulholland. Hurst and Mulholland constructed a four-armed revolving amusement ride with wooden buckets, a device that would transport four adults into the air rotating them around a central axis. Another attraction built by a Frenchman, Antonio Maquino, is said to have used a large wheel that was about 40 feet in diameter patterned after mill wheels. According to an article in *The History of Atlanta and Its Pioneers*, “so far as the principle of this novel device for entertainment is concerned, as perfected in the Ferris Wheel, Atlanta is at least forty years ahead of Chicago” (qtd. in Anderson 25). But perhaps the most obvious model preceding...
Ferris’s invention was the Garden City Summer’s Observation Roundabout, built in 1891, on the boardwalk in Atlantic City. The ride bore the strongest resemblance to Ferris’s wheel; in fact, the Garden City Summer’s parent company sued Ferris for patent infringement. And yet, when you go to the fair you will ride a “Ferris wheel” and not a “Summer’s wheel.” So how did Ferris secure the cultural rights to such a lasting cultural icon?

The sheer size of Ferris’s Great Pleasure Wheel certainly helps explain its legacy as an amusement ride and a cultural icon. While pleasure wheels existed prior to Ferris’s invention, and millions of subsequent Ferris wheels populate almost every American fair, the boldness of Ferris’s design is unparalleled. The amount of steel in motion was close to 1,800 tons. It took two 1,000-horsepower steam engines to rotate the behemoth wheel around two 140-foot towers. The Ferris wheel transported passengers over 260 feet in the air and could carry 2,160 people at a time. At night, 3,000 light bulbs attached to steel framework dazzled fairgoers at every juncture of the fair. Judith Adams asserts that although electricity made its debut at the 1877 exposition, it was not accepted nor considered safe. The Columbian fair used the fun of the Ferris Wheel to introduce the benefits of this new technology. The Ferris wheel and the movable walkway were ways in which the public explored the spectacle of electricity. Ferris’s Great Pleasure Wheel caused a stir of amazement, then, not only for those who rode on it but also for all those who witnessed its incandescent luminosity.

The story behind the inception of the wheel and its design began in October 1890 at the Saturday Afternoon Club in Chicago, where Burnham is said to have rebuked a group of American civil engineers for their lack of creativity. After a few short introductory remarks, in which he praised his architect colleagues for their colossal buildings, Burnham turned his attention to the engineers in the room: “What’s wrong with you scientists? Haven’t you any
sense of the unique, of the off-beat on a grandiose scale? We must have something, anything, that will make a publicity splash all over the world” (“George Ferris Engineering Marvel” 47). Burnham’s message was clear: For the fair to be successful, it needed something to dazzle the spectators, something “off-beat” and “unique,” something spectacular. The fair’s ability to attract large crowds depended on its ability to communicate novelty and evoke wonder in the audience.

As Paul Greenhalgh comments in his study of world expositions, displaying scientific progress and technological advances had been a novelty during the first part of the century, but by the 1850s it had become so normal as to make the effort commonplace (41). Greenhalgh’s comment suggests, then, that fair organizers might feel pressed to satisfy the public’s immense appetite for the unexpected and unfamiliar. Burnham’s concerns were well justified. Some previous expositions had not supplied the necessary revenue to make the undertaking profitable. The 1873 Vienna exposition, for example, failed to draw sufficient crowds and as a result did not score well as a commercial investment.

Burnham’s speech at The Saturday Afternoon Club was cleverly contrived to solicit an immediate reaction. Ideas quickly emerged from the group, including a recommendation for building a tower that would be 500 feet higher than the Eiffel Tower. In fact, Eiffel himself had submitted a similar design, a larger version of his wrought-iron triumph at the Paris Expo. But mere bigness would not produce the novelty so crucial to the success of a public spectacle, so the committee quickly rejected the idea. Other ideas replaced it, however. Burnham needed something to compete not only with the size of Eiffel’s creation but with its originality and daring design, something that would satisfy the public’s curiosity.
A distinctive feature that could arouse excitement and wonder would be an important criterion for selecting the winning design.

Among the people in attendance that evening was a young engineer named George Ferris. Some popular accounts say that Ferris had written on the back of a napkin the original plans for a great observation wheel. So perfect was the sketch, said Ferris, that little was changed in the construction of the final design. The other engineers, perhaps jealous of Burnham’s selection, called the wheel “G.W.’s cockeyed dream.” Ferris would triumph over his critics, and the spectacle of his Great Pleasure Wheel, lauded by the press as a glorious triumph of American industry and skill, soon became one of the most prominent features of the fair.

Opsis

Before moving to my analysis, I want to affirm the role of the audience in such spectacles. To do so, I turn to Aristotle, who distinguishes spectacle, or *opsis*, from the other elements in a play (e.g., plot, character, script). But in doing so, he does not suggest that the concept is unimportant. He simply argues that, in relation to the other parts of a tragedy, it has the least to do with the poet. The poet must tell the story; he is not expected to design the set. In creating this distinction, Aristotle assigns *opsis* “an emotional attraction of its own” (64). That is, in recognizing that *opsis* is a concept independent of the poet, he also affirms that it effectively creates its own sort of appeal, or message. Unfortunately, Aristotle does not explicate this appeal because he is concerned with the poet and the plot, but by acknowledging the concept’s independence, he implies an invitation to consider more closely its role in moving the audience. Finally, Aristotle links the concept not to the actor, the
person seen, but to the “stage machinist,” the one behind the scenes, the invisible force that creates the landscape for social action (64). Whether he intends to or not, Aristotle indicates the remarkable power of *opsis* to invite the audience to participate and to view spectacle as a separate and distinct text.

Coincidentally, Michael Halloran makes a roughly similar distinction in his discussion of spectacle, which he defines as “a public gathering of people who have come to witness some event and are self-consciously present to each other as well as to whatever it is that has brought them together” (5). In witnessing the spectacle, the public sees itself differently. The observers (spectators) no longer exist as individuals but are part of a collective “reaction” to what is seen (6). Citing David Proctor, Halloran argues that spectacle occurs when “rhetors transform some event into enactment of their social order” (qtd. in Halloran 6). For Halloran, then, spectacle creates a body of rhetorical agents, a collective whose very presence alters the message of the text. “For every ‘Gettysburg Address’ or ‘I Have a Dream’,” Halloran claims, “there are hundreds of banal drones whose significance lies more in the fact and the circumstances of their delivery than in their texts” (15).

In supporting this claim, Halloran recalls a scene from *Forrest Gump* in which the simpleton hero finds himself behind a microphone before tens of thousands of angry war protestors at the Washington Mall. As he begins to speak, an anti protestor disables the sound system. By the time the sound returns, Gump is concluding his remarks, yet he is congratulated because, as one protestor tells him, “You said it all, man.” So, in this example, the power of spectacle lies not with the speaker but with the audience and their collective response to the rhetorical situation. The emotional moment of the scene speaks through
Gump’s visual presentation. The script is meaningless. Audience, in this view, is not a mere constituent or a nonessential subsidiary of spectacle; it is the spectacle.

**Audience Response to the Fair: A Personal View**

This discussion expands on Aristotle’s and Halloran’s respective treatments of spectacle by offering a useful complication. Although both Aristotle and Halloran argue that spectacle (and, more broadly, any rhetoric of visual space and design that has implications for the audience) exists within an extra textual space, it need not be tied teleologically to the given script or performance. Halloran even suggests that the spectacle may, for all the audience knows, run counter to the script. The spectacle may speak more loudly. Free to exist separately from the script, visual rhetoric, and spectacle specifically, can be used to reorient or supplant a given script, so that spectators can imagine new possibilities and articulate a new story being told.¹ That is, spectacle defined as empty theatrics is a pale reflection of a much more interesting and rich concept that includes the way in which the public expands the boundaries of the spectacle through their participation. But, one of the challenges of examining the audience’s role in expanding the script at the World’s Columbian Exposition is that those in attendance have all passed away, leaving only memories and written accounts of their experiences. I have recreated their stories here in the form of journal entries, interviews, and literary writing about the fair. These texts provide a glimpse of the fair experience from the point of view of those who witnessed it.

¹ This discussion of Opsis was originally submitted to Rhetoric Society Quarterly by authors Benjamin Crosby and Jonathan Balzotti
On August 10, 1893 *The Princeton Union* called the Ferris Wheel “a triumph of American Ingenuity.” Celebrating the wheel’s expression of modernity, the story portrays Ferris’s wheel as an example of “the idea of greatness” and “other characteristics of America” (“In Midway Plaisance” 1). It is only by first seeing the wheel—that is seeing the wheel on the Chicago skyline—that the White City is then made visible to each visitor who enters the gates. The wheel is not only an imposing figure on the skyline; it provides a vision from the ride itself, a view that creates important critical distance, separating fairgoers from an ordered labyrinth of towers and minarets in the celebrated Court of Honor and other administrative buildings. The view from the top of the wheel, reports *The Princeton Union*, is “a view never forgotten.” In either view, the wheel functioned as a disturbance through
which fairgoers reoriented themselves to the fair. The positionality allows fairgoers to reflect on the experience as a whole, what it means, how it relates to personal memory. Henry Adams rode the famous Ferris wheel “high above the milling crowds of the Midway Plaisance and delighted in the spectacle,…In the distance shimmered the pediments and domes of the White City.” The voice of “high culture” and Victorian America, Adams said the fair posed a provocative question for Americans to consider: “Chicago asked in 1893 for the first time the question whether the American people knew where they were driving” (Adams 343). Other voices provide further definition to the personal experience of fairgoers at the exposition in Chicago.

One of these voices, an ordinary visitor to the fair, gives a written account of her visit in a letter to her younger sister Bertha. The author of the letter, Annie Lynch, a 27-year-old, unmarried woman from the Philadelphia area, was described by her family as “a very bright” young woman. Annie’s account indicates how middle-class Victorians might have talked about their experience at the fair. A few observations about her letter follow.

Dear Bertha-

Does not this [stationary] look extremely official? I think I shall tell you about today before yesterday, it has been so pleasant. We started out about 8:30 for breakfast and then immediately entered the fair grounds…Was very agreeably surprised at the interest this awakens.

…all around the room were little tables to accommodate three persons where you were invited to sit down and have a cup of tea free of charge. We sat down and the
dignified Indian waiters in their cool, clean linen tunics and turbans brought us a quaint black tea pot full of tea after giving us a pretty china cup to drink from. We took our sandwiches and ate them and the whole was very enjoyable. I think I can hear C say- “She wouldn't drink tea at home.” This was exceptionally good and one half cream.

Figure 4: First page of Annie’s letter to Bertha

Annie says she was “surprised at the interest” this experience “awakens” in her. She tells her younger sister that the day ended with the group of women eating French pastries on the side

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1 For a more comprehensive analysis of Annie’s letter to her sister see Marvin Nathan’s essay “Visiting the World’s Columbian Exposition”
of the lake and watching fireworks. Describing her experience at the fair, Annie seems to radiate a sense of adventure, perhaps a bit of wonder—a reaction no doubt felt by others. Of course, those who visited the fair experienced some kind of awakening of the senses. The sheer size and novelty of the spectacle would be quite likely to stir their emotions and ignite their imaginations. But Annie’s first-hand account of her experience at the fair offers something else as well, a reaction that demonstrates participatory agency. In different parts of the letter, Annie provides her practical judgment about the different exhibits. Despite the grandiose intentions of fair organizers, she provides little reflection on the “ideal city” or on her own racial superiority. In fact, just the opposite is true. Annie’s account democratizes the spectacle and shows selectivity based on her tastes and personal interest: “I lay down on a big sleepy couch and dozed for an hour. Then I went up stairs after washing in the fine toilet. When we were put out we went on the lovely porch and sat in the wicker rockers until we felt like moving.” Her words clearly suggest that the fair allowed visitors the freedom to pursue their own ways of enjoying the fair without moralistic ruminations. Perhaps the “education” so important to the small number of fair organizers was far less important to the 21 million fairgoers such as Annie.

While there are other accounts like Annie’s that offer scholars a penetrating view of the fair, few deal explicitly with the Ferris wheel as a new modern experience. But one of these accounts, written by Andrew Burgess, provides an enlightening description of how fair spectators might have responded to the sensation provided by Ferris’s Great Pleasure Wheel:

This revolving a circle through the air up to 260 feet is a new sensation. It combines the gliding motion of the R.R. train and the upward jerk of an elevator. But does not
take away ones breath. There is nothing to cause a creepy sensation except when the
car swings at the top in the down trip. Except for this cradle motion it is easy riding
and the only fright comes from looking and noticing how far away the ground is and
how small things look. We had a splendid view of the surrounding scenery....Some
people get nauseous on the first trip, but generally enjoy the ride and wonder at the
panorama which can be enjoyed from the Ferris Wheel.

The perceived danger associated with riding such a large and unproven amusement ride is
evident in Burgess’s account. He tells his readers that the “nauseous” or “creepy sensation”
one might expect is actually not felt by most riders and that the only issue regarding the
sensation of riding the wheel is a kind of “cradle motion” experienced on the downward
plunge.

To help his readers understand the sensation of riding 260 feet into the atmosphere,
Burgess draws from his modern-life experiences, his memories of riding the train and being
lifted in the elevator. These personal memories serve not only as means by which Burgess
recounts his experience for others but as important examples through which he makes sense
of the experience for himself. To say this another way, Burgess must draw from his own
experiences and use his imagination in order to articulate those experiences that have not yet
been defined for him. The “gliding motion of the R.R. train” and the “upward jerk” of the
elevator are no doubt familiar sensations. Through his imaginative prose, Burgess creates a
bond between writer and reader, a bond perhaps formed by other fairgoers in conversations
inside and outside the fairgrounds. These shared experiences and memories, drawn from
modern life, work to define the Ferris spectacle and thus help to define its cultural
significance. It would have been difficult, if not impossible, for Ferris and other fair organizers to anticipate what package of personal memories that Annie or Burgess would draw on to explain their experience of the fair. And as such, both Annie and Burgess help to construct public interpretation of the Ferris spectacle.

The individual accounts all help to contest the educational message of the fair. The larger cultural agenda of perfecting the masses is nowhere evident in either Burgess’s or Annie’s account. Both writers use familiarities drawn from personal experience to describe what is unfamiliar and new. Through their participation, these fairgoers work to redefine the public spectacle of the Columbian exposition—to complete the rhetorical text—and in so doing, create an altogether different spectacle. The audience’s experience in the case of Ferris’s wheel speaks more loudly than—or at least independently of—the script. My goal here has been to reveal how the material object speaks in light of, and in spite of, the political scripts from which it emerged. As Blair and Michel point out, “sometimes what appears to be the rhetorical text is not the rhetorical text, but an altogether different one.” And “what counts as the text is open to question” (38, 39).

Conclusion

Public entertainment, even in the case of a large state-run exposition, is rarely (if ever) so one dimensional as to enable only one reading of, or point of view on, its subject matter. Great exhibitions can give visual expression to the political ambitions of the nation-state. They symbolize national prestige: helping the host nation to further an imperialist agenda based on global expansion. But unlike other symbols of national pride, such as monuments and memorials, the great exhibitions of the 19th century were temporary
expressions, lasting only brief moments. I have argued that expositions can provide as many options for creating meaning in a participatory sense as they can for experiencing public education in a normative sense. I have focused on the concept of spectacle to demonstrate that public entertainment contains several subject positionings. I am able to discuss these positionings precisely because Ferris’s Great Pleasure Wheel makes them available for reflection and interpretation.

Ferris intended for his idea to promote a national education agenda, to elevate mankind. But his contribution did not find its way into many educational venues. Rather, Ferris’s contribution to society is located mostly in America’s fairgrounds and amusement parks. So, although Ferris hoped his wheel would be remembered as Ferris’s Observation Wheel, it is now more commonly referred to as a symbol of public entertainment, or a pleasure wheel. Thus, not only is the spectacle of the Ferris wheel created for a particular purpose, but it is also reformed and redefined by the participants’ responses, whether personal or public.

Public entertainment, I contend, is inherently a participatory space, replete with alternative interpretations and audience involvement. Working within this participatory space in rhetorical scholarship can enrich our understanding of the public’s role in articulating perceptions of culture and the idealistic quest for our imaginary community. The World’s Columbian Exposition as a case study enables rhetorical scholars to explore a powerful moment of cultural transformation in the 19th century through the spectacle of new technologies and dazzling displays of human achievement. The exposition introduces the audience to possibilities of an undefined future. It is precisely this capacity of rhetorical
objects to rupture the status quo that can account for their central role in helping to create a transformative moment for those present.

From this perspective, spectators are never wholly imposed upon by a singular message, and in the example of Bloom’s Midway Plaisance, spectacle offers opportunities to resist the imposition of Victorian ideals. In the case of Burnham’s White City, the educational model was precisely the mechanism through which fair organizers tried to impose a singular vision of American ideals. Instead, rearticulating the display of exotic cultures and creating colossal edifices of public entertainment the public spectacle of the Plaisance enabled fairgoers to fashion interpretations of their own making. Burnham’s White City might have imposed a bourgeois imagination on fairgoers, but through the disruptive qualities of Bloom’s spectacle, the Midway Plaisance also provided fairgoers the opportunity to construct a public memory of the fair.
Works Cited


CHAPTER FOUR: REPRESENTING IKE: SPECTACLE, MEMORY, AND THE RHETORIC OF CONTEMPORARY MEMORIALS

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ABSTRACT

This essay develops a reading of Frank Gehry’s proposed Eisenhower memorial to interrogate and discuss how some contemporary memorials use rhetorical staging to create what Della Polloch calls the pseudo-modern texts, a text that creates opportunities for socially constructed meaning, encouraging audience participation and reflection. As a pseudo-modernist text, Gehry’s proposed design does more than “critique” the practice of memorialization. It combines a strategy I call “narrative collage” with bigness to captivate and then invite spectators to organize the different elements of the composition, forming their own memory of Eisenhower. I wish to argue that contemporary monument design, as demonstrated by Gehry, has the potential to break from conventional memorial practices in ways that encourage audience members to begin constructing a more self-directed and democratic public memory.

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i Sole researcher and author.
...theorizing memory was a crucial tool for determining the ‘objective’ or ‘subjective’ status of personal and cultural knowledge as well how human desires and beliefs emerge or are installed within humans.

-Jeff Pruchnic

Introduction

On March 25, 2010, the federal Eisenhower Memorial Commission awarded architect Frank Gehry the opportunity to memorialize America’s most popular WWII hero, Dwight D. Eisenhower. But the controversial design has provoked harsh criticism from the Eisenhower family and from Republican lawmakers. Senator Rob Bishop from Utah proposed a bill to eliminate congressional funding for the Gehry design: “Our goal should be to do what is right by President Eisenhower and to do it the right way” (“Criticism Barrage” 1). Congress told the Memorial Commission that they would block any construction of the memorial until the commission could show they have adequately worked “with all constituencies—including Congress and the Eisenhower family—as partners in the planning and design process.” Bruce Cole, a member of the Memorial Commission, has stated publicly that the Gehry design is currently “on life support” (“Criticism Barrage” 2).

Controversies surrounding the memorial’s design have escalated since 2012, turning into a cultural debate about post-modernism versus traditionalism; the purpose of memorials in the 21st century; and the general aesthetics of the D.C. National Mall. Susan Eisenhower, the granddaughter of Ike, has come to symbolize her family’s strong objection to the Gehry design. At a Senate subcommittee meeting in 2013, Ms. Eisenhower denounced Gehry’s
design as too “grandiose” and not keeping with the nation’s memory of her grandfather (“Interview with Susan Eisenhower”). In her speech to the subcommittee she compares the giant metal tapestries of Gehry’s design to the metal fences of Adolf Hitler’s death camps and the colossal limestone columns to Soviet missile silos. Her intent is made clear by the references to Nazi Germany. Ms. Eisenhower, and most of the Eisenhower family, have requested a formal review of the Commission’s use of public funds and a complete redesign of the memorial.

Incendiary as Susan’s portrayal may have been, the comparison between Gehry’s Big Rhetoric design and Hitler’s death camps is ineffectual. Quite the opposite is true. Gehry’s design might draw from western traditions of grandiosity to garner a strong emotional reaction, but the method by which Gehry uses Big Rhetoric ensures that neither author nor memorial defines the public memory of Eisenhower. Rather, Gehry uses a narrative collage—a term I will define below—to invite audience participation, to bid the viewer to fashion for themselves a memory of Ike of their own making.

The memorial is planned to be built on a four-acre plot south of Independence Avenue. The primary elements of the memorial include 13 80-foot tall limestone columns, oak trees, a series of monolithic stone blocks, a stature of Eisenhower as a young boy, and two rows of perforated metal screens (also referred in this essay as metal tapestries). The towering columns support the metal screens, images of Abilene printed across the surface like a black and white film.

My method for mining Gehry’s design for this new approach to memorialization is circumspective and limited, given the memorial is still in the design phase. But my analysis is influenced by a fusion of scholars working to understand public memory; more precisely
said, my method is derived primarily from what many rhetorical scholars have contributed to our understanding of public memory and its relationship to the built environment. While each of these scholars shares a common understanding of public memory, with the rhetorical practices that entails, they each contribute a unique element to my interpretive pool.

Art historian Rudolf Fuchs addresses what he calls the “collective dream” of memorials, a dream that “is never just an absolutist gesture by a ruling class towards its subjects. It also reflects how a people or a community wishes to see itself – a collective dream on a national fulfillment and honour” (97). Fuchs’ “collective dream” places the text and audience in an interactive dialogue. The audience desires a positive national-self image, and the memorials must communicate that positive self-image, or risk being considered obsolete by the community. Therefore, a memorial’s ability to speak to the community requires some attention to those things the community deems important. Stephen Browne notes how public memory must account for the social “aspiration” of the public and explains that the most important function of the monument or memorial is to “fix collective identity in the present.” It does so by distributing and in some cases repurposing symbolic resources (201).

Memorials, like monuments, are symbolic resources rooted in the past and define ways in which particular people and events intersect with broader configurations of culture and politics. Browne argues these public memory texts are “fashioned from the symbolic resources of community and subject to its particular history, hierarchies, and aspirations” (248). In a similar vein, Clifford Geertz argues that humans need these symbolic “sources of illumination” to find their place in the community (45). Monuments, memorials, and public art are all good examples of memory devices, using particular symbolic approaches to
“fashion” public memory. The craft of making public memory, then, is a rhetorical one. It ties particular political aspirations to material, symbolic expressions. Shared memory, or public memory, requires affective expressions that join political power with the more finite material world. Together, the memory and material structure become Geertz’s source of “illumination,” directing people towards ideologies and forming links between institutions and people. As many memory scholars have noted, public texts such as these often benefit some groups and not others.

One problem with these memorial practices is that they are organized by a single storyteller, a history-telling approach that promotes a particular vision for a particular institution. Maurice Halbwachs maintains that symbolic resources, distributed by social institutions, construct a particular collective memory and thus highlight an institutionalizing process of collective identification. The problem with this approach is that memory and forgetting are co-constitutive processes: each is essential for the other’s existence. Therefore, rhetorical scholars should be aware that when collective memories are drawn from “symbolic resources” they require some process of excluding individual, lived experience. The memorial, in this case, becomes a tool for selectivity and partiality. For rhetoricians, this focus on public memory has led some to ask why some events are being remembered and why others are being forgotten.

Fuchs’ framework concerns itself with the desires of the whole community, a national dream waiting to be realized in material form. Browne’s use of public memory contributes the idea that memorials are tied to the communities that operate around them, a point Halbwachs advances by examining the ways certain social institutions help communities to disregard individual lived experiences. Out of these three main ideas on memorialization
comes the most useful way of critically examining Gehry’s design and its potential for a more democratic history-telling approach.

**Gehry’s Design**

Representations of Eisenhower often portray him as the stalwart general or heroic leader of Allied forces, as seen in Figure 1. The statue at West Point, one of the most recognizable depictions of the famous general, stands perched atop a pedestal of red granite. For this project the artist Donald Delue used one of Eisenhower’s actual uniforms supplied by Eisenhower’s son to cast the mold for the bronze statue. The role of the public monument in defining the general-president’s legacy is a subject that has been considered central in the debate between the traditionalists and modernists. The memory of Eisenhower is not simply a memory of an individual whose life and history had some relevance at a particular time. Eisenhower was one of the most popular presidents the United States has ever elected. As historian Garry Wills explained, “…he remained, year after year, the most respected man in America” (118).

Returning from Germany laden with decorations and medals, Eisenhower is said to have told his fellow countrymen, “The proudest thing I can claim is that I am from Abilene”
(“Homecoming Speech”). Eisenhower’s immense popularity lay in his background and his pride in 19th century agricultural America. Growing up in an undistinguished Midwest town, the son of a pacifist, Eisenhower exemplified the homespun virtues many Americans idealized. The statue of Eisenhower as a young boy sits inside an enclosure surrounded by images of his hometown Abilene, Kansas. The statue of the young Eisenhower was inspired, says Gehry, by a childhood photograph of the President and by a homecoming speech in which Eisenhower recalls his days as a “barefoot boy in Kansas.” Critics of the Gehry design deride the boy-statue as misrepresenting the leadership and authority of the great president-general.

Figure 2. The proposed Eisenhower monument seen from the DOE building
One of the most prominent features of the Gehry design is the trees that dominate the memory landscape. The trees obscure other elements within the memorial, forcing spectators to explore the memorial one section at a time. The placement of green elements creates a contrast between Gehry’s design and the Mall. Thus, the significance of the park, and its connotations, complicate the traditional memorial, adding associations of unbridled nature, or, quite simply, the wilderness as our past. Nature blocks the viewer’s ability to organize the memory landscape and in so doing contrasts the ordered concrete buildings that populate the D.C. Mall.

In the material sense, the Gehry design, as a symbol, can both represent the idea of Eisenhower and, because it is a park (a green space), an experiential function to be used as a place of rest and relaxation. However, as Geoffrey Broadbent explains, “architecture is not
only the signifier of some abstract meaning, but is itself the signified of some pervading philosophy” (387). Moving from signifier to signified the memorial becomes more than a representation of Ike, it becomes a new opportunity to craft a public memory of Ike. But the memory of the general-president is vague and somewhat obscure, it resists our desire to fix a particular image of Eisenhower in our minds; even the relationship between the different elements of the composition is unclear. The invitation therefore is to explore the relationship between these three separate moments in history, starting with the question posed by the “barefoot boy from Kansas.” What experiences caused this small boy to rise to the highest office in the United States? Gehry talks about how the photo of the young president camping along the Smoky Hill River in 1904 was inspiration for the memorial’s design as a whole (See appendix A).

Surrounding the park and the boy are the large metal woven tapestries that dominate the composition. As mentioned above, the tapestries depict Abilene, Kansas, and the Midwest landscape. In depictions of Gehry’s design above, the transparency of the tapestries allows the buildings behind to permeate the viewer’s experience. The contrasting elements of steel + holes separately indicate their use, and taken together communicate a past connected to a material present. The use of these elements in the memorial calls for a process of remembering that is always located in the present, always situated alongside the institutions that work to govern our memory of the past. The Gehry design exposes Browne’s point that these representations are always connected to cultural institutions of power. While the steel tapestries appear to critique public memory, they also celebrate an agrarian past, depicting a Midwest farmhouse on the fertile prairie, giving the whole monument an epideictic feel rather than ironic. And so Gerhy’s design both critiques and celebrates an American past.
The cinematic feel to the tapestries also suggests a process of remembering influenced by modern technologies. Eisenhower’s boyhood memories are broken at intervals by the columns, each image is cast as a scene in a larger cinematic real. The tapestries invite the question of how future presidents might experience the past with the digital tools of the present? How might our own memories of the past be constructed and displayed by the tools we use to tell stories in the present? The alphabetic elements of the memorial are situated behind the visual elements—the boy sculpture, relief of present Eisenhower, the relief of general Eisenhower—all provide a visual triptych of meaning.

Figure 4. Eisenhower triptych

Figure 5. Design concept
The triptych was predominantly used in the Middle Ages to display multi-panel works of art in Catholic churches. The works could be folded easily and then relocated when necessary. In the Eisenhower monument, the spectator is invited to explore the relationship of the three visual items as they relate to the ideas situated behind them in the written text. Once again, the audience is challenged not to fix a particular image of Eisenhower but to begin a process of piecing together different moments of the subject’s life and in so doing to create a self-directed memory of Eisenhower.

The invitation for the spectator to draw connections is repeated throughout the monument and becomes a central motif of the Gehry design. By locating Eisenhower’s speeches behind the triptych, the audience is invited to contemplate the relationship between language and memory, between image and sound. The open front of the monument faces the capital building, highlighting a political process that continues even while the spectator tries to make sense of the past. A final question emerges: how has the political process in Washington been changed because of Eisenhower’s experiences, his words, and his actions?

The monument resists answering these questions and instead invites the viewer to experience the juxtapositioning of those ideas and make their own determinations within the distributed design. In contrast to the image of Eisenhower at West point, the standing general, Gehry’s dynamic design has no central figure, no heroic image to stabilize the public’s memory of Eisenhower. The dynamic design uses instead the tree filled square bordered by columns to provide the spectator an opportunity to both experience the past and construct a self-directed memory of the dead president. Nowhere in the memorial is there a single point of emphasis. The columns and tapestries use their impressive height to surround the sculptures, but once inside the viewer sees mostly the trees, an element of the
composition that helps to obscure both column and tapestry. The rewards of experiencing the Eisenhower memorial might be increased further if the audience enters that space having done some research, bringing along stories and visions of the general-president that help contextualize the memorial.

The contrast to other monuments is a form of disturbance, a disconnection from the language-system of the Mall, a new architectural aesthetic that stands apart from the ordered, concrete space of the Mall. The Gehry design operates independent of its context, and yet merges with the Mall as a new symbolic system. Its walls are permeated with the buildings that communicate government and bureaucracy.

The Post-Post Modern Memorial

Nations and their leaders are often memorialized for two reasons: first, to celebrate by artifice the actions of a national figure; and second, to establish through symbols the state’s political power. But a historical legacy of this sort is less bounded by state-sponsored propaganda than might first appear. A person’s life is a momentary event in history, limited in time and space, and as time passes the public’s memory of that person becomes fuzzy, as pressing concerns govern our attention and leave little room for remembering the distant past. Thus for presidents to be more than dead statesmen, their memory must be presented to the public in some material form; they must hang on the walls of elementary school classrooms; they must stand as statues in public parks; a tenuous link must be forged between the memory of the statesman and a symbolic, material manifestation.

At the heart of this link is the rhetorical text, a text that promotes psychological and mental coherence, or group identification, and unlike other architectural designs that may
serve to reinforce culture but lack the persuasive power to actively shape it, monuments and memorials are persuasive agents that actively shape the conversation. Otherwise put, they actively work to affirm beliefs about the institutions they come to represent. Chaim Perelman’s definition of epideictic discourse helps reveal the memorial’s rhetorical nature:

The speaker engaged in epideictic discourse is very close to being an educator. Since what he is going to say does not arouse controversy, since no immediate practical interest is ever involved, and there is no question of attacking or defending, but simply of promoting values that are shared in the community . . .” (52).

If we may call the discourse of memorials and monuments epideictic, then we can surmise that for these rhetorical texts to shape group identification they must promote shared values while not arousing too much controversy.

The primary difference between monuments and memorials is their subject matter. The monument is typically used to honor a particular individual or to celebrate what one group deems a significant event. The Arc de Triumph stands in the Place Charles de Gaulle to celebrate the French revolutionary and Napoleonic wars. However, memorials often remind their audiences of loss—for example the World Trade Center memorial or the Titanic Wreckage memorial. Interestingly, the Eisenhower text is called a memorial, not a monument, leading to speculation about its intention as a public text. The implications of this naming are significant and help express the rhetorical goals of Gerhy and the committee.

In the case of traditional monuments and memorials, rhetorical criticism has been deployed for the purpose of uncovering hegemonic practices to address the hidden message located within the text and how that message constrains the spectator’s capacity to use personal judgment to recall images of the past in the present. In the case of Diocletian’s
column, I argued the monument could be used to align disparate groups with a larger, dominant hegemonic power. But if the goal is to maintain a critical mode of being, rather than a representational one, a new breed of memory text is needed, one that employs a system of references that use a range of rhetorical strategies to place the past in the present but that also resists stabilizing a particular version of the past. One aim of this paper, then, is to explore the ways in which the Gehry design accomplishes some of these objectives.

The post-modern text, in contrast to its more traditional counterparts, challenges notions of stability by dismantling known symbolic referents. These texts appear to use both cognitive and sensory experience to loosen the anchor of the signifier and signified and create what post-modern theorist’s call the “floating signifier, a signifier that does not point to a particular object or agreed upon meaning.” James Young in his book, *Memory’s Edge*, recommends, as many other post-modern theorists have, that alternative practices of commemorating be explored for their ability to resist static interpretations that lead to hegemonic practices.

Barbara Biesecker, Carole Blair Bodnar, J. Bodnar, and Greg Dickinson have all written extensively on how many American memorials serve to construct a national narrative of the past. Many of these scholars have worked to expose our problematic relationship with the past and in some cases (for an example see Blair’s essay on Maya Lin’s Vietnam memorial) argue for counter-rhetorical-strategies that work to escape the problems of hegemony. Young calls these commemorative practices “counter-monuments,” and Anne Daly uses the term “anti-monuments,” because the artifact explicitly attacks known cultural symbols that promote singularity and perpetuate cultural dominance. These anti-monuments and memorials use persuasive means to generate a “critical moment” for the audience, a
moment of reflection and critique. But the post-modern text often works in absence rather than subsistence, which is to say they remove the political cultural symbols and replace them with abstract ones. This absence can provide a critical moment for the individual but can also strip monuments and memorials of their rhetorical potential to create community coherence.

Commemorative practices, like the artifact I’ve included for this analysis, point to something more than a moment of critique. These post-post-modern texts, or as Della Polloch calls them pseudo-modern texts, create an opportunity for socially constructed meaning that promotes group participation and interactivity rather than individual criticism; they use symbolic referents located within the culture (without irony) to generate a political power for the collective. In my analysis of Eisenhower’s design I suggest that the pseudo-modernistic text, the post-post modern text, moves beyond the critical reflective moment, beyond deconstruction, and begins a process of reconstruction.

Gehry’s Eisenhower design represents a unique bifurcation of the two extremes of modernism and post-modernism. While the Eisenhower memorial design utilizes many of the rhetorical practices of the modern memorial—grandiosity, permanence, spectacle—Eisenhower’s memorial locates those strategies in a narrative collage of cultural objects that invite spectators to join in the process of constructing public memory. I define the narrative collage as an assemblage of compositions elements that like their post-modern ancestors resist agreed upon referent. The collage approach allows for an interactive text, a rizomatic structure, with no identifiable central axis to fix meaning. Instead, the elements of the collage are distributed almost at random to allow the audience to participate in constructing their memory of the person or event. To attempt a standard unified reading of the collage is to miss the point. The text offers a multitude of readings, sometimes even conflicting readings.
By inviting the audience to author their own experience with the collage, authorial intention becomes negligible. More is required of the audience in the Gehry design if the audience is to make sense of the symbols within the collage. However, the memory of the past can still be somewhat redemptive or inspiration in this approach.

The traditional monument, in contrast, is designed to fix a narrative of the past for future generations. Such psychological and mental coherence, or group identification, is not a result of a particular persuasive rhetorical agent but is instead intentionally promoted by the community or seat of government for a particular purpose. Non monuments, in contrast, challenge notions of stability by dismantling known symbolic referents (as discussed above). In my analysis of different memorials and monuments I suggest the pseudo-modernistic text, Gehry’s narrative collage, moves beyond the critical reflective moment, beyond de-construction, and begins a process of re-construction.

The use of different cultural references celebrates the audience’s role in creating the memory of the historical figure, and the design democratizes the process of history-telling (Figure 6).
The range of signs we can manage, says Geertz, defines the “intellectual, emotional, and moral space within which we live” (77). If meaning is made socially, which is to say that meaning in the form of interpretable signs is constructed by communities of discourse through things like monuments and memorials, then the problems with our memory of the past surfaces, in part, because of our limited range of communicative signs, restricting our ability to imagine other worldviews. By rearticulating the memory texts at the D.C. Mall, these habits of remembering are challenged: the design distributes images, speeches, and statues in an assemblage of seemingly random places, separated by greenery and jagged walkways. The participation of the community is required to make sense of the parts and how they relate to the whole. At the heart of Gehry’s design is the distribution of different elements in what can only be described as an assemblage of independent parts.
Public Response

In a recent interview by “Focus Washington,” Susan Eisenhower explained why her family opposed the monument. She believed the monument failed to capture “the memory of her grandfather.” The monument does not depict a man who “liberated Europe” or “freed Europe from tyranny,” says Ms. Eisenhower. Instead it depicts a “barefoot-boy from Abilene, Kansas” (“Interview with Susan Eisenhower”). Ms. Eisenhower’s comments highlight her personal memories of her grandfather, memories of heroic battles, and of a conservative president and not of a poor boy living in an unremarkable midwestern town.

In support of Congressman Bishop’s “Memorial Completion Act,” Susan and her family testified before Congress on March 19th, 2013. At the beginning of her testimony, she argues a separation must be made between Gehry’s proposed design and the memorial project:

Mr. Chairman, Members of the Committee,

…From the moment the current design was adopted, some members of the Commission and the staff were determined to link the proposed Frank Gehry design to the very future of the memorial itself. This is unprecedented in the history of presidential memorials. This rigidity has damaged the effort to build a memorial. The approach has made adversaries out of stakeholders and alienated even the greatest supporters of this process.

Ms. Eisenhower’s first complaint is the “unprecedented” approach of the Memorial Commission: they have unfairly linked the winning design of the memorial competition, the Gehry’s design, to the memorial project itself. This decision has alienated “stakeholders” who saw the Gehry design as too “post-modern.” It is not clear who the “stakeholders” are to which Ms. Eisenhower refers, but given her testimony, we can assume she is chosen to speak on their behalf. Ms. Eisenhower uses the term “significant stakeholders” throughout her
testimony and says that this group deems the Gehry design “regretfully, unworkable.” The primary complaint of the stakeholder group, according to Ms. Eisenhower, is that “the design is flawed in concept.” She goes on to explain how: the design is “overreaching in scale” and the “durability” of the “metal scrims (metal tapestries) is questionable.” She continues her attack by questioning the Commission’s prudence: “despite all this, the Commission’s approach is to plow ahead with a design that has virtually no support outside of a percentage of the architectural community—which has understandably rallied more in defense of architect Frank Gehry than for the specific memorial design itself.”

In addition to Susan Eisenhower’s testimony before Congress, the subcommittee also received criticism made by independent, traditional architects who claimed the Gehry’s design has a post-modern feel that “so often characterizes Gehry’s work.” The National Civic Art Society (NCAS), a non-profit organization dedicated to the restoration of the classical tradition “to its rightful primacy in our nation’s capital,” has devoted considerable resources in opposing the Gehry’s design. The group denounced the design’s “avant-garde” feel, and in a 154-page report criticizes Gehry for his associations with Jazz musician Robert Wilson and sculpture Charles Ray. Wilson was deprecated in the report for “tampering with Shakespere’s Hamlet” and Charles Ray, according to the report, for “sexualizing children” (Kennicott, “Opposition”). Raul M. Grijalva, one of the Democratic members of the subcommittee, responded to the culture war waged by both Ms. Eisenhower and the NCAS by stating that he did not think the subcommittee, or “the full committee, or Congress is the appropriate place to litigate a memorial design or a potential family dispute.” The senator’s comments attempt to distance the process of building memorials from public discussion and criticism. The
report issued by the NCAS has since been used by a number of conservative columnists and critics to denounce the Gehry design (Kennicott, “Opposition”).

Ms. Eisenhower’s criticism of the design in many ways is accurate; the spectacle of the monument is used to diminish the central figure in favor of a much larger but less certain idea. Eisenhower’s complaints highlight some of the key differences between the Gehry design and previous Eisenhower memory texts. Although the memorial contains a large sans relief of the general speaking with troops in Europe, the relief and the rest of the memorial do not appear to communicate the primacy of Eisenhower. Ms. Eisenhower claims the size and spectacle of the 80-foot tall metal tapestries dwarf the image of her grandfather, and in so doing render him small and insignificant. At the end of the interview, Ms. Eisenhower said she would prefer something “simple” and “welcoming.” When asked by the interviewer what her design might look like, she replied: it would look like “freedom,” and ended the interview by saying her grandfather was about “freedom.” Many commenters on the Washington Post website responded to Ms. Eisenhower’s interview. Most of the comments agreed the Gehry’s design was “overstated” and “grandiose.” Jfschumaker wrote:

Eisenhower was a modest, conventional man, and he needs a modest, conventional monument, like the tasteful and restrained monument to him in London. Socialist Realist tableaus have no place in Washington, and are entirely inappropriate to mark the life of this great American.

Jfschumaker’s complaint points to a particular memory of Eisenhower, a memory not communicated by the “Socialist Realist tableaus” in the Gehry proposal. The post by Jfschumaker is interesting for two reasons: first, it argues for the correct memory of Eisenhower, one reducible to certain abstract characteristics that represent what are important to the poster and thus important to the larger community. Second, it says these ideals are
nowhere in the Gehry design. The design is characterized by both Ms. Eisenhower and the poster as “grandiose” and “unrestrained.” ConventiGlenB27 agreed with Jfschumaker and says that “our best memorials are small, or understated neo-Classical Greek and Roman Republic.” Both posters argue for a corrective aesthetic, one that stays true to what it means to be American. The correct view is a “neo-Classical Greek and Roman Republic.” It might be hard to see Rome as an “understated” aesthetic, but the post nevertheless advocates for a more conservative design for the president.

Fuchs’ point about the “collective dream” can be seen within these commentator’s response to Ms. Eisenhower. The monument proposed by Gehry does not promote their singular vision of Eisenhower imagined by a particular political party. In fact, it works actively to resist a simple interpretation of Eisenhower. And instead, it presupposes that the audience negotiates an interpretation of their own, perhaps one they did not anticipate having. The comments on the Washington Post website criticize the Gehry design for not providing a simple representation. MayHem1 wrote that Gehry’s design is an example of the “emperor’s new clothes” (Kennicott, “Opposition”). Very few of the responses disagreed with Ms. Eisenhower, but a few asked for restraint as some comments became aggressively personal towards Gehry. The three posts I’ve highlighted were voted the top comments by other bloggers and reflect the call for a “simple,” more “traditional” rendering of Eisenhower.
Conclusion

To approach the memorial requires identifying useful rhetorical theory that can provide an instructional account of the memorial’s unique method for delivering content to the audience. Thus this test and assessment of public memory does not only provide analyses for the Gehry design, but can be used when other pseudo-modernist texts are examined for their ability to redefine traditional memory practices. I posit that these objects are actors situated in exigencies that motivate both what is spoken and what is heard. There are, therefore, many possibilities of employing rhetoric as a heuristic to render contemporary memorial practices as dynamic messages with surrounding circumstances.

Interestingly, but not surprising, the public has reacted to the Gehry design along political lines. In this way the memorial becomes a contested site where political groups wage their cultural war for control over the national identity. But my argument questions the Gehry design as a symbol of post-modernism. If we can say that the principle purpose of the Gehry design is to encourage the imagination of spectators as well as display the cultural symbols we use to reference Eisenhower, the memorial can be effectively approached as a rhetorical artifact with persuasive intentions and identifiable discursive strategies that work to both critique and to construct a public memory of Eisenhower. Frank Gehry’s proposed Eisenhower memorial uses public spectacle but distributes that spectacle within a narrative collage that invites audience members to actively participate, both as members of a collective and as individuals, in constructing a shared memory of the memorial’s subject.

The task of Gehry’s design does not appear to restrict meaning—as some have argued—but for the individual who is trapped in a web of semiotic ethnocentrism to somehow imagine difference, or imagine a way of seeing the world that is always in process.
Contemporary memorials like Gehry’s might offer a place to confront the past, to inhabit a space of knowing, and still play with meaning.
Works Cited


Appendix A

Dwight D. Eisenhower (Center) With Friends, 17 Years Old, 1907
Appendix B

Mr. Chairman, Members of the Committee,

I wish to express our thanks to Chairman Bishop and the Committee for the opportunity to testify today. I would also like to echo the appreciation we have for everyone—Congress, the Eisenhower Memorial Commission, and architect Frank Gehry—for their commitment to a memorial to Dwight D. Eisenhower in Washington, D.C.

My sister, Anne, is with us from New York. On behalf of the Eisenhower family, we are grateful to Chairman Bishop for introducing a bill to sustain the momentum on the building of an Eisenhower Memorial in Washington, D.C.

On hearing the news of this bill, Eisenhower Memorial Commission Chairman Rocco Siciliano said in an email reported in the press: “I am saddened by Congressman Bishop’s attempt to thwart the memorialization of one of America’s greatest generals and presidents, Dwight D. Eisenhower.”

My family and I respectfully, but emphatically, disagree:

Congressman Bishop’s legislation is designed to assure a memorial to Dwight Eisenhower, not to thwart it. From the moment the current design was adopted, some members of the Commission and the staff were determined to link the proposed Frank Gehry design to the very future of the memorial itself. This is unprecedented in the history of presidential memorials. This rigidity has damaged the effort to build a memorial. The approach has made adversaries out of stakeholders and alienated even the greatest supporters of this process.

Mr. Chairman, you and Chairman Issa have been the first to address the impasse that has unfortunately developed. We applaud you both for your efforts. We would also like to thank the co-sponsors of your bill. Continuation of the status quo, as you have pointed out, will doom the prospect of building a memorial. You are right that no consensus on the memorial design has emerged and that it is time to go back to the drawing board, with an open process for a new design of the memorial.

Significant stakeholders believe that the Gehry design is, regretfully, unworkable. My family – as well as countless members of the public and the media – thinks the design is flawed in concept and overreaching in scale. The recent durability study notes the limited lifetime of the metal scrims, as well as the potential ice and snow hazard to the public. It also notes that the current design, to meet presidential memorial specifications, would require a duplicate set of scrims to be furnished—with the additional costs that would entail. Yet despite all this, the Commission’s approach is to plow ahead with a design that has virtually no support outside of a percentage of the architectural community—which has understandably rallied more in defense of architect Frank Gehry than for the specific memorial design itself.
For more than ten years my family raised concerns and objections that were ignored. We believe they were never adequately communicated to all the Commission members. Any disagreement we had with them was criticized as an attempt to scuttle the building of the memorial. This could not be farther from the truth. The president’s only surviving son, our father, John S. D. Eisenhower, has been clear about his desire to see a memorial, but one which reflects his father’s values and enjoys national consensus. More than once this year he has weighed in, most recently this fall in a letter to the late Senator Daniel Inouye. I am providing a copy of the letter today, but the key points he writes are this:

- Though “creative, the scope and scale of it [the Gehry design] is too extravagant and it attempts to do too much. On the one hand it presumes a great deal of prior knowledge of history on the part of the average viewer. On the other, it tries to tell multiple stories. In my opinion, that is best left to museums.”

- “Taxpayers and donors alike will be better served with an Eisenhower Square that is a green open space with a simple statue in the middle, and quotations from his most important sayings. This will make it possible to utilize most of the taxpayer expenditures to date without committing the federal government or private donors to pay for an elaborate and showy memorial that has already elicited significant public opposition.”

- “Though the members of the Eisenhower family are grateful to those who conceived of this memorial and have worked hard for its success, we have come to believe that the Eisenhower Memorial Commission has no intention of re-examining the concept, even though there would be ample historic precedent for it. It is apparently interested only in convincing us of the virtues of the present design, ignoring my objections as articulated by my daughters Anne and Susan.”

- “I am the first to admit that this memorial should be designed for the benefit of the people, not our family...You may or may not agree with our viewpoint. However, we as a family cannot support the Eisenhower Memorial as it is currently designed – in concept, scope or scale.”

- “We request that lawmakers withhold funding the project in its current form and stand back from approving the current design.”

The Eisenhower family does support the effort to revitalize this process. Among the first steps might be to defund the current design, including zeroing out money for staff expenditures, except to provide services related to an open and transparent financial accounting of monies used to date, as well as those already committed. A thorough review of
the fundraising studies commissioned in the past should also be undertaken, as well as the current efforts underway so that we can assess financial needs going forward.

To expedite this process, perhaps an effort should be made to establish a neutral, non-partisan group to review the elements mentioned above. They could propose the needed organizational changes required for building a strong, responsive commission that can manage an open competitive design process and succeed in building a national consensus on a new memorial design.

Members of my family wish to thank, again, Chairman Rob Bishop and the Committee for holding this hearing, for their commitment to finding a way to resolve this impasse, and for the opportunity to participate. We are deeply grateful to all of Congress for their effort in building a lasting memorial to Dwight D. Eisenhower.
CHAPTER FIVE: CONCLUSION: THE INFLUENCE OF BIG RHETORIC ON PUBLIC MEMORY AND MONUMENTS

Upon reviewing some of the principles of Big Rhetoric discussed, I think it is fair to say that Big Rhetoric as a subcategory of spectacle connotes more than “empty theatrics.” Its end result is for something more than “a passionate release” or “zombification.” Rather, the use of these oversized objects disturbs and disrupts the status quo. Big Rhetoric has the capacity to produce new opportunities for history-telling (Gehry’s Eisenhower Monument) and challenge efforts to regulate public opinion (Ferris’ Great Pleasure Wheel). It can expand the public’s imagination and unsettle expectations of reality. To borrow from Aristotle, Big Rhetoric has the capacity to be in the story and simultaneously remain independent or outside the story. When the audience views the world through Big Rhetoric, the distinction between reality and imagination blurs.

Some colossal texts fail to produce a stirring reaction because they fail to transport the audience out of themselves; they fail to produce wonder. In contrast, big objects that have the ability to create a dynamic tension with their environment, to counter the cultural and physical landscape, can become important texts for social transformation; their voices help to both alter the physical landscape and shape the conversation about the future. In these cases, Big Rhetoric participates in the public expression of new ideas and new ways of seeing the world. While the expressions of Big Rhetoric are experienced by individuals, they are also shared by a community, both physically and conceptually. The structure and the audience who view it are each part of a complex visual relationship. The group gathered around the
big object must enter and share space with the buildings or monuments: the spectators become part of the physical landscape and part of the spectacle and thus part of the rhetorical text. To say this another way, the audience of Big Rhetoric are not spectators but participants in shaping Big Rhetoric and its place in the public sphere.

To give this relationship the attention it deserves, in Chapter 2 I drew on the rhetorical concept of *megethos* to explore Diocletian’s use of the monument genre to transform victory into political power. Focusing on the artifact, the memory landscape, and accounts by classical historians, the analysis examined the changes to the memory landscape over time and how Diocletian’s use of magnitude (*megethos*) attempted to both transform and disrupt the collective memory of the people in Alexandria. To avoid the problems of a scattered and therefore limited rhetorical account, the concept of *megethos* as an analytical framework was used to highlight Big Rhetoric’s dialectic properties. The relationship between Diocletian’s Column and the memory landscape of the Serapeum reveals religious and political expressions co-existing, each nourishing the other.

In Chapter 3, I extended the dialectic possibilities of Big Rhetoric by using Aristotle’s idea of *opsis* and Bachelard’s philosophy of imagination to study the audience’s experience of spectacle during the great exhibitions of the 19th century, not only phenomenologically but as constituting an ontology--that is, imagination’s unique ability to do more than simply reproduce perception but to deform images provided by perception, to liberate the auditor from the mental imitation of reality. To analyze the effects of Big Rhetoric, I examined personal correspondence from World fairgoers, reports by well-established local and national newspapers publicizing the event, and promotional material such as pamphlets and flyers. Spectacles such as Bloom’s Amusement Zone may offer a visual relationship that counteracts
master narratives like those found at the World’s Columbian Exposition, encouraging instead opportunities for collective imagination.

Chapter 4 investigated contemporary memorial design and the democratic process of building Big Rhetoric by examining the proposed design and discourse surrounding the development of Frank Gehry’s Eisenhower Memorial. Because the example of Big Rhetoric in this case is still under development and has already gone through three revisions, the chapter focused on the heated discussions between the Eisenhower family, designer Frank Gerhy, and the Congressional subcommittee.

Memory and Monumentality

For Big Rhetoric stands at the intersection of the public and private where memories of the past are crafted into material form, a form where audience, rhetor, and text speak to one another. Shared memory, or public memory, differs from personal memories in that they are fashioned from these material expressions in the public sphere, and are often situated between historical fidelity and present-day political motives. Mitchell Reye’s argues that rhetoricians interested in this phenomenon have “yet to attend sufficiently to memory’s material manifestations and the way in which they shape affective experience” (595). Reyes argument calls for rhetorical scholars to understand the tension between the public and private by looking closer at the material of public memory and the public texts that authenticate and authorialize memory. Examining this relationship necessarily requires an examination of what defines a monument and its relationship to public memory as a tool for state sponsored social control.
The word monument comes from the Latin word *monere*, which means “to warn” or “remind.” The monument is therefore a special kind of rhetorical instrument that works to bring together communal memories and aspirations. Stephen Browne explains that the most important function of the traditional monument is to “fix collective identity in the present” (201). For Brown, the act of memorializing the past is more than commemoration; it is an afterlife of memory, a material reconstruction of the past that sanctions certain interpretations and not others. Blair et al. add that such places are significant because “they select from history those events, individuals, places, and ideas that will be sacralized by a culture” (377). Blair points out two rhetorical advantages of the monument genre: monuments allow certain social groups to “sacralize” certain events, values, and stories, and they enable them to sustain that sacralization with a lasting material manifestation. The monument operates as a mechanism for connecting personal values with group values and for ascribing a community’s aspirations onto a material presence—or more accurately, a symbolic representation that serves as a reference for community members. A call to remembrance, monuments often work to promote particular dominant ideologies, and they leave a lasting material and cultural presence on the landscape. The act of selecting particular events reveals the epideictic nature of monuments, and that partiality also reveals their rhetorical nature.

Cecil Elliott explains the characteristics of a rhetorically successful monument. First, says Elliot, the subject of the monument must have lasting significance to the audience. If the audience deems the subject pedantic, the celebratory effect is nullified. Second, the material of the monument must communicate permanency: marble and granite, for example, help communicate the durability of both the monument and its ideas. Finally, the traditional monument must lack complexity. The monument, says Elliot, must “deal with ideas that are
expressed in general and simple terms. Their nature requires that they be assigned in a way that is neither casual nor personal” (52). A common way of understanding monumentality, then, is that a monument uses some material form to allow the past to exist in the present. The monument gives material shape to the ephemeral images of significant events. Barry Schwartz explains that a monument “lifts from an ordinary historical sequence those extraordinary events which embody our deepest and most fundamental values” (377). The WWII memorial in Hawaii exemplifies the simple and celebratory characteristics of traditional monumentality.

In March of 1958, President Eisenhower authorized construction of the memorial to honor 2,400 sailors who died during the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor. Alfred Preis, the lead architect on the project, ordered that a bridge be constructed over a sunken battleship, the U.S. Arizona, and the bridge would float above the sunken ship and should in no way touch any part of the ship below\(^1\). When construction finished, Preis said the bridge “stands strong and vigorous at the ends … The overall effect is one of serenity. Overtones of sadness have been omitted…” (Langmead 462).

\(^1\) The USS Arizona is visited by over one million visitors every year. The structure is 184-feet long with two peaks at the end and a sag in the middle. Critiques of the memorial describe the design as a “crumpled milk carton.” The memorial also contains an opening in the floor over the hull of the sunken ship.
Preis's intentional omission of any "sad" feelings from the memorial's design reveal his modernist vision for an idealistic future. The utopian dream of modernism can be seen in many traditional monuments of that time period. In the Preis design, strength and vigor repress sadness and hope to redeem us from the past. As shown by Preis, the act of memorializing the past is more than commemoration; it is an afterlife of memory, a material reconstruction of the past that sanctions certain interpretations and not others. To understand how Preis’ design accomplishes its intended purpose for the audience, the concept of spectacle should be considered more closely.

Some scholars warn against monuments such as the one constructed by Pries. Dan Flavin says the monument can either provide a clearer perception of physical reality free from the general claims of “purity and idealism” or, as Theodore Adorno adds, falsely redeems events with “mimetic pleasure” (86). Both Flavin and Adorno introduce problems with memorializing that give rise to questions about a memorial process that confronts the past and resists redemption. How can a national state incorporate death, grief, and general
sadness into its national memory landscape. What commemorative practices allow the state to confront its misdeeds? How should we remember slavery or the Salem witch trials? Some designs, I have argued, challenge the conventions of memorial design and respond to the needs of the immediate time and place, representing a compelling alternative to traditional memorialization. I will introduce three emerging practices that, as Young says, “breach the conventions of the ‘memorial code,’” and represent future sites of analysis for Big Rhetoric (7).

New Methods of Memorializing

Scholars and artists in the more recent present have explored alternative memorial practices, branching into more critical and complex approaches to engaging with the past. Johansen's “Falling Pillar,” for example, called by scholars a “non monument,” breaks from the traditional approach of durability and longevity. Alison Daly's “Covering of Versailles,” attacks and challenges the traditional monuments’ ability to obscure the past. Her approach has been labeled by many as the anti-monument. And the most recent proposal for a D.C. monument, the Eisenhower memorial, represents the alternative memorial practice of narrative collage.

The Non Monument

Challenging the permanent nature of monuments, the non monument tends to provoke rather than console the audience. It adopts characteristics of the traditional monument--grandiose in scale, important subject--and simultaneously avoids the iconic representation common during the late nineteenth century. The non monument is often ironic and self-effacing; it reflects an uncertain future. Blair calls these monuments a “post-modern response
to memory” because they avoid the modernist commitment to idealism. Referring to the antagonistic relationship between the modern and post-modern, Blair says the post-modern “displaces the tendencies of its modernist counterpart by 1) a refusal of unities or universals, 2) attention to and use of context, and 3) an interrogative, critical stance.” (266). The post-modern monument, or non monument, embraces pluralism and resists the metanarrative. Germany's relationship with the holocaust provides a good example of how the non monument may offer a more appropriate mnemonic response to the complexity of history. In Germany’s case, the perpetrator of the holocaust must also mourn the victims of the genocide.

Jochen Gerz decided against the authoritative rigidity of the traditional Holocaust memorial when he was invited to construct a Holocaust monument for Harburg, Germany. Instead of creating the monument and introducing his design to the public, Gerz asked the people of Harburg to change the design of his slowly sinking pillar. He positioned the sinking pillar inside a shopping mall and the unconventionality of the site for the holocaust memorial lent to its disruptive nature. The forty-feet-high pillar monument was built from dark, grey lead. Four stylus pencils were attached to the four corners of the monument. And at the base of the monument, an inscription in German, French, English, Russian, Hebrew, Arabic, and Turkish read:

We invite the citizens of Harburg, and visitors to the town, to add their names here to ours. In doing so, we commit ourselves to remain vigilant. As more and more names cover this 12 meter tall lead column, it will gradually be lowered into the ground. One day it will have disappeared completely, and the site of the Harburg monument against fascism will be
empty. In the end, it is only we ourselves who can rise up against injustice.

(Young 130)

There are two notable differences between Gerz's disappearing pillar and Pier's floating bridge. First, the temporality of the monument requires more immediate action from the audience. The fact that in two years time the column will disappear from the natural landscape compels a response. And second, the invitation to mark the monument’s surface gives the audience of the column some authorship over the column. Gerz's monument invites shoppers of the Harburg shopping center to commit their names to the idea of social justice. The invitation to sign the column is a sort of petition, a collective decision, and so the column is both a mnemonic device and social contract. Gerz's decision is in direct conflict with Elliot's recommendation that the monument must communicate permanency if it is to be successful. For Gerz, the monument's durability is less important than his invitation to act.

The nonmonument encourages auditors to express themselves and make critical social decisions about what is valuable to the community. The impulse to redeem the past is forfeited, replaced with a desire for accountability. As Gerz' pillar falls, and is eventually covered over, the monument also allows the rhetorical landscape to change in a dramatic fashion. Where once stood a 12-meter lead column now reveals an empty space in the shopping complex. The landscape is free to make new associative references and shoppers can find new ways of remembering and engaging with the past. The memorial itself becomes part of the community’s past.
The Anti-Monument

Like the non monument, the anti-monument resists the authority of the traditional monument. A strategic strike against the metanarrative introduced by a particular monument or series of monuments, the anti-monument uses persuasive means to generate a “critical moment” for the audience, a moment of reflection and critique. But these monuments often work in absence rather than substance, which is to say they remove the political symbols and replace them with abstract ones. Anne Daly uses the term “anti-monuments,” because the artifact actively resists authoritative social forces in the built environment. Like the non monument, the anti monument offers a critique of how the past is remembered but with greater critical force. The objective of the anti-monument is not to create a new monument but to subvert the already established practice of monument building. Daly’s anti monument project, “Looking for the Labyrinth: Re-collecting Versailles,” covers the imposing, authoritative aesthetic of baroque excessiveness in the garden. Her work is in direct opposition to monumentalism found in the public space.
The decision to leave part of the monument uncovered emphasizes the disempowered figure. The figure is shrouded in darkness and blind. The transformed figure communicates a sense of disorientation. The statue no longer signifies the baroque ideals of the past but points to the discourse of monumentality—how objects of representation can assert powerful messages about the past—encouraging viewer circumspection.
Narrative Collage

Recent commemorative practices, like the artifact I’ve included in the penultimate chapter of this dissertation (Gehry’s design), point to something more than a moment of critique. These post-post-modern texts, or what Della Polloch calls pseudo-modern texts, create an opportunity for socially constructed meaning that promotes active reception rather than passive acceptance; they use symbolic referents located in the culture (without irony) to generate political power for the collective. Frank Gehry’s proposed Eisenhower monument invites audience members to actively participate, both as members of a collective and as individuals, in constructing a shared memory of Eisenhower.

Gehry’s design for the Eisenhower monument in Washington D.C. features a tree filled square bordered by 10 stone columns. Nowhere in the monument is a central figure. Attached to the columns are a series of metal tapestries that depict the president’s hometown of Abilene, Kansas. The columns and tapestries stand 80 feet tall and surround three sculptures depicting different periods of the president’s life. Two sculpture reliefs, one of Eisenhower as the military commander and one depicting Eisenhower as president create two sides of triptych with a young Eisenhower reading a book in the middle panel. The boy is meant to be reading the future events of his life, and the words of his most famous speeches are laid on sandstone behind the triptych. The three quotes are from the Guildhall Address, the Homecoming Speech, and the Farewell Address.

The collage approach allows for an interactive text, a rizomatic structure, with no identifiable central meaning. Instead, the elements of the collage are distributed almost at random to allow the audience to participate in constructing their memory of the event or person. To attempt a standard unified reading of the collage is to miss the point. The text
offers a multitude of readings, sometimes even conflicting readings. This process of constructing memory might be applied to our own approach of making sense of the past. By inviting the audience to author their own experience with the collage, authorial intention becomes negligible. However, the memory of the past can still be somewhat redemptive or inspiring with this approach.

The tendency at this point would be to argue for a particular monument strategy, to select one of the methods listed above as the most correct for addressing the problem of false redemption in the traditional monument. That is an understandable impulse; memory practices such as these have long-term implications for the community. But the proliferation of monument and memorial practices actually serves to promote a more comprehensive approach to memorialization. In addition to the three monument practices explored here, other strategies might meet the immediate demands of the circumstances and exigencies of the moment. For example, Chandler Sanchez, chairman of the Pueblo Indian tribe, referring to our newest national monument, says “the story of my tribe, the Pueblo of Acoma, and our history is intimately connected to Chimney Rock” (“Supportive Statement”). The relationship between the Pueblo people and Chimney Rock reveals a memorializing practice that requires no modification of the natural landscape. Still other monument practices exist, alternative ways of remembering as a community that also respond to the immediate needs of place, audience, and purpose. There are, therefore, many possibilities of employing monuments to render contemporary problems with the past with a sensitivity to both the complexity of the past and the needs of surrounding circumstances.

This dissertation considered how the spectacle of monumentality is designed, delivered, received, and remembered as a prominent form of public discourse, which
rhetorical analysis is uniquely qualified to illuminate. The chapters explored how the deployment of large rhetorical artifacts is a form of cultural and identity politics, in conversation with historical narrative, collective memory, and the physical landscape. Monumentality in this sense is both a locus of commemoration and a repository for histories that run parallel to official accounts.

**For Future Study**

As stated earlier in this discussion, this study is preliminary and the influences of Big Rhetoric discussed in each chapter begin to point towards areas for further study. The implications of Big Rhetoric in the genres discussed in this study include only a few of the possibilities. Big Rhetoric as an instrument for social transformation leads to another vast area of rhetorical analysis. For example, an audience reception analysis of activist Big Rhetoric may shed light on understanding the role of Big Rhetoric in shaping alternative political opinion. A study of this nature could eventually change our use of Big Rhetoric as a tool for civic engagement. From a professional standpoint, it may also be profitable to examine new methods, such as digital texts, for creating the effects of Big Rhetoric.

Three-dimensional virtual reality in urban planning, for example, is using image-processing technology to design realistic, interactive historical landscapes. Some historians are using this technology to recreate the built environment of significant moments of the past (see Lisa Snyder’s project “The World’s Columbian Exposition of 1893”). These historians are trying to capture the spectacle of the exposition communicated to 19th century audiences. Of course, the limitations of image-processing introduce new problems. The most obvious limitation is that this kind of experience is a visual representation as opposed to a multi-
sensory immersion. This raises a fundamental question: what is lost or gained when Big Rhetoric is introduced in a virtual reality application?

In sum, many scholars note that the practice of building big objects for public consumption typically works to promote and communicate ideology and to reinforce particular worldviews. In this sense, Big Rhetoric is seen as a semiotic referent for a particular set of beliefs. However, a close analysis of the big objects introduced in this study reveals in many ways that Big Rhetoric can challenge reductive history-telling practices, or in the case of the 1893 World’s Columbian Exposition, present the audience alternative views about the future. I have argued that Big Rhetoric works to destabilize and decentralize reality and creates an “imaginative moment” for the audience. And, as Aristotle reminds us, the public spectacle of Big Rhetoric transforms the built environment into a stage and its buildings, inhabitants and objects into characters, audience, and props within it. In that imaginative space it is possible to formulate images that go beyond perceptions of reality.
Works Cited


