

The Rhetorical Function of Raghu Rai's Images of Bhopal

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Twenty-six years have passed since the night toxic gas leaked from the Union Carbide chemical plant in Bhopal, India. Yet the incident, which occurred in December of 1984 and was estimated to be the cause of more than 300,000 casualties, still regularly appears in news headlines (Kim et al. 245). This is due partially to the grand scale of this infamous catastrophe, which led to death and suffering for thousands of people. Another reason for the continuing coverage of the disaster for over two decades is the ongoing controversy concerning the causes of the leak and debate regarding which entities should be held accountable. Over this period of deliberation, documentary photographs depicting victims of the gas leak taken by renowned Indian photographer Raghu Rai have often operated as rhetorical catalysts (stimuli for discourse that prompts viewers to take action) to such disputes. Indeed, as Susan Sontag argues in *Regarding the Pain of Others*, disaster photography has a formative influence in “shaping what catastrophes and crises we pay attention to, what we care about, and ultimately what evaluations are attached to these conflicts” (105). In this way, visual rhetoric not only presents ideas to an audience but may also serve as a form of social activism, geared towards engaging the audience in a dialogue that forwards specific goals.

In this essay, I investigate this complicated relationship involving visual artifacts, viewers, and the actual victims of the crisis by analyzing the images created by Rai as a mode of visual rhetorical appeal. I argue that by offering an intimate view (that is, an overt and penetrating experience that is usually unavailable to distant audiences) of a devastating situation far away in time and often in place for viewers of these images, the photographs substitute for the reality of the situation and, through their verisimilitude, invite audiences to demand justice (Booth and Davisson). The essay unfolds by attending to how each image in the presented series of photographs helps to create an overlying narrative of crisis and distress by introducing the story line of the suffering of the Bhopali population, then establishes consubstantiality between the audience and the victims, and thus provokes the viewer to social action because of resulting guilt. To understand Rai's visual rhetorical efficaciousness, or power to produce a desired effect, I will elaborate on Burke's theorization of the guilt-redemption cycle, or the process by which humans assign culpability in order to ease their own consciences and enact reparations for the faults of an imperfect society.

The Disaster

The text I have chosen for analysis is a series of photographs taken by Raghu Rai depicting victims of the Union Carbide chemical disaster at Bhopal, India, in 1984. Greenpeace commissioned Rai to document what is widely considered to be one of the worst industrial disasters in history and its ongoing effects. Rai's photographs have become the defining images of this tragedy. He took the initial photographs just after the gas leak in 1984, and then returned in 2002 to document the continuing struggle of the Bhopali people. Rai aimed to capture the destruction and enduring impact of the catastrophe. This documentary project has led to the production of a 2002 book,

Exposure: Portrait of a Corporate Crime, and three exhibitions, “Bhopal” (2003), “Exposure: Portrait of a Corporate Crime” (2003), and “Bhopal, 1984–2004” (2005), that have toured Europe, America, India, and Southeast Asia. Rai says of his “Exposure” exhibit:

Some of the photographs on display here were taken in 1984 immediately after the disaster. As one of the first photographers to get to Bhopal, I witnessed scenes of great sorrow. When Greenpeace approached me to create this exhibition, I saw it as an opportunity to revisit an issue that had made a deep impact on me. The situation of the survivors, their daily struggles for survival, the toxic legacy that keeps rearing its head in the new generations opened my eyes to the aftermath of the disaster. (“Raghu Rai’s”)

The photographs hold important cultural meaning for the Bhopali people and serve as chilling reminders of the catastrophe to the rest of the world.

The chemical disaster that produced the effects documented in these photographs occurred on the night of 2 December through the morning of 3 December 1984. It remains a frightening example of what can transpire when the safety of workers and the surrounding community is neglected for the sake of profit. Jim Yong Kim’s description of the disaster in *Dying for Growth* is helpful in understanding the magnitude of the crisis. Union Carbide Corporation’s (UCC) pesticide factory in Bhopal, India, released vast amounts of lethal gases into the air when water entered a holding tank through an unsafe line as workers performed routine maintenance. This caused a reaction that led to the escape of forty tons of methyl isocyanate, hydrogen cyanide, and other poisonous gases into a surrounding area of over twenty-five square miles (Kim et al. 245; Sutcliffe 1883). The accident was the result of hazardous operating procedures and faulty safety systems. When the pesticide market began to decline in the early 1980s, UCC headquarters instructed the company’s subsidiaries to reduce operating costs (Bhopal Working Group 231). As a result, maintenance crews were cut in half, the night maintenance supervisor position was eliminated, and safety training was shortened. At the time of the accident, the methyl isocyanate holding tanks were overfilled and connected by unsafe lines, the system was unrefrigerated, the flare tower designed to burn off excess gasses was inoperative, and the vent gas scrubber was faulty. According to findings from the September 1984 Union Carbide safety audit, UCC was aware of the liabilities associated with these flawed systems, but did not instruct the Bhopal plant to remedy them (Kim et al. 248–49).

The resident population of the affected area numbered more than half a million. The exact number of fatalities and the extent of sickness and injury caused by exposure to the gases are still unknown. The Indian government has claimed that 1,754 people died and 200,000 were sickened or injured. However, doctors, agencies such as UNICEF and Greenpeace, and eyewitnesses estimate the number of dead at up to 10,000 and those adversely affected at 300,000 (Kim et al. 245). Studies indicate the occurrence of gas-related symptoms in 27 percent of exposed persons: 50,000 people who were exposed are permanently injured or disabled, and 10 to 15 people continue to die each month from the effects of the gas (Mukerjee 16). In addition, poisons continue to leach into the water supply of the surrounding community even decades later, resulting in health problems for residents who rely on the source (Labunska et al. 23–24).

Union Carbide’s response to the tragedy proved to be not only inadequate but grossly unethical. The company officially claimed an ambiguous “moral responsibility” (Browning 6), but did very little to compensate victims or ensure that the site was properly cleaned. In February 1989, the company agreed to compensation totaling \$470 million, far less than citizens had demanded

(Cassels 37). This amount is not enough to pay the victims' medical bills or compensate them for loss of livelihood. In addition, many victims have not been granted any awards at all (Kim et al. 254). Criminal charges of culpable homicide and grievous harm have been brought against Warren Anderson, the former CEO of UCC by the Bhopal Magistrate Court ("Raghu Rai's"). Anderson has yet to appear before the court or face any legal consequences. In February 2001, Dow Chemical Company acquired Union Carbide. Dow maintains that the victims have been justly compensated and remains unwilling to accept responsibility for the disaster ("The Bhopal Legacy").

Visual Rhetoric and Burke

Kenneth Burke (1897–1993) was an American philosopher, literary theorist, and critic whose work has remained influential in the study of rhetoric, philosophy, and literature. Burke first introduced the concept of dramatism in the 1940s as a way to understand the social uses of language, symbolism, and human motives. The basis of dramatism is the notion of motives: the reasons for action that give purpose and direction to behavior. Burke was concerned with "the basic forms of thought which, in accordance with the nature of the world as all men necessarily experience it, are exemplified in the attributing of motives" (*A Grammar of Motives* xiv). As a theoretical approach to understanding human behavior and communication, dramatism investigates how people justify their actions, both to themselves and to others, and the sociological influence on such rationales. Dramatism treats language as a type of symbolic action rather than a method of communicating knowledge (*Language as Symbolic Action* 44). Language has a utilitarian function as a shared system of symbols meant to express meaning, but language itself holds connotative meaning that may contribute to motives. Central to dramatism is the idea that social reality is constructed through the use of symbols. The language human beings employ to describe their experiences communicates their perception of reality, and in turn influences the attitudes, perceptions, and motives of others. Thus, a co-constructed view of reality is created and modified with the use of language. In dramaturgical terms, the primary intention of rhetoric is to ally the interests of the audience with those of the presenter by manipulating motive through the use of symbols. For our purposes, the traditional understanding of "rhetoric" in this context is expanded to include the use of visuals (photographs, charts, illustrations). There are two key concepts I will borrow from Burke in order to theorize the rhetorical work enacted by Rai's photographs: identification and guilt.

The concepts of identification and guilt are integral to Burke's postulates referring to persuasion and dramaturgical theory. The notion of identification, in Burkean terms, posits that when one perceives shared interests, beliefs, or values (which Burke calls "substances") with another, persuasion can occur. Simply stated, a message is more persuasive when the receiver perceives those presenting the message or those that are the subject of the message to be like him or her, or con-substantial. Identification encompasses a wide spectrum. Burke states in *A Rhetoric of Motives*, "Identification ranges from the politician who, addressing an audience of farmers, says, 'I was a farm boy myself,' through the mysteries of social status, to the mystic's devout identification with the source of all being" (xiv). However, Burke focuses primarily on the functioning of the hierarchy of identification in the context of social action (Kirk 414–15). Identification and the subsequent divisions it produces between parties who do not perceive shared values or interests between them are integral aspects of motive. As such, identification is a powerful component within the guilt-redemption cycle that motivates human acts. When identification occurs, division also occurs simultaneously. As Camille Lewis writes, "[T]o identify with someone or something means to dis-

associate from an Other. Within every attempt at division is an ironic and contrary division” (2). This “Other” may then become villainized in the guilt-redemption cycle (3).

Burke emphasizes the concept of the guilt-redemption cycle as motivation for all rhetorical acts of the human drama. Guilt is induced by how we humans become separated from our natural condition by instruments of our own making (*Language as Symbolic Action* 16). That is, humankind is motivated beyond “purely natural or biological inclinations” (*Permanence and Change* 274). Human beings identify with and are motivated to perfect moral order; however, this “flawless ideal irritates or goads humanity rather than comforts” when the ideal is not achieved (Lewis 2, 3). Guilt is induced because of imperfections in the order humans seek to create. Humans attempt to relieve this feeling of guilt by performing a redemptive act achieved through the use of symbols. Roused by the desire for perfect unity, human beings must determine and then abolish the discordant component, a villain. By expunging this antagonist, the community is purified and order may be restored (2). Gregory Desilet explains, “[S]acrifice, as a cleansing, requires something (or someone) washed away, that is a victim” (34). The sacrifice is not always the guilty party causing the disruption in moral order—rather, a scapegoat could be offered up for atonement instead. The most important aspect of this cycle is that a symbolic act must be performed to lead to liberation from guilt. This process is cyclical and inevitable: order is established, guilt is caused by imperfections, then a ritual purification must occur to achieve redemption and restore order.

Burke’s use of both identification and guilt is particularly valuable to my analysis of Rai’s images of Bhopal given that recent theorizations in visual rhetoric suggest that images may substantiate unique impetus to social justice. Although photography and other art forms are not usually thought of as a form of rhetoric, as Sonja Foss writes, “A definition of art easily becomes extremely rhetorical if it is viewed as the production or arrangement of sounds, colors, forms, movements, and other elements in a manner that affects or evokes a response” (“Rhetoric and the Visual Image” 55). Foss goes on to assert that the process by which a visual phenomenon creates a response is analogous to that of verbal discourse. Visual images depict a particular reality that the producer of the image creates by making choices about the method of representation and visual elements included, choices that may or may not persuade the audience to accept this reality. Charles Hill proposes that images are quite powerful persuasive tools because they are particularly adapted to making important rhetorical elements “more salient and memorable” (28).¹ Therefore, emotional appeals at work in photographs are particularly poignant (35). Photographs lend themselves quite well to establishing identification and inciting emotional responses such as guilt. This is an important force at work in Rai’s photographs of Bhopal because it allows groups seeking punitive action against Union Carbide to capitalize on the viewers’ feelings in order to provoke them into undertaking actions for redress themselves.

Analysis

The images of Bhopal commissioned by Greenpeace and taken by photographer Raghu Rai perform a rhetorical act. They serve not only as documentary photographs that may be archived as a part of Indian history, but as a form of persuasion that takes place through the stories the photographs and captions tell. Rai’s images of this devastating event are presented in a manner that invites the audience to become involved in the dialogue. The exhibits and books attempt to frame the negligence surrounding the calamity and the repercussions of the disaster as an injustice to the people of Bhopal. The captions especially attempt to demonstrate that the victims find themselves

in dire circumstances as a direct result of carelessness and greed, both preceding and following the gas leak. The disaster is now set in a different context than that of the “simple accident” described by Union Carbide and other responsible parties. The audience is called upon to demand explicit actions as it views the text—specifically, that an entity be held liable for the events that occurred so that victims may receive adequate compensation and the toxic area may be cleaned. Rai goes about this both by implementing identification between the viewer and the human subject(s) of the photograph and, more importantly, by inciting a feeling of guilt within the viewer that demands a redemptive act. This section will seek to analyze the specific methods and means employed to instill a sense of obligation in the viewer and how these rhetorical tactics relate to Burke’s theoretical propositions. The composition of the images, the choice of subjects, and the captions that correspond to each image lead the viewer to a feeling of identification and subsequently to a sense of guilt. I will address these aspects by providing a detailed examination of three of Rai’s photographs and highlighting the features that enhance the rhetorical function of each of them.² I chose these particular images because they are excellent examples of the key rhetorical features Rai has employed in his work. These photos demonstrate the primary themes of the series: death and mourning, the severely diminished quality of life of the survivors, and appalling injustice.

One photograph that is exemplary of the rhetorical efficaciousness of the images is the most well known of the series. It is entitled “Burial of an Unknown Child” and has become the iconic image of the disaster. The photograph depicts the face of a dead child, mouth agape, eyes open as if staring into the distance, peering out from the rubble and soil of a hastily prepared grave. A hand gently caresses the child’s face. The photograph is disturbing; it immediately plays on the emotions of the viewer. As previously discussed, photographs are more immediate than other forms of communication. They are usually much more poignant than charts or other forms of data. As Hill writes, “It has often been remarked that a picture of one starving child is more persuasively powerful than statistics citing the starvation of millions.” Part of the effectiveness of photographs such as these is that the existence of the photograph seemingly proves the existence of its subject (29). For the audience, the photographs act as indisputable evidence of the suffering and death in the wake of the gas leak. The composition of the photograph allows for death to be the focus of the image. The deceased child’s face is centered near the top of the image, making it the most prominent part of the photo. The subject of the photograph is literally a small child who has passed away, but in a more abstract sense it is suffering, death, and the destruction of innocence. This is essentially proof of the violation of the perfect moral order which, according to Burke, all humans strive for. The audience is now led to experience a sense of guilt because of this extreme breach of ideal order.

Another photograph in the series that is a choice example of visual rhetoric is the image of a beggar named Nanko. A major rhetorical facet of this work is the accompanying caption. Arguably, one of the most important aspects establishing a sense of identification is the interaction of the captions with the photographs. The captions tell the story through language. The texts that surround an image that is photojournalistic in nature are the reality in which the image is defined (Booth and Davisson). The caption below Rai’s work reads, “Until 3 December 1984, Nanko (76) was independent and able to provide comfortably for his family. After the gas disaster, he became a beggar. The tragedy left in its wake loss of job opportunities, mounting medical bills and lack of support structure from the state.” This communicates the virtually universal desire to be able to provide for both self and loved ones. The image may stand alone as an aesthetic work of art or perhaps pres-

ent a concept or information. However, the caption further defines the exigency that requires action and presents more evidence that the Bhopali people are consubstantial with the audience. Such captions are able to explain the specific context of each victim's misery and communicate shared values with the viewer.

As with the "Burial of an Unknown Child" image, the subject, Nanko, is centrally located in the photograph, with a focus on his face. His gaze breaks the plane of the photograph, giving the impression that he is looking directly at the viewer, trying to communicate his plight specifically to the audience. In a majority of the photographs, the subjects are shot in this manner: from the front, their eyes focused forward. This composition allows the viewer to better observe the expression of the victim and the emotion portrayed in the lines of his or her face. The team that designed the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum used this same tactic to personalize the exhibit, displaying images that create a painful link with the faces of Holocaust victims (Linenthal). Viewers are able to identify with the human emotion they see, because every person has experienced sadness or frustration, even if it not at quite the same level of intensity as the emotional experience of the gas leak victims. Emotion is a shared experience among all people, though the events that evoke it may be very diverse. Although the viewers may not be able to relate to the situation portrayed in the images, they see a reflection of emotion they have themselves experienced in the faces of victims—and thus they see a reflection of part of themselves and part of humanity. They audience members consciously or unconsciously recognize some shared qualities with the victims that allow them to be empathetic towards their plight. The focus on the individual serves to both personalize and universalize the narrative the photographs tell.

The similarities between viewers and victims are highlighted in order to invite the audiences into a dialectical exchange—or logical reasoning to reach truth through the exchange of opposing ideas—with the rhetoric of the images. The candid nature of the images and the focus on the emotions of the individual as similar to those of the viewer contribute to the desire to help the people of Bhopal. They are established as true victims of external forces, not just as people foreign to the viewer. According to Kenneth Burke, "Identification is compensatory to division" (*A Rhetoric of Motives* 22). Though the viewers may be of different ethnicity, nationality, or economic status than the Bhopali people, they cannot dismiss the victims as "others" (Bhabha 71) because they are able to acknowledge common attributes between themselves and victims such as Nanko. This prevents the viewers from simply separating themselves from the subjects of the photographs. Identification with the suffering people and the realization that the human goal of flawless order has been marred by this event lead the audience to feel guilt because this defect has been allowed to occur.

As previously discussed, humans seek to alleviate this guilt by engaging in a metaphorical battle against an evil in order to achieve redemption. A kill, or "rhetorical vile beast to be slain," must be overcome in order to right a wrong and again strive for perfection (Griffin 464). One image quite effectively provides the viewer with a very specific indication of the guilty party to be symbolically offered up and destroyed. This photograph depicts women of the community holding signs that demand Warren Anderson be brought to trial. One sign reads, "You Want Osama, Give Us Anderson." The caption of the photo indicates that Anderson, wanted for crimes in Bhopal, is evading justice in the United States. Similarly to the photograph of the beggar Nanko, the subjects' gaze breaks the plane of the photo. Several of the women seem to be looking directly at the viewer, with expressions of discontent evident in the lines of their faces, as if they were demanding action explicitly of that viewer. It is obvious that this plea is addressed to American audiences. Anderson

has become the ultimate villain to this community; much in the same manner that Osama Bin Laden became the ultimate symbol of villainy to Americans after 9/11. In this case the argument to be overcome is that this incident was simply a tragic accident and neither Warren Anderson nor Dow Chemical bears responsibility. The sense of obligation to overcome this argument is now transferred to the viewers because they have identified with the victims and experienced guilt. These specific photographs in the series increase the viewers' sense of responsibility to make reparations for this situation (particularly American viewers because they are targeted) and urge them to aid the people of Bhopal.

This photograph and others in the series similar to it are blatant and direct cries to the audience demanding a specific action: Anderson needs to be detained and brought to trial in a local court of law. Whether this argument is logically sound, the comparison of Anderson to a wanted terrorist perpetuates the characterization of him as a murderous criminal. The gas leak becomes a crime rather than simply an unfortunate event, and thus blame is ascribed to Anderson and Union Carbide (now Dow Chemical). The audience is now aware of what must be done to alleviate the guilt felt when viewing this text.

This text encourages discourse about these events and creates public pressure to remedy the situation (redemption from guilt). Several of the photographs are from 1984, taken immediately after the incident. Others were taken in 2002 and depict the ongoing suffering in the community. The narrative is unfinished. This allows the rhetorical act to beg the viewers themselves to become agents, to begin the process of reaching a greater understanding of the incident. The desire to become involved on behalf of other thinking, feeling, human beings prevails over passivity. It is a call for action, an imploring narrative that causes the viewer to analyze the various ethical, logistical, and moral issues involved and his or her relationship to them.

It is unlikely than any single viewer of this text will be able to single-handedly apprehend Warren Anderson or persuade Dow Chemical to take legal responsibility for the accident that occurred under Union Carbide. But because of the desire for rectification the viewers experience while viewing this text, they are more likely to raise public awareness (either actively or simply by describing the photographs to friends) and participate in dialogue about these events. The photographs are truly an example of visual rhetoric because they perform this task. Rhetorical critic Lloyd Bitzer states that a work of rhetoric "comes into existence for the sake of something beyond itself; it functions ultimately to produce action or change in the world" (3). Raghu Rai's images meet this criterion, asking viewers to take up the plight of the Bhopali people and change the outcome of this disaster.

This was Greenpeace's intention in commissioning these photographs: to invite audiences not simply to see the disaster but to interact with the images and recognize the need for social, united action. At the opening of the "Exposure: Portrait of a Corporate Crime" exhibition in Delhi, Ananthapadmanabhan, executive director of Greenpeace India, commented, "The exhibition opens in Delhi at a time when recent developments are promising to resolve some of the long pending issues and demands of the people of Bhopal." Jose Carlos Masquita, a member of the Environment Ministers of Brazil, declared after visiting the exhibition in Johannesburg, "Now I understand what is meant by corporate accountability and I will push for it" ("Raghu Rai's"). This is evidence of the power these images hold as an impetus to rhetorical exchange. Indeed, various demonstrators and activists have used these photographs as persuasive tools because of their ability to motivate. The reactions of people such as Masquita are evidence that the photographs have the ability to influ-

ence people and encourage them to take action on an issue they would otherwise ignore. The degree of influence Rai's photographs will have in the ongoing sociopolitical dialogue concerning the event in Bhopal is yet to be determined. At present, the Bhopali people continue to wait for justice while the debates continue.

Conclusion

Raghu Rai's images have become icons representative of the tragedy that occurred in Bhopal and the ethical responsibility of corporations. This demonstrates the potential power documentary photographs possess to create motivation through their narrative qualities. Indeed, the rhetorical power of these specific images points to the need to expand traditional concepts of rhetoric—verbal or written—to include a wider variety of media. As Sonja Foss notes in the concluding chapter of *Defining Visual Rhetorics*, throughout rhetoric's long tradition discursive constructs have held ideological dominance over other forms of communication, "suggesting that visual symbols are insignificant or inferior, and largely ignoring the impacts of the visual in our world" (303). This focus on verbal forms of expression limits understanding of the persuasive process at work beyond formal pieces of linguistic rhetoric. Human experience is multidimensional and complex, and our perceptive constructs are shaped in a variety of ways. To ignore the influence of the visual in directing our thoughts would be folly. A more careful examination of visual rhetorical elements that accompany social movements would be a valuable addition to the field of rhetorical analysis. By dissecting the means of persuasion active in works such as Rai's images, we will achieve a better understanding not only of rhetorical methods but of various social movements and their impact in general. This is increasingly important in an age in which technology and the media have created a "global village" where more ideas and communicative artifacts are exchanged between different cultures and people (McLuhan 21). The images examined in this essay are widely available for viewing across the globe on the World Wide Web. Media such as this are able to reach a greater quantity and diversity of people, at a more rapid rate than ever before. Raghu Rai's photographs represent an important force at work in the drive for international and intercultural cooperation to produce greater ethical accountability. They are exemplary of the human desire to remedy injustices and restore principled order, and of the endeavor to create a more responsible world.

Notes

¹ Hill refers to Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca's notion that an object or person is most present, or foremost in our consciousness, when we can see it directly (Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca 117; Hill 29).

² These photographs are available for viewing on the *Outlook India* Web site.

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