

EXPLORING THE ELICITATION OF EMPATHY
USING COMMUNICATIVE VISUAL STIMULI:
GORDON PARKS' *AMERICAN GOTHIC*

by

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ABSTRACT

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This thesis explores how visual rhetors communicate through a photographic image. Using Gordon Parks' 1942 photograph, *American Gothic*, this rhetorical critique establishes a systematic framework designed to ascertain how an image uses semiotic signifiers to evoke pathos, specifically empathy, to create an effective correspondence between artist and audience. The purpose of this thesis is to gain a deeper understanding of how mass media has and will continue to, address societal maladies through visual discourse. The first stage describes the explicit 'data' within the image; ultimately determining the presence of signifiers. The second stage interprets the latent content within the image; ultimately determining what the signifiers potentially signify. The third stage evaluates, using elements of narrative criticism, the visual discourse formulated within the image; ultimately determining the effectiveness of the image in evoking empathy. Through this exploration of photo-criticism, visual media practitioners and activists can gain a better understanding of Parks, *American Gothic*, and methods for producing persuasive rhetorical visual discourse.

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This thesis is dedicated to my family. Thank you for your love and support. I am continually inspired by the goodness within you. And a special thank you to my mother and brother, who assisted with the proofreading of this paper.

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I. INTRODUCTION

Those who have been fortunate enough to experience moments of awe-inspiring revelation, regarding the intricacies of art, understand the idea of having some ‘*thing*’ speak to them in a referential capacity. This experience is similar to those transcendental moments of bliss when we find ourselves gazing up upon the moon and stars that occupy the foremost reaches of our galaxy. The glaring difference, *of course*, with these two examples of experiential wonder is the absence of the artist, creator, producer, etc. within the confines of astronomical delight. That brings us to the truly miraculous notion of a producer of texts saying *something* through objects inanimate in nature.

But how is this visceral act of personal reflection achieved? How can an individual, whom we usually don’t know, speak to us, offering an epithet of wisdom regarding some aspect of our existence? This process of orotundity becomes even more remarkable when we consider the, often, lack of actual discourse found within these texts.

The following is a critical analysis regarding processes used by visual artists to evoke emotional rhetorical appeals. This examination uses, as a vehicle for this exploration, the historical confines of the photographic career of the prodigious American renaissance-man, Gordon Parks.

The emotional appeal of particular interest for this study is empathy. Empathy being a tool in which mass media practitioners can ameliorate our society, culture, and species; acting as the great equalizer that has the transformative power to potentially eviscerate the most vitriol hegemonic structures constructed by man.

Since the dawning of communication, rhetors have long inspired empathetic appeals amongst their audiences. But how? How is empathy rhetorically cultivated? Specifically, how is

empathy cultivated through visual stimulation? Even more specifically, how did Gordon Parks use a photographic image to tell a story, offering his audience avenues to consider the perspectives of others?

The framework proposed within this thesis is an attempt to understand the aspects regarding the artistic processes used to evoke an empathetic response from viewers of visual texts. Continuing this understanding, of both the functions and developmental processes of visual rhetorical appeals, is significant because of the universality concerning the language of sight.

Pathos, Narrative and Visual Imagery

Pathos is the rhetorical act of persuading an audience by appealing to their emotions. Narrative is arguably the most efficient means a rhetor has when making this emotional appeal. In the realm of visual imagery, a rhetor proclaims a narrative with the application of common semiotic truths.

Semiotics and Media

Semiotics concerns the analysis of signs and sign systems. There is a close relationship between the research disciplines of semiotics and media studies.

Semiotics, the study of sign processes and systems in nature and culture, has contributed approaches to media since the very beginning of media studies. Media such as photography, film, comics, [etc.] and topics such as advertising have long been major areas of study in applied semiotics. (Nöth, 2016, p.154)

Semioticians have used media platforms as an arena to apply their research practices and theoretical foundations. Academics within the field of media studies have used semiotics as a source for sign production and analysis, especially through content analysis and criticism. Media practitioners have attempted to use principles of semiotics to gain a better understanding of

nonverbal discourse found within media messages (Nöth, 2016). This is because signs, in theory, have the potential to convey cultural philosophies and societal paradigms in a condensed form.

Furthermore, for semioticians and media practitioners, signs are a visual language tool for an attempted act of discourse between themselves and certain demographics. Signs are then used to convey people's beliefs, feelings, and principles in a condensed and direct way (Durante & Sanchez, 2016). Many signs used within mass media are significant when they become integrally connected to moments of discourse, thus transferring communicative texts into meaningful significations of human nature.

For this analysis, basic principles of semiotics will be used to ascertain the signifiers of the signified found within intended narratives emitted by Parks through *American Gothic*. These basic principles concern aspects of semiotic language regarding the three types of signs (symbol, index, icon). The narrative, or narratives, obtained will then be evaluated using principles of narrative criticism; ultimately determining the effective, or ineffective, nature of the narrative's representational prominence in addressing experiential truths in order to evoke an empathetic response. The principles of narrative criticism pertain to traditional analytical inquiries of the narrative developmental process, through an examination of certain elements of narrative: setting, character, point-of-view, temporal relations, causal relations, audience. Justification for this ultimate conclusion is designed to advance our innate understanding and perseverance of evoking rhetorical appeals from personal experiences, and signs and sign systems have given us that ability from our most nascent stages of development (Durante & Sanchez, 2016).

Narrative

Narrative helps us to understand our experiences so that we can remain in control of our emotions throughout our daily lives. The stories we tell and hear “help us decide what a

particular experience is about and how the various elements of experience are connected” (Foss, 2018, p.319). Identifying certain characteristics within narrative structures, concerning effective means of persuasive discourse, has led to various analytical explorations of narrative within a wide variety of academic disciplines.

When analyzing an image regarding its rhetorical appeals, it’s essential for the analyst to first speculate that an attempted narrative is present within the artifact. This, however, can be a difficult aspect to ascertain because of the multidimensionality of narrative structures. A story integrates the elements of when and who, which can last minutes or generations and describes an event or series of events with characters, action and consequences (Simmons, 2000). A narrative can also make the impersonal, personal; truths like righteousness or honor are too convoluted to be communicated in a statistic, or a fact (Simmons, 2000).

There is a universality found within effective narrative structures; stories help us address the intricacies of conflict and absurdity by providing an outline for contextual cognizance. “Stories provide a sense of community, a cohering feeling of shared concerns, values, and investigations” (hooks, 2010, p.52). Narrative helps us to associate similarities to a jurisdiction beyond oneself. Telling stories helps us to make connections with that in which we do not fully understand. Stories are often told with the accompaniment of words that signify semiotic truths and thus provide a “way of knowing. Therefore, they contain both power and the art of possibility” (hooks, 2010, p.53).

Rhetors have the potential to share their narratives through the medium of photography. Pictures capture subjects that can act similarly to words. When these ‘words’ are put together, a skillful photographer can tell stories that evoke feelings and emotions as unflinching as any endeavor of literature. A photograph can integrate “fact and fiction, experience, imagination, and

feelings in a visual dialogue that has enormous impact on how we observe and relate to the external world and our internal selves” (Brookman, 1997, p.346).

Gordon Parks

As a producer of media, if your quintessence is aroused by the education and inspiration of the masses to evolve beyond communal hindrances, then it’s beneficial, if not essential, to understand such hindrances. Gordon Parks’ immense sympathies concerning certain ignorances of man were derivative of his own experiences. Parks’ photographic portfolio demonstrates his conviction regarding the power images have in transforming maladies within our culture.

Parks’ photography captured the dignity of African-Americans, something that was uncommon during the period of his prominence. Photography, as with all forms of mass media, was mostly produced by and framed for the Eastern-European consumer’s perspective. Parks’ most effective images transport these perspectives into the lives of his minority subjects, offering profound proximity to another’s, highly underrepresented, humanity.

Gordon Parks is well regarded today as a visionary artist; an artist that helped people see the world and each other in a deeper, more profound way. However, above all his distinctive traits, Parks was a humanist, saying, “I felt the need for me to somehow or another use humanity to get people to become aware of how people suffered; that was what drove me into it... to expose something to the public that I felt was hidden” (Harris, 2014).

Despite growing up facing the worst aspects of racial discrimination, perpetrated by his fellow man, Parks remained eternally faithful in the potentiality of humanity. “He was critical of our faults, but he believed in our potential to overcome them and our ability to strive for a greater understanding of one another” (Lord, 2013, pg.9). This unwavering trust in people would

ultimately prove to be one of his greatest strengths; allowing him to produce reflective portraits, notwithstanding of the hazardous conditions in which they took place.

Born in Fort Scott, Kansas, in 1912 the fifteenth child of sharecroppers, Parks was “born to a black childhood of confusion and poverty” (Johnson, 2004, p.216). In his youth, Parks experienced virulent racial discrimination and segregation in the Jim Crow south. “It was a place with an inner music of its own; a tormenting music that provoked our black souls” (Parks, 1966, p.1). In the face of this discrimination, his mother imparted pertinent empathetic principles that remained the embodiment of his life and career; “my mother used to tell me that there is some good in everybody, and that I should always try to find it” (Parks, 1966, p.157).

At age fifteen, after the death of his mother, Parks moved north to live with his sister in Minnesota. However, he did not stay with her long, due in part to the verbally abusive nature of his brother-in-law. “Winters in Minnesota were unbearably cold. The only thing I was to find colder was my brother-in-law, David” (Parks, 2005, p.5). Parks soon found himself alone, living in Chicago, working whatever odd-job he could find to make ends meet.

At age twenty-five, he was drawn to photography and the influence images had in broadcasting the horrific pictures of war; first exemplified by the newsreel he saw depicting the bombing of the USS Panay, “...newspapers and radio reported the bombing; but the newsreel, through its grim directness, brought me face to face with the real horror of war” (Parks, 1966, p.184). This directness of platform, which first appealed to Parks’ sense of civic duty, would eventually define his photographic tenure.

After buying a camera at a pawnshop, Parks taught himself the various technical aspects of photography. He began his career working for various African-American news publications, documenting poverty on the south-side of Chicago. Parks found himself alone, poor, and

entrenched within a society that considered him inferior due to the pigmentation of his skin. Understandably, this period was rife with uncertainty. However, with his new camera in tow, there was promise for a better day. “Poverty and bigotry would still be around, but at last I could fight them on even terms. The significant thing was a choice of weapons with which to fight them most effectively” (Parks, 1966, p.274).

Even though he started his artistic journey in photography, Parks also achieved various accolades within film, music, poetry, and literature. Parks used his broad range of innate artistic talents with perfect synergy throughout his photographic career.

Photography became a way to synthesize his wide-ranging interests into one powerful medium: he used his still camera cinematically, composed his images like a musician, sequenced them as a poet might assemble words, and created visual narratives that spoke volumes about the people they represented.

(Kunhardt & Hoffman, 2016, p.9)

In 1942, at age 30, Parks moved to Washington, D.C. to work in a fellowship program at the Farm Security Administration (FSA); a New-Deal organization designed to combat poverty during the Great Depression. The FSA spawned, arguably, the most recognizable photograph in U.S history, Dorothea Lange’s *Migrant Mother*.

Now among other future legends of photography at the FSA, Parks was equipped with certain tools to combat societal injustices. It was at the FSA where Parks began his pursuit of what he called, “the common search for a better world” (Johnson, 2004, p.216). Parks documented the management of daily indignities committed against his African-American brethren.

Parks injected himself into his photographs; so much so, that an examination of his portfolio is an examination of his identity. It is within his photographs that we are confronted with every part of who he was and the environments in which he occupied. This prominent feature was highlighted by his ability to occupy multiple environments at the same time; an understanding, perseverance, and impartiality that allowed him to transversely move through hindrances others found impervious. This vast variety of personal experiences allowed him to associate with individuals of varying domains.

By spending a significant amount of time with his subjects, as both journalist and friend, and treating them as equals and collaborators, Parks was able to present narratives rather than snapshots, allowing readers to see parallels between their own lives and the lives of the people in Parks' stories. (Stange, 2012, p.78)

By his mid-thirties, with his photographic career in its nascent maturational stages, Parks had already faced the most insidious aspects of American life regarding poverty and discrimination. At the conclusion of his life, Parks encompassed some of the most luxurious components of America; in between, he assiduously sought to 'bridge the gap' between these two worlds. This range of dynamic life experiences allowed Parks to find commonality with almost anyone, including Ella Watson, whose paradigmatic portrait has become the characterization of social and cultural inequity.

American Gothic

In its most basic of interpretations, the 1942 Gordon Parks' photograph, *American Gothic*, is a portrait of a woman standing in front of an American flag; depending upon one's perspective, which consists of an amalgamation of knowledge and personal sympathies, this may be our societies predominant interpretation. However, upon further analysis, the image speaks to

Parks' elucidation of the woman's place within the confines of the American demographic. Parks described portraiture photography as the pictorial illustration of an individual (Parks, 1975).

Later in his life, Parks would describe *American Gothic* as "unsubtle." Nevertheless, it remains among his best-known images, which "depicts [a] sharp-featured cleaning woman [named Ella Watson] standing against a background of the American flag, a broom in one hand and a mop in the other" (Berry, 1991, p.19). The image combines elements of both realism and idealism, "the elaborate lighting picks out some details and hides others, lending to symmetry and monumentality to her quiet figure" (Stange, 2006, p.10).

The setting, both latent and implicit, perhaps, is the most "unsubtle" aspect of the image. Ms. Watson is "abstracted from her surroundings; the flag's soft-focus encourages us to read it allegorically rather than materially" (Stange, 2006, p.10). Parks unquestionably delineated Ms. Watson's placement within the frame, highlighting certain semiotic aspects of her, and our, environment.

Ms. Watson, the woman featured in the image, was a charwoman that worked within the FSA building. Parks' boss and mentor at the FSA, Roy Stryker, a brilliant individual in his own right, demanded that his photographers both "get involved with their subjects [and] have empathy for the people whose lives they were documenting" (Berry, 1991, p.17). Upon his mentor's suggestion, Parks became close to Ms. Watson, spending many hours with her at work and home.

Ms. Watson told Parks about her "lifetime of drudgery and despair" (Johnson, 2011, p.10): her mother died at a young age, her father was murdered by a lynch mob, her husband was shot to death, and her daughter died at age 18. "She was raising her two small grandchildren, one of whom was paralyzed, on a meager salary she earned mopping floors" (Berry, 1991, p.17).

With the desire to elicit such an expression of solemnity, Parks then asked her to stand in front of the flag and to “think of what you just told me and look into the camera” (Johnson, 2011, p.10). Ms. Watson’s expression combined with Parks’ instinctive artistry, “became one of his most famous and enduring expressions of outrage at America’s treatment of black people” (Johnson, 2010, p.10).

The ability to arouse Ms. Watson’s expression within these confines highlights Parks’ ability as both a visual artist and rhetor. Ms. Watson, “regards the camera steadily and solemnly, her face half hidden in shadow” (Stange, 2006, p.10). The image demonstrates how an artist’s use of form can create a profound point-of-view that critiques certain paradigms without the use of the written word.

As a maturing civil-rights activist, Parks “learned to use the camera as a means of persuasion” (Johnson, 2011, p.11). This consideration of the subject unquestionably influenced Parks’ contextual documentation of both personal and universal cultural subtexts found within *American Gothic*. “What the camera had to do was expose the evils of racism by showing the people who suffered most under it” (Parks, 2009, p.157). *American Gothic* then acts as a microcosm regarding how Parks felt about Ms. Watson’s placement within the dynamical confines of American society.

Gordon Parks Within Photojournalism

“It was not until the 1880s, when small, handheld cameras were introduced, that photographers started to record the harsh realities of the human drama that were largely invisible to mainstream culture” (Kellan, 2007, p.49). Visual documents of inequality emerged around the time the halftone printing process was developed; this technique, of reproducing images, provided social activists with the ability to share their photographs with mass audiences, thus

resulting in shifts of cultural paradigms. “Today, as in times past, photographs depicting violence, love, grief, joy, and countless other emotions continue to mold public opinion” (Kellan, 2007, p.65).

Early practitioners and scholars of African-American photography, were continuously confronted with the challenge of attempting to shift paradigms that were accentuated by visual narratives predominantly portraying “blatantly stereotypical images of African-Americans as inferior, unattractive, and unintelligent” (Levering & Willis, 2003, p.51).

Frederick Douglass, who was the most photographed person of the 19th century, “believed that images of refined Negroes could counter the stereotypes” (Levering & Willis, 2003, p.51). Douglass believed a significant step toward combating negative racial representations was to use photography to define his own visual identity through the medium.

Additionally, in the early 20th century, African-American photographers, such as James Van Der Zee, provided images that “served as evidence that black Americans were as multifaceted as anyone else, and they played an important role in making the black experience visible” (Levering & Willis, 2003, p.51). Van Der Zee depicted flattering images of African-American urbanites and presented to the American consciousness, African-Americans as they desired to be understood. “Black photographers created a new visual language for “reading” black subjects, an image of self-empowerment—a “New Negro” (Levering & Willis, 2003, p.52). This crusade considered all men and women equal and was prepared to offer more examples of visual conceptualizations to prove their beliefs.

By the mid 20th century, “the term “New Negro” came to represent a spirit of self-awareness, artistic consciousness, and racial pride that arose in black communities” (Levering & Willis, 2003, p.52). This movement was understood and predominantly portrayed in various

visual media platforms; thus, a new visual narrative provided an affirmation of self, and others, for those exposed to such mediums.

This allocation of perspective, regarding equality, did not, initially, extend to the predominantly white mainstream mass media establishments; thus, contributing to intellectual ignorance's that further perpetrated racially discriminatory practices. This delay of representation is notable when considering the fact that the civil-rights movement could not have been understood, by white audiences, without insightful contemplation through visual imagery; therefore, in order for all Americans to realize the progress made during the civil rights era, "the persuasive and protective power of those pictures [had to be] recognized" (Kasher, 1996, p.8).

Gordon Parks was the first black photographer to work for *Life* and later *Time* magazines; a notable feat considering the eminence and demographics of viewership possessed by both publications. "In its heyday—during the post-World War II and pre-TV news years—*Life* magazine reported each week on major political and cultural events to an estimated 20 million readers" (Haas, 2015, p.13). Because of this viewership, which was mostly white, affluent, and middle-class, Parks wielded a tremendous platform to influence concentrated, potentially racially biased paradigms, thus making him a highly significant cultural attaché.

Though Parks had a successful mainstream fashion and fine-arts career in photography, he is most remembered for his photojournalism, concerning societal hardships endured within certain African-American communities; his *American Gothic* photograph exemplifies the prominence of his photojournalistic endeavors. Parks did not attempt to glamourize the struggles people endured; instead, he provided direct documentation of harsh realities, allowing his innate artistic aptitudes to provide the significance of representation.

Almost certainly, Parks was the first photographer to show a predominantly white, largely privileged, audience how the “other half” of the society lived; doing so with respect, consideration and unwavering morality. His biggest contribution is the affirmation that photojournalism, like all mass media, plays a pivotal role in progressively shaping popular culture and evolving societies. Furthermore, his depictions of the 20th century African-American experience will remain iconic and relevant for generations to come.

Gordon Parks Within the 21st Century

Much like many of our great historical progressive leaders, Parks’ portfolio serves as an example for rhetors today who seek to nonviolently address the ills of our world (Jenkins, 2007). According to Stange (2006), from our current 21st century perspective, “it is clearer than ever that Gordon Parks’ work and life tell compelling stories that must be attended to, even as their contingent events recede into an all but irretrievable past” (p.9). For most who attend to his work today, his photography is a means by which we learn and experience various aspects of the African-America narrative, which remains just as relevant today as it was in 1942.

Even though Parks died in 2006, at the age of 93, like most transformative artists, his work endures. Parks’ portfolio pertains to the consideration of all people, no matter the color of their skin or other discernable characteristics. During his time, racial discrimination was the predominant mindset. Most white people, especially in the south, considered themselves the ordained superior race. Fortunately, the endeavors of Parks, and many other mass media communicators and civil-rights activists, have slowly ameliorated this heinous generational mentality.

Unfortunately, the struggle for complete racial efficacy remains. Many of the problems Parks addressed during the 20th century remain engrained within American cultural constructs.

For example, “today, one in three black male babies born in the United States is expected to go to jail or prison during his lifetime” (Coyle & Moresi, 2015, p.18). This epidemic of disproportionate mass incarceration has a shattering effect upon minority communities; so much so, it is being described as “the new Jim Crow.” Furthermore, “schools have become increasingly re-segregated by race as a result of policies that have undermined integration gains from a generation ago” (Coyle & Moresi, 2015, p.18). Voting rights of many African-American communities are, once again, being constrained by obstacles and governmental red-tape. Additionally, “nearly half of all black children live near or below the federal poverty line” (Coyle & Moresi, 2015, p.18).

Today, when confronted with the harsh realities of racial inequality, both from the past and the present, many people, not affected by such practices, choose to turn a blind eye. This lack of attendance is inspired by either topical ignorance or personal discomfort. This phenomenon has been exacerbated further with the advent of personal social media accounts, that have global outreach potential and the ability, from outside forces, to alter or dissuade factual, racially-sensitive, communal narratives. These, often amateur, media practitioners reinvent artifacts designed to soften the anguish and destruction of the past and present.

However, “without fully acknowledging the truth of our past, we cannot reconcile ourselves to a future with the necessary commitment to racial equality for justice to prevail” (Coyle & Moresi, 2015, p.17). This is why Gordon Parks’ photography remains just as relevant today as it was in 1942. As long as issues of racial discrimination endure, the narratives Parks told will remain equally necessary and impenetrable. “Without telling the truth about our past, we can’t ensure the kind of future that honors the courage of the participants in the civil rights struggle” (Coyle & Moresi, 2015, p.18).

The hurdles that continue in the fight for racial equality remain because of our collective lack of attendance to such issues of inequality. That is why effective imagery is so vital within the public sphere; these images demand our immediate attention and inspire us to embrace the vision, courage, and commitment of racial justice. Just as it was in 1942, “the hope of civil rights and justice now resides in all who bear witness to these images and choose to stand and speak” (Coyle & Moresi, 2015, p.18).

Many producers of mass media today can learn valuable lessons from Gordon Parks. Instead of kowtowing to corporate demands, compelled only by capital gains, artists can have principles and use their artistic talents to inspire and educate the masses toward more compassionate realizations. If he so desired, Parks could have rested on his laurels by exclusively producing photographs for major fashion designers and multinational retail distributors. However, instead of such superficiality, Parks had principles that propelled him to invest his time and resources toward more noble pursuits.

Recently, Kendrick Lamar honored the portfolio and legacy of Parks by recreating some of his most pertinent images within his ‘Element’ music video. Unlike most popular artists today, Lamar has shown, in his young career, a propensity to speak to relevant cultural issues without placating to the demands of special interests. Indoctrinating his fans, and the public, to the life and work of Parks is a commendable act, one that should be replicated more frequently.

Instead, the majority of popular culture seems to revel within the confines of inconsequential art and celebrity. Practitioners decree this popularization of irrelevance is predicated by the demands of the public interest; as a result, the narratives divulged are at best superficial, at worst completely hollow. Though this discourse of media is prevalent, it is not truly, either consciously or not, desired by the majority of citizens. That is why individuals like

Parks, and their work, are so fondly remembered. Parks remains a role model for media practitioners who use mass-communication platforms with just motivations and vigilant agendas; for those who spurn trivial gains and endlessly pursue the production of texts that attempt to improve societal deficiencies.

It may be argued that there aren't the obvious societal deficiencies today as compared to 1942; this may suggest that Parks chose his righteous path because racial inequality was so prevalent he simply couldn't ignore it or look at himself in the mirror without experiencing the burning desire to right the morally inept ship. This, of course, is rhetorical poppycock; described by decision-makers who strive to keep the public both subservient and fractured, and are afraid of individuals like Gordon Parks. Today, societal deficiencies regarding poverty, social disenfranchisement, income inequality, racial antagonism, simmering global nationalism, climate change, etc. remain just as topically imperative as they were during any time in our brief history.

Interest in the Topic

The purpose of this thesis is to gain a deeper understanding of how mass media can eliminate, or alleviate, the suffering of those who require such consideration. History has provided numerous examples of mass media reconstructing societal paradigms in the affirmative. Through both informative and entertainment-based media platforms, mass media producers have played a role in fostering a more empathetic society. Therefore, it can be assumed that the more knowledge one has regarding communicative rhetorical appeals, the greater the ability one has in persuading the masses toward a greater consideration of others.

That is why Gordon Parks is an essential figure within this analysis. Parks' photography formulated transformative narratives that increase the spectrum of awareness regarding societal concerns, and his images remain just as relevant today as they were in the mid-twentieth century.

Through the example he helped establish, his portfolio illustrates the idea that a “photographer’s work has as much to do with his heart as it does with his eye... [and that] the camera [can ultimately] serve a humane purpose” (Parks, 1990, p.86).

Parks’ photograph, analyzed within this thesis, has had a measurable impact on crafting a more empathetic society. As both a student and practitioner of mass media processes, the foremost objective is clear; create content worthy of attendance and derivative of evolutionary consideration. *American Gothic* accomplishes the objective of persuading many of its viewers to consider the perspectives of others; Parks is then a role model for any individual seeking greater tools for this form of societal reformation.

Today, when confronted with deleterious societal media messages, one is often overcome with feelings of inert helplessness. However, if one is equipped with a broader understanding of media history, solace can be unearthed when reviewing the past triumphs of a brazen few; and perhaps, with this understanding of historical contexts, more people of prominence can emerge as activists who are capable of using various mass media platforms to procure a more empathetic society.

Statement Regarding the Problem

Chaos reigns throughout many corners of the world. Consider, for a moment, nouns regarding societal destruction and discord: war, hunger, rape, addiction, poverty, genocide, suicide, homicide, racism, religious intolerance, slavery, human trafficking, terrorism, hegemony, capital-greed, capital-punishment, molestation, hatred, etc. Humanity has come a long way in alleviating many of these egregious anthropological practices. However, there’s still a long way to go in order to progress beyond our earliest primordial instincts.

Statement Regarding the Solution

Education is the primary means of eradicating intolerance. There is no greater representation of civility than the pursuit of one's education and the attempted education of others. This analysis will explore the means in which educators can use visual imagery to elicit rhetorical appeals designed to evoke pedagogical reflection within given audiences.

The Research Question (RQ) in Relation to Rhetorical Theory

Pathos is the rhetorical appeal that uses emotion to elicit an audience response. This analysis will provide a framework used to gain a greater understanding of how a photograph uses pathos to evoke empathy. The conclusions of this analysis can advance rhetorical theory by providing a greater understanding of the operational processes within visual imagery regarding the formulation of discourse that can then be used towards the elicitation of pathos.

Research Question

RQ: How does a visual image evoke an empathetic rhetorical appeal? Specifically, how does *American Gothic*, by Gordon Parks, evoke an empathetic rhetorical appeal?

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Rhetorical Criticism

Rhetorical Criticism is the process of analyzing discourse that is intended to persuade an audience through strategic means. Though it can be used to analyze a variety of texts, the following thesis uses rhetorical criticism as a framework for the exploration of a visual text. Numerous academic disciplines attempt to ascertain a broader understanding of visual imagery through rhetorical criticism. This type of analysis affords critics with the opportunity to ask questions regarding the persuasive power of images through the art of discourse. Questions such as why are some images more persuasive than others? And, does visual imagery follow the same rules of rhetorical discourse that pertain to literature?

“We live our lives enveloped in [signs]. How we perceive, what we know, what we experience, and how we act are the results of our own [sign] use” (Foss, 2018, p.3). These signs are found within an enumerable variety of texts; from content given by a professor in a classroom, to movies, speeches, posters, prints, paintings, etc. The idea regarding the existence of such signs within texts is not a profound concept. It is this intrinsic concept that perhaps separates even the most nascent of human-beings from that of any other sentient species; our use of signs and sign systems distinguish us and our cognitive capabilities. Humans possess the ability to understand the presence of signs and participate with them directly. Rhetorical criticism is then partly the analysis of why and how signs affect us.

Within the realm of rhetorical criticism as a theory, the rhetorical locution holds greater definitional standing than that of its usual communal delineation. Here rhetorical refers to the art of discourse and its assorted methods of syntactical execution; thus exploring the innate ability a

producer of texts has in conveying a narrative with concise precision. This narrative, if executed effectively, can have the transformative power to persuade the masses.

Rhetoric and rhetorical criticism are broad in scope, not limited to written or spoken discourse. The usage of signs within the confines of rhetoric can lead to an endless variety of analytical processes. Regarding these processes, the “theory you choose is a lens through which you can view the work” (Bodden, 2013, p.8).

A rhetorical analysis can alter how texts are perceived and provide a deeper understanding of the appeals of effective discourse. To partake in rhetorical criticism, one must systematically engage the signs encountered to procure a greater appreciation for the effects they hold. It is through these systematic processes of examination that we obtain a greater skillset regarding the illumination, exploration, and understanding of signs and our reactions to them. Rhetorical criticism theory explores the processes we use signs for communication purposes.

Foss (2018) specifically compartmentalizes ‘dimensions’ for hypothesizing within the confines of rhetorical criticism. The first dimension distinguishes ‘*rhetoric as an action*,’ where the creator and viewer of texts make the cognitive choice to engage in communicative processes. The next dimension describes ‘*rhetoric as a symbolic action*’ where a system of signs communicates complex connections between objects. These symbols are then noted as being exclusively conceptualized by human-beings (through *human action*) or are a result of human ingenuity; thus, excluding objects found in nature.

Foss (2018) recognizes the research surrounding symbol-use between non-human animals but acknowledges that this communication does not represent rhetoric. Though communicative abilities are evident among various species, she notes that rhetoric, in both degree and kind, is a distinctive human ability.

The final dimension of note describes the idea of rhetoric as the ‘*enabler of communication,*’ where rhetoric functions in the allowance of communication for a multiplicity of purposes; either to persuade others to see things in a new light, or an opportunity to educate oneself to a new perspective.

Unlike traditional criticism, where an artifact is analyzed to determine its intrinsic value; rhetorical criticism seeks to explore the artifact based on its value within a more expansive framework. The goal is to move beyond the explicit constructs of the artifact and consider its broader placement within societal, cultural, or philosophical environments. Through rhetorical criticism, “you might want to learn more about [the artist] and how his or her personal background is reflected in the work. Or... what the work says about society” (Bodden, 2013, p.6).

The outcome for rhetorical criticism is to attain conditional conclusions regarding the advancement of rhetorical theory. The theory being a provisional response to an issue posed to better understand the world; this encompasses a series of universal doctrines that clarify a method or phenomenon and provides a foundation for the answering of inquiries. A theory obtained from rhetorical criticism is derived from the explanation of rhetorical processes.

However, the exploration of an artifact through rhetorical criticism is not exclusively culminated with a theoretical contribution. The primary goal is the development of our abilities as communicators and consumers of applied sign usage within communal confines. This stringent theoretical understanding can describe, “how art, literature, music, theater, film, speeches, and other endeavors either support or challenge the way society behaves” (Bodden, 2013, p.7).

With the advancement of rhetorical criticism, at the behest of the rhetorical critique, we can understand how signs are operationalized. Therefore, as a consumer and/or creator of tangible rhetorical texts, we can experience a greater depth of knowledge when confronted with these rigorously explored representations.

Ultimately, rhetorical analysis is important in the evolutionary development of a common-world; especially within the confines of visual interpretation. This common-world of visual interpretation may establish an even more relevant common-language among various cultures, races, and creeds.

A unified visual language can potentially expand our perceptions of reality, common or otherwise. The idea that our experiences are created through rhetorically persuasive means contributes to the perception of a malleable reality. Therefore, the permeable nature of signs, both historical and contemporary, allows rhetoric to constantly shape our definition of what reality is. Furthermore, the visual vocabulary contributes to the formulation of signs that further shape our perception of reality.

The systematic confines regarding rhetorical criticism, as described by Foss (2018), “point to the essence of rhetorical criticism as an art, not a science... artifacts are dealt with more as the artist deals with experience than as the scientist does” (p.26). With this in mind, the rhetorical critic must possess a multitude of creative aptitudes. These aptitudes will help the reader gain a greater understanding of the artifact and why the nature of the understanding is an important component to procure.

Finally, the rhetorical critic has to ascertain and provide an effective argument for the formulation and functionality of the persuasive narrative that exists within the artifact. This

understanding of the narrative then provides an opportunity for the viewer to see the artifact from a truly unique perspective.

Narrative Criticism

Can a picture tell a story? If so, how is this narrative achieved? Is it through the same means in which a narrative is told through a novel or short story? Based on the complexity of both narrative and our interpretations of narrative structures, these questions may, or may not, have ascertainable answers; however, resolutions to these inquiries may be, at best, open-ended. To this end, narrative criticism provides opportunities to explore the various dimensions of narrative structures.

The stories we tell each other provide clues regarding the values and ethical system that characterize our culture (Foss, 2018). This is why critics, from a wide range of academic disciplines, use narratives, or elements of narrative, to explore the rhetorical aspects found within communicative discourse.

Narratives provide order to the presentational values of a rhetor's perspective through a description of events involving structures of narrative. These descriptions require the presence of at least two events that are in some way temporally organized. When analyzing one photograph, that only describes one event, the narrative critic must maneuver around this temporal restriction.

This is achieved through an understanding of a broader construct of narrative that moves beyond these traditional, temporal characteristics. For example, some narratives are produced by the use of certain narrative characteristics such as theme, setting, character, events, etc. When used effectively, these qualities can be found within the confines of photography, which then make narrative criticism possible.

For this analysis, the justification for using elements of narrative criticism is derived from a desire to ascertain effective means of persuasive discourse; ‘persuasive’ acting as a variant designation for educational discourse. With this in mind, critics can investigate deviations of narrative implementation, and gain a better understanding of how these idiosyncratic methods persuade audiences differently.

According to Hart (1997), narratives advance persuasive discourse with unique characteristics: “(1) they disarm listeners by enchanting them, (2) they awaken within listener’s dormant experiences and feelings, and (3) they thereby expose, subtly, some sort of propositional argument” (p.93). A well-told story frames given experiences; by analyzing these characteristics, critics can then determine the persuasiveness of a given narrative.

Ultimately, analytical determinations surrounding narrative processes are matters of “accuracy and goodness [that] often exist in the eye of the beholder” (Hart, 1997, p.97). Furthermore, there is a strong need to continue such careful examinations because of the escapist and pervasive power of narrative systems. When used effectively, by a skillful rhetor, narratives can shift public discourse through the effective elicitation of empathy and thus create a more communally considerate public policy.

Empathy

Empathy is defined as “the action of understanding, being aware of, being sensitive to, and vicariously experiencing the feelings, thoughts, and experience of another” (Merriam-Webster). From Greek origin, ‘em’ (in) + ‘pathos’ (emotion), the word ‘empathy’ has only existed for approximately one-hundred years; meanwhile, the emotion itself has likely existed since the nascent stages of our earliest primordial, parental tendencies. This is exemplified with human infants, who provide emotional signals to their caregiver, to procure a desired response.

Baron-Cohen (2011) notes that empathy “occurs when we suspend our single-minded focus of attention and instead adopt a double-minded focus” (p.16). This “single-minded” focus is only cognizant of one’s personal affairs, while a “double-minded” focus perceives the thoughts or perceptions of another’s perspective, while still engaging with their own. This characteristic supports the idea of the images’ role in the evocation of an empathetic response. Photography, by its nature, portrays the perspective of another, thus providing a “double-minded” focus.

Emotion, empathy in particular, greatly contributes to the mechanisms of a functioning civilization. “One needs to pay close attention to the activities and goals of others to cooperate effectively” (Keltner, Marsh & Smith, 2010, p.21). As a community, our biological tendencies must be considered when determining what our society should look like and how it should be achieved, particularly, with regards to basic civil and human rights. “If we could manage to see people on other continents as part of us, drawing them into our circle of reciprocity and empathy, we would be building on, rather than going against, our nature” (Keltner, Marsh & Smith, 2010, p.23).

The nature of empathy is both fickle and all-encompassing. Empathy is often only activated when a member within our community is distressed, and less prominent when members deemed outside our communal-ranks exhibit the same amount of distress. Human nature, which consists of both positive and negative aspects of basic tribalistic tendencies, makes it more difficult to identify with people unlike ourselves. However, “our best hope for transcending tribal differences is based on the moral emotions, because emotions defy ideology. In principle, empathy can override every rule about how to treat others... Caring emotions may lead to subversive acts” (Keltner, Marsh & Smith, 2010, p.24).

Empathy is a state of being, an intrinsically innate instrument of attunement; “the key idea is that we all lie somewhere on an empathy spectrum” (Baron-Cohen, 2011, p.15).

However, within this analysis, it’s most important to describe empathy as an ability; one that can be fostered through rhetorical means in an effort to improve one’s community. Dalton and Fairchild (2004) note that this ability can be learned by “using one’s imagination to see and feel as others see and feel” (p.111).

The greatest danger to empathetic consideration is our ability, as humans, to make assumptions regarding people not enmeshed in your particular demographic. These assumptions can validate judgments and categorizations that, combined with our indoctrinated sense of superiority, can lead to societal strife. Generally, assumptions should not be definitive in nature and we should be ever cognizant of our “natural biases that [make us] judge people incorrectly” (Greene, 2018, p.49).

Due to the complex nature of our society, and the fact that we are a tribal species, universal empathetic consideration is most likely achieved through repeated exposure to diverse populations. This repetition has the potential to slowly formulate a semiotic language that procures an intellectual understanding necessary for the empathetic deference of various personages.

Semiotics

“In the last forty years, students of human communication have developed a number of approaches for empirically investigating spoken dialogue” (Garrod & Galantucci, 2012, p.1).

Semiotics concerns the evaluation of human communication through signs and sign-systems.

Academic scholars within the field, or semioticians, are responsible for “[investigating] the generalities of human semiosis rather than the specifics of spoken dialogue” (Garrod &

Galantucci, 2012, p.1). Signs are inherently visual; throughout the course of one's life, we are bombarded with and must navigate through, the varying interpretations of signs. Signs are also emotionally ambiguous; existing equally as an impediment of vexing complexity, as well as a dais of jubilant artistic ingenuity.

Kress and Leeuwen (2006) note that in order to encompass a full range of communicative traits, visual images, like all semiotic modes, have to encompass many properties of both signification and discourse. These properties must embody features of the world as it is experienced by humans, and denote phenomena in an environment separate from that of the representational system. This environment is most frequently represented semiotically.

Semiotic modes offer an array of *choices*, of different ways in which objects, and their relations to other objects...can be represented. Two objects may be represented as involved in a process of interaction which could be visually realized by vectors. (Kress & Leeuwen, 2006, p.68)

These vectors act as paths of mobility and can be simple, and/or directly, connected; or they can be connected through a multifaceted web of interpretation, “not by a [direct] vector but, for instance, [but] by a ‘tree’ structure” (Kress & Leeuwen, 2006, p.75). Any means of signification must convey relationships between the creator and re-creator of signs. Further, any mode of discourse must be able to characterize a specific common relationship between the producer, the viewing audience and the object represented. Therefore, all semiotic modes possess “the capacity to form *texts*, complexes of signs which cohere both internally with each other and externally with the context in and for which they were produced” (Kress & Leeuwen, 2006, p.13).

According to Burn and Parker (2003), a glaring problem with semiotics is that it has been historically “developed into increasingly obscure variations” (p.2). This obscurity has been driven by both modernist and postmodernist philosophical identities and processes of the 20th century. This injection of philosophical leanings, into semiotic theory, has not provided anything remotely denoting a consensus regarding the language required for textual analysis. These non-systematized ideologies “valuably challenged the idea that meaning resides in fixed codes, representing fixed identities and a stable world, they also lost some of the clarificatory benefits of structuralist thought” (Burn & Parker, 2003, p.2).

Conversely, Hamel defends this somewhat anti-structuralist approach. Describing that while the examination of texts subjectively offers a semblance of academic orthodoxy, it is not representative of how our society functions in actuality. By contrast, objective dissemination of communicative means “will by its very nature produce criminals, rebels, trouble-makers, non-conformists, freethinkers and theorists” (Hamel, 2011, p.56). These communicative means cannot be meticulously confined amongst our current pedagogical tendencies. Regarding social semantics, our “personal ethics cannot be assumed to be identical with any officially propagated moral code” (Hamel, 2011, p.56).

It should be noted that modernist and postmodernist philosophical approaches will be incorporated within this analysis; this is due to the fact that “subjects cannot simply follow the universal law, because the law itself is being refracted by the increasingly complex prism of society” (Hamel, 2011, p.56).

Semiotics: Signs (symbols, indexes, icons)

It’s important to note, that any work of art is in and of itself a sign. Within semiotics, signs are signifiers that refer to the signified. Signs are anything (and everything) from visual

depictions of objects, a person's body language, actual street signs, etc. The elements and principles of art and design, such as color, line, perspective, etc. are also capable of being style-based signs (or style-based signifiers).

Signs are not arbitrary; they are often clear signifiers of discernable truths. Whether signs can be consciously determined, or not, is dependent upon the interpretation of the viewer of given texts. Representational and abstract art are both capable of being and having signifiers. Representational art usually signifies objects, places, or people that are being visually signified; abstract art can also signify a concept or emotion within the artist or viewer. There are three derivatives of representational signs in semiotics: symbol, index, and icon.

A symbol is an object that embodies the presence of something not present; this is achieved particularly when a quantifiable entity is used to signify something subjectively abstract. A symbol is a signifier that does not look anything like the phenomena being signified.

To understand symbols, the addition of learned constructs must be applied. For example, a ring is only understood to be representative of love and marriage because of additional social and cultural constructs pertaining to this representation. Without these learned constructs, obtained through the epistemological methods of tradition and/or authority, a ring would possess zero significance regarding love or marriage. The same is true for letters in the alphabet or national flags; the American flag, for instance, is the embodiment of many subjective, culturally learned, constructs. Jung (1964) described a symbol as:

A term, a name, or even a picture that may be familiar in daily life, yet that possesses specific connotations in addition to its conventional meaning. It implies something vague, unknown, or hidden from us. It has a wider 'unconscious' aspect that is never precisely defined or fully explained. (1964, p.3)

With this definition in mind, symbolism is then the implementation of symbol-signifiers to represent an idea or perspective. Producers of such texts understand that symbols can have an immense command over human incitement, both rallying and riling a desired emotional sentiment.

An index is a signifier that indicates, or points to, a connection between the signifier and the signified. For example, footprints signify the presence of a person walking, black-smoke signifies the presence of a fire. Indexes can be both innately known or culturally learned; for example, a baby crying innately signifies sadness and a need for parental care. However, the red-light of a stop-sign denotes the need to stop; this is a signifier that must be learned.

Geometricians mark letters against the different parts of their diagrams and then use these letters to indicate those parts...A sundial or a clock indicates the time of day...A rap on the door is an index... Anything which focusses the attention is an index. (Innis, 1985, p.13)

Indexes bear no similarity to that in which it represents, but does share a relation of “dynamical (including spatial) connection both with the individual object... and with the senses of memory of the person for whom it serves as a sign” (Innis, 1985, p.13). Index-signs are distinguished by three characteristics: (1) they have no likeness to what they signify, (2) they refer to a singular phenomenon, (3) “they direct the attention to their objects by blind compulsion” (Innis, 1985, p.13).

Icons are everywhere within our society and are far more apparent than symbols and indexes. When compared to symbols, icons are on the opposite end of the representational semiotic spectrum. An icon is a signifier that bears a physical resemblance to that which is being signified; something that is meant as a direct imitation of the object or concept. “An Icon is a

sign which refers to the Object that it denotes merely by virtue of characters of its own, and which it possesses, just the same, whether any such Object actually exists or not” (Innis, 1985, p.8). A portrait or cartoon drawing of someone is a good example of an icon signifier. “Anything whatever, be it quality, existent individual, or law, is an Icon of anything, in so far as it is like that thing and used as a sign of it” (Innis, 1985, p.8).

Photographs, in general, are icon-signifiers, “because we know that they are in certain respects exactly like the objects they represent” (Innis, 1985, p.11). This likeness, by physical relation, “is due to the photographs having been produced under such circumstances that they were physically forced to correspond point by point to nature” (Innis, 1985, p.11).

It is important to consider these representational signifiers independently and also amongst themselves. For example, there is a discernable spectrum pertaining to the directness and clarity of representation when considering all three types of signifiers; symbols and icons occupying both ends of the representational spectrum, with index-signifiers found in between.

Another notable distinction regarding sign-types is that they are not mutually exclusive. A sign can, and usually does, possess multiple characteristics of sign-types, procured through the breath of interpretation and analysis. Symbols, for example, “come into being by development out of other signs, particularly from icons, or from mixed signs partaking of the nature of icons and symbols” (Innis, 1985, p.19). Symbols themselves are generative in nature when amalgamated with concepts and other signs; new symbols germinate from concepts established by previous signs and significations. “So it is only out of symbols that a new symbol can grow” (Innis, 1985, p.19). Once established, a symbol propagates among people in use and meaning. These types of significations can then be used within a multitude of modalities to foster structures of narrative.

For this analysis, perhaps the most notable of all the characteristics of signs is their seemingly cavernous multi-representational nature. Simply put, an object within a frame can, and usually does, have multiple significations and even constructs that are being signified. For example, within the photograph *American Gothic*, by Gordon Parks, the tools-of-labor (mop and broom) directly signify a palpable, icon-based, representation of a mop and a broom. These objects can also signify hard, back-breaking work; or they can signify that the woman in the picture uses these objects for her occupation, thus making her a charwoman. These two objects also possess style-based signifiers, such as the fact that they are facing forward, or that they are standing side-by-side next to the woman in the photograph. Or, perhaps most bothersome to critics with structural-traditionalist tendencies, the mop and broom could represent something completely abstract; as long as there is any degree of justification for that which ‘signifies the signified’, there is always representational potentiality of intended discourse.

Visual Imagery, Criticism and Persuasiveness

“Vision has always played an important part in determining cultural attitudes, behaviors, and effects” (Fuery, 2009, p.97). Traditionally, rhetorical scholars have focused the predominant amount of their time on the influences the written word has had within the confines of the public sphere. Recently, however, a growing amount of consideration has been given to the rhetoric of the image. “Visual rhetoric refers to a large body of visual and material practices, from architecture to cartography and from interior design to public memorials” (Lucaites & Hariman, 2007, p.45).

“There is no formula that makes a picture influential” (Gibbs, 2015, p.12). However, according to Hart (1997), “a captivating visual is captivating in two senses: (1) it “contains” an idea or ideology, ... (2) it reduces the interpretations an audience can make, filling their eyes

with a single, dominant meaning” (p.192). This theory certainly makes sense and seems easily comprehensible; the difficult part for critics, or anyone trying to describe texts, is the ability to articulate thoughts into a clear comprehensible manor. This is difficult because images possess a language onto themselves. While giving a critique of images, it is impossible to do so without the means of syntax. This fact does visual critique a disservice because, through necessity, it requires an additional and often unrelated, modality. Therefore, to truly ‘discuss’ the effects of images without words, is to truly understand its communal significance. Instead, we settle to interpret our personal intrinsic responses to visual stimuli by providing justification through unrelated means.

In order for persuasive images to inspire a rhetorical appeal, “it is not enough for the photographer to *signify* the horrible for us to experience it” (Barthes, 2012, p.116). Many artists, who use visual platforms, are ineffective in their attempt to emotionally ‘move’ their audiences. Many attempts at pathos come off as pretentious and trite, having zero emotional effect. Barthes (2012) notes that this phenomenon is perhaps due to the artist’s desire to inject themselves ‘too generously’ within their texts, stating that the artist, “almost always *overconstructed* the horror he is proposing, adding to the fact, by contrasts or parallels, the intentional *language* of horror” (p.116). Barthes (2012) notes that the artist provides too much judgment, and has reflected too much for us, “except a simple right of intellectual acquiescence: we are linked to these images only by a technical interest; over indicated by the artist himself” (p.116).

Regarding this notion, it is perhaps no wonder why legitimate, emotionally charged, images are often the work of individuals who, first-and-foremost, consider themselves to be photojournalists; “where the fact, surprised, explodes in all its stubbornness, its literality, in the very obviousness of its obtuse nature” (Barthes, 2012, p.118).

Justification for Choosing American Gothic for Analysis

The photojournalist, that is innately artistic, is perhaps the most persuasive force for societal, cultural and personal evolution. Because the vast majority of people respond to visual stimuli, the more visual persuasive techniques are understood, the more weaponized they can become. This is perhaps why Gordon Parks' *American Gothic* was chosen for this analysis; Parks exemplifies a photojournalist that possesses innate artistic talents; and with *American Gothic*, Parks compiled a bevy of style-based signifiers that are capable of transmitting effective rhetorical appeals.

Parks was clearly able to evoke a “humanistic connection—a strong relationship based on some form of mutual understanding—made between the photographer and his subject” (Brookman, 1997, p.79). The presence of this connection is also felt by the reproducer, or viewer, of such texts. It is this evocation that appeals to the overall goals of the analysis, and thus its justification. Parks was clearly “able to listen, understand, and silently convey his own compassion for Watson as a complex individual with a serious story to tell” (Brookman, 1997, p.89).

Much of the reason for choosing *American Gothic* is due to the lack of scholarly study previously devoted to it. Perhaps one reason for this academic chasm may be Parks' propensity to supply his own critical analysis of *American Gothic*, through both written and oral summation. Parks also describe the image as “unsubtle,” which may have intimidated certain critics from offering their personal analyses. Or perhaps some non-African-American critics may have not wanted to broach topics concerning racial discrimination. Whatever the reason, *American Gothic* provided a girth of functionality when addressing this analysis' RQ.

Visual Imagery and Education

Visual imagery should be dominant within pedagogical institutions. This falsity is perhaps why many scholastic endeavors are looked upon with such reproach, especially by those individuals who would benefit from the implementation of more visual modalities within educational environments. Moving forward, it's important to incorporate the idea of the 'visual culture' into scholarly practices, in all its varieties. To this end, it's important to explore the processes of visual discourse; specifically asking if "visuals follow the same rules guiding verbal rhetoric? Does language inevitably "frame" visuals, making them meaningless until captioned by an enterprising persuader?" (Hart, 1997, p.188).

The visual culture has advanced for the younger generations into an exercise of visual thinking. This, as noted by Mirzoeff (2016), is not something to simply study but "we have to engage with it ourselves... For many artists, academics, and others who see themselves as visual activists, visual culture is a way to create forms of change" (p.283).

Effective visual images are perhaps the most persuasive forms of empirical data. This data is then used by the producer (visual artist) and reproducer (viewer) as expressive acts which are then linguistic in nature. This process may have an effect of "sweeping the reader of the image into an astonishment less intellectual than visual precisely because it fastens him to the surface of the spectacle, to his optical resistance and not immediately to its signification" (Barthes, 2012, p.117).

III. METHODOLOGY

Rhetorical Criticism Processes

This rhetorical criticism analysis will consist of five steps, as provided by Foss (2018): formulating a research question, selecting an artifact, selecting a unit of analysis, analyzing the artifact, and reporting the results of the critical analysis.

Formulating a Research Question. As previously stated, the research question that provides the generative functionality of the analysis, is: “*How does a visual image evoke an empathetic rhetorical appeal? Specifically, how does American Gothic, by Gordon Parks, evoke an empathetic rhetorical appeal?*” The formulation of this research question is generated from an exhaustive examination of the proposed artifact.

The research question proposes concepts, regarding semiotic rhetoric that will be explored through the examination of the artifact. The question drives the analysis toward a deeper understanding of rhetorical processes, specifically the invocation of empathy, which then speaks to the invocation of rhetorical appeals.

Selecting an Artifact. The artifact that will be analyzed, act as the ‘data’ for the study, and used to answer the research question, is the photograph *American Gothic* by Gordon Parks. This image was selected for this analysis because it contains instances of symbol use that is capable of procuring new understandings regarding rhetorical processes.

Selecting a Unit of Analysis. The unit of analysis will be used to provide a substantive answer to the proposed research question and the critic will only focus on certain aspects of the artifact that support the pursuit of said answer. The unit of analysis must provide the critic with a lens in which to examine and describe the artifact to adeptly answer the research question.

Furthermore, the unit of analysis acts as a scanning-device for picking up specific information regarding the artifact. Depending on which unit of analysis is selected, the focus of the critic will be sharpened and thus expose certain aspects of the artifact.

Analyzing the Artifact. The critic will analyze the artifact using the ascribed unit of analysis. This is achieved by having *American Gothic* visually present at all times as analytical inquiries are being made. The critic will look at the picture over and over again with specific details, questions, and analytical components, in mind.

Reporting the Findings of the Critical Analysis. After the unit of analysis is selected and the artifact is observed through this unique critical lens, the critic is now responsible for disclosing the results of the findings. Objectives to be achieved are: familiarize the reader to the topic, present a clear statement of purpose, explain the research question (RQ), explain how and why the RQ contributes to the advancement of rhetorical theory, describe the ‘data’ gathered pertaining to explicit content of the image, interpret the latent content found within the image, describe what has been revealed from the application of the unit of analysis, provide an answer to the RQ that advances, or supports, rhetorical theory.

Statement Regarding Perspective and Impartiality

The critic does not provide one ‘right’ elucidation of the artifact; this is because the artifact, does not comprise a reality that can be identified and proved, merely interpreted through a certain critical lens. Foss (1996) notes the impossibility of the critic’s ‘objectivity and impartiality,’ which is due to an inability to view the artifact without the incorporation of one’s personal interpretation. Personal experiences and principles of the critic are inevitably incorporated within the critical evaluation of the artifact. The critic provides one rhetorically slanted perspective on the artifact; because of the impartiality of the critic, the main objective is

then to defend one's claims as stated. This defense of claims is achieved through a vivid presentation of data as exhibited within the given artifact. The critic then creates a relationship between the data presented and the conclusions derived from the data. It's worth noting that the critic's objective is not convincing others to adopt the claims made about the artifact, but to understand how the critic justifies the particular views regarding the artifact (Foss, 2018).

Unit of Analysis

The objectives within the three stages of analysis follow a chronological trajectory: determine the explicit and latent *content* of the image, determine how the content creates *symbols*, determine how the symbols create *narratives*.

Stage 1. Describe. The purpose of this stage is to describe the 'data' pertaining to the explicit content of the image. The ultimate goal of this analysis is to determine the signifiers used. The following demands will be considered:

- Describe the social and cultural milieu in which the photograph was published: This is achieved by describing any notable events from the period that may have influenced the producer of the image and the intended narrative.

- Describe the explicit content of the image. This consists of anything that is visibly apparent within the confines of the frame: persons, objects, setting(s), event(s), etc.

- Describe the style or type of photograph. This regards the characteristics that differentiate one approach of photography to another.

- Describe style-based components pertaining to form. This is used to determine "how the subject matter is presented" (Barret, 2003, p.26). Elements and principles of art and design will be used to describe how the image is "composed, arranged, and constructed visually" (Barret, 2003, p.27). Only the elements and principles that are pertinent to the RQ will be documented.

- Describe the signs that are present within the image and note their traditional representations.

Stage 2. Interpret. The purpose of this stage is to interpret the latent content found within the image. The ultimate goal of this analysis is to determine what the signifiers mean within the framework of the overall publication. The following demands will be considered:

- Interpret the signs within the image. This is a critical interpretation of signifiers used in correlation with the knowledge surrounding the explicit contexts of the ascribed data.

- Interpret the subject matter, or topic, of the image. This is a macro-summation of the narrative, obtained by combining the critic's interpretation of signifiers, an understanding of the social milieu, and the artist's perceived motivations.

- Interpret the image's narrative. This is achieved by finding correlations between the explicit content of the image and the critic's interpretation of signifiers. The amalgamation of sign interpretations and data analytics provides the potentiality for narrative formulation.

Stage 3. Evaluate. The purpose of this stage is to evaluate the narrative and how it evokes or does not evoke, a rhetorical appeal. The ultimate goal of this analysis is to determine the effectiveness of the image in evoking an emotional response. The following demands will be considered:

- Evaluate the effectiveness of the image's narrative in telling a coherent story: This is achieved by making traditional analytical inquiries of the narrative developmental process, through a comprehensive examination of certain elements (setting, character, point-of-view, temporal relations, causal relations, audience) of narrative:

Regarding setting, the following questions will be considered: What is the setting of the narrative? How is the setting created? How does the setting relate to the subject matter?

How does the setting relate to the characters? Is the setting textually prominent—highly developed and detailed—or negligible?

Regarding character development, the following questions will be considered:

Who are the main characters in the narrative? Are the character's real or inanimate phenomena?

What are the physical and mental traits of the characters? In what actions do the characters engage?

Regarding point-of-view, the following questions will be considered: What is the narrator's attitude toward the narrative? What is the narrator's attitude toward the subject matter? What is the narrator's attitude toward the audience?

Regarding temporal relations, the following question will be considered: How does the narrative upon its publication compare to its narrative from today?

Regarding audience, the following questions will be considered: To whom is the narrative addressed? What are the potential variables pertaining to one's understanding of the narrative?

Regarding theme, the following question will be considered: What is the major theme of the narrative?

- Evaluate the effectiveness of narrative in evoking pathos, specifically empathy:
- Evaluate if the narrative addresses a pervasive societal truth that is experientially relatable. This is important to explore because a story's '*pervasiveness*' leads to the potential for effective discourse between the producer and the reproducer of texts.

- Evaluate the effectiveness of the narrative in persuading someone, who perceives the narrative, to do something within their own lives to address the subject matter addressed: Most people aren't bad or evil, even those who partake in nefarious activities. But every person does

have, to some degree, empathetic blind-spots regarding various issues. This deficiency of perspective is due, in large part, to the magnitude and complexity of the world. Ignorance is often rhetorically viewed as a negative characteristic. In actuality, ignorance is a universal human trait. With this in mind, there are then questions to consider when determining if one can be persuaded to do something to address their ignorances: (1) to what degree are you aware of your personal ignorances? (2) To what degree are you motivated to address these personal ignorances? (3) To what degree are you capable of gaining a greater understanding of topics in order to reduce your personal ignorances? (4) To what degree do you believe your actions can result in the amelioration of such ignorances?

Justification for Selecting Unit of Analysis

This method of analysis was chosen because it provides the best resources for answering the research question. The following objectives must be obtained: gain a greater understanding of the explicit and latent characteristics of the image, identify the signs within the image, interpret the significations of the signs and sign systems, interpret and then determine how the signs and sign systems create narrative, determine the effectiveness of the narrative in evoking an empathetic rhetorical appeal.

Data Collection Processes

The *American Gothic* image used for this analysis was ascertained from ‘The Gordon Parks Foundation’ website: <http://www.gordonparksfoundation.org/archive/washington-d-c-and-ella-watson-1942>

IV. RESULTS AND FINDINGS

Plate 1: *American Gothic*, Washington, D.C., 1942. Gordon Parks.



The results of this analysis found signifiers within *American Gothic* (visual image) create the potential for the evocation of empathetic rhetorical appeals; these signifiers act as rhetorical building-blocks for the formation of a coherent narrative between the producer (artist) and the reproducer (viewer) of visual texts. Further, the degree to which the empathetic appeal is felt, is dependent upon certain characteristics of narrative: (1) the narrative must address an existent, socially prevalent issue that is occurring, or has occurred; (2) the narrative must address content which is in some way relatable to the viewer through either experienced or learned constructs; (3) relatable components within the narrative must, in some way, trigger additional experienced or learned empirical constructs that contribute to the formulation of a personally subjective narrative for each viewer.

Regarding how visual images evoke pathos, consider (for reasons of comparison), an experiment that gives ten different people the same set of one-hundred Lego pieces, then asks each participants to construct a “robot.” Surely, the result will consist of ten, non-identical, but perhaps similar in many ways, robots. With this experiment in mind, the same principles apply regarding the elicitation of empathetic emotional responses through visual stimuli. In other words, every image contains metaphorical ‘Lego pieces’ that provide viewers with the opportunity to understand the image. The responsibility, of each viewer, is then to use the ‘pieces’ to construct a one’s own visual significance.

Stage 1. Describe

- Describe the social and cultural milieu in which the photograph was published:

World War II: The United States entered WWII on December 7, 1941, resulting in a massive shift within the manufacturing industry, aiding the war effort. In May of 1942, African-American men are allowed to enlist in the U.S. Navy for the first time. By the end of the war,

over one million African-Americans served in the armed forces; many enlisted with the hope of returning home from war to a more grateful, accepting society.

Remnants from generational enslavement: On January 1, 1863, the signing of the Emancipation Proclamation officially ended 244 years of the enslavement of black people in America. By 1942, the United States government had not officially apologized for or attempted to remedy the impediments African-Americans endured from slavery.

Jim Crow Laws: Ending in 1956, Jim Crow Laws had been actively enforced in the southern states for approximately 65 years (since 1877). These laws enforced segregation and instilled generational inadequacies of living conditions for African-Americans.

Decades of institutional discrimination of African-Americans: Beyond, and in conjunction with, the racially discriminatory practices of the Jim Crow South, African-Americans faced additional latent institutional biases throughout the entire United States, from a lack of public funding for education, to housing and employment discrimination.

Japanese-American “relocation” during WWII: In February 1942, President Franklin Delano Roosevelt signs an executive order that forces 117,000 Japanese-Americans into internment camps and seizure of their property; two-thirds of which were native-born citizens of the United States.

- Describe the explicit content of the image:

Persons: One middle-aged African-American woman stands, facing-forward, gazing slightly left-of-center.

Objects: One American flag is draped across a wall, one wet-mop, one wicker-broom, the woman is wearing eye-glasses and a polka-dot cleaning smock.

Setting: An un-descriptive indoor location, presumably nighttime.

Event: A charwoman stands in front of an American flag.

- Describe style(s), or type(s), of photograph:

Portraiture: Image of Ms. Watson attempts to capture her essence.

Documentary (Realist): Image chronicles an everyday event within a given environment.

Black & White: Image is void of all primary, secondary, tertiary and their variant colors.

Fine-Art: Image produced in accordance with the vision of the artist/photographer.

- Describe style-based components pertaining to form:

Line: Note the stripes of the American flag; two sets of lines, both white and dark-gray, stretch vertically, straight, parallel (equivalent spatial separation), and long across the majority of the frame. These lines lead the viewer's eye toward the woman, reaching a point-of-conclusion behind her. The lines are geometric and juxtaposed by the organic nature of the woman's shape.

Color: The image is void of color, consisting only of black (shade) and white (tint).

Contrast: Note the high contrast of light and shadow on the woman's face.

Space: Note the minimal distance between the foreground, mid-ground, and background.

Also, note the minimal amount of negative space within the frame.

Balance: The image is symmetrically balanced on the vertical axis. If you were to split the image in half, vertically, it would provide a bilateral representation.

Emphasis: There are two primary points-of-emphasis: (1) the American flag; this is due to its sheer size within the frame; (2) the woman's face; this is due to the extreme contrast of light on her face. Also, it is within the most in-focus section of the frame. Also, it is centrally located within the frame.

Perspective: The image is taken from the viewer's eye-level; Ms. Watson's face is approximately centered on both the x and y-axis within the frame.

- Describe the signs that are present within the image and note their traditional representations:

Sign: American flag

Representations: The United States of America, the American dream, history, unity, purity, innocence, justice, respect, armed-forces, government, the American people

Sign: Tools-of-labor (mop and broom)

Representations: Labor, servitude, janitorial chores, cleaning floors

Sign: Middle-aged African-American woman

Representations: Mother, daughter, grandmother, old, infertile, past-prime

Stage 2. Interpret

- Interpret the signs within the image:

Sign: American flag

Interpretation: As previously mentioned, within the realm of semiotics, national flags are symbol-signifiers, because they bear no resemblance to what is being signified. The correlation between the signifier and the signified must be provided through epistemological means. As a result, this ambiguity of symbolic representation provides, the viewer of such texts, the opportunity to inject their interpretation of what is being signified, based on their own personal sympathies.

With this in mind, the American flag is one of the most omnipresent symbols in the world; widely recognizable, the flag represents a multitude of exemplifications based upon given perspectives. The flag represents a vast dichotomy of social, political and cultural constructs for both American citizens and citizens of the world; encompassing “the most recognizable, loved, hated, respected, feared, and admired flag in the world” (Marshall, 2016, p.13). The flag has been effectively propagandized for many national and global campaigns; for those in the

affirmative, it inspires the expectation of a bright future, elicits images of a heroic fearless protector and speaks to the collective consciousness of a nation. For others, the flag stands for division, discrimination, and inequality and elicits images of heartless hegemonic terror.

Gordon Parks' opinion was not favorable regarding what the flag, and Ella Watson's place within such representational constructs, signified. Having experienced similar discriminatory practices to his subject, Parks stated: "I choose my camera as a weapon against all the things I dislike about America—poverty, racism, discrimination." This denotes Parks' socially conscious stance regarding the flag's signification within the image. However, this understanding is proved through the multimodal nature of Parks' portfolio; Parks wrote extensively about his use of significations within *American Gothic*. The question, as it pertains to this analysis, is how can an image alone, without additional modes of contextualization, 'speak-to' the photographer's intent.

The first style-based signifier of note, designed to permeate such a viewpoint, is the flag's color, or more specifically, lack of color. What should be a vibrant display of significant national colors, is instead a spectral gray; gray being "associated with gloom and depression" (Bruce-Mitford, 2004, p.107). The strikingly profound color scheme of red, white and blue is notably absent. "Light as well as tone, color, and sharpness help define and separate the subject from the background" (Kobré, 2008, p.87). Within *American Gothic*, the sameness of color forces Ms. Watson and the flag to become enmeshed, thus providing a sensation of being unable to properly define one without the other.

Furthermore, the colors of the flag are individually symbolic; "White signifies purity and innocence. Red, hardiness & valor, and Blue signifies vigilance, perseverance & justice" (Marshall, 2016, p.14). With the absence of these colors, Parks is perhaps noting an absence of

purity, innocence, hardiness, valor, vigilance, perseverance and justice within the environment of Ms. Watson. The flag's prominence within the frame makes the absence of these colors even more profound.

Another style-based signifier of note is the visual weight and placement of the flag within the frame. The flag is above and almost literally on Ms. Watson's shoulders. We get a sense of the weight, or pressure, from the flag bearing down upon the subject. The flag's placement also represents a sense of dominance above a lower, and therefore lesser, figure.

The flag's dominance is further exemplified with the avoidance of a 'busy background' surrounding the two main focal points. "A busy background can easily distract readers from the subject of the photo. You do not want the background to compete with your main subject for the viewer's attention" (Kobré, 2008, p.87). The only items of note, other than Ms. Watson and the flag, are the two related, visually symmetrical, tools-of-labor (mop and broom). This lack of clutter within the frame further accentuates the presence of the American flag and pushes the notion of dominance within Ms. Watson's environment. "The background affects the "readability" of a photograph. Readability requires that the subject not get lost in the details of the environment" (Kobré, 2008, p.87).

Further signifying the flag's domineering presence is the minimal distance between the foreground, mid-ground, and background; this effect is achieved by both actual proximity of items within the frame and the use of focal manipulation. Regarding proximity, Ms. Watson is a minimal distance from both the camera and the flag; her placement adds a claustrophobic dimension to the image, as if the flag is stalking, domineering, and omnipresent within the daily affairs of Ms. Watson.

The most prominent style-based signifier, pertaining to the flag, is the use of line. Lines from the flag stretch vertically, are straight and parallel within the frame. These lines are long and encompass the majority of the frame, leading the viewer's eye toward Ms. Watson, and thus reaching a point-of-conclusion behind her. This effect creates a sense of "the frame within a frame [merging] the real and artificial... [*American Gothic*] incorporates these conflicting views to create double meanings and different readings" (Meyerowitz, 2016, p.52).

Line symmetrically balances the image on the vertical axis. This provides a bilateral representation that simplifies the image and further accentuates the subject and object relationship within the frame. Vertical lines establish "a more pronounced distinction between top and bottom, and hence a bias toward hierarchy, and towards 'opposition' generally (what is most important or otherwise dominant goes on top, what is less important or dominant is relegated to the bottom)" (Kress & Leeuwen, 2006, p.70).

This hieratical nature of line further entraps Ms. Watson within the frame. The geometric lines are juxtaposed by the organic shape of the woman enclosed within the flag's confines. This 'straightness' of the lines may be used to "carry any one of a vast range of meanings compatible with that. It may be positively valued in one context... [and] less positively in another." (Bruce-Mitford, 2004, p.56). For Parks, this 'straightness' carries a less positive representation.

Perhaps, the lines of the flag signify Ms. Watson being behind bars, like a bird in a cage, unable to spread her wings. The imagery of a "locked cell is symbolic of any kind of entrapment you find yourself in, whether by circumstance, emotion, or life choices" (Phillips, 2002, p.96). Within the frame, the subject finds herself trapped within a state of inertia. Ms. Watson's imprisonment denotes a sense of a lack of movement, which then translates to "a loss of power or choice...unable to grow in [one's] personal or professional life" (Phillips, 2002, p.96).

Being behind these bars allows the viewer to interpret Ms. Watson's expression further; she is expressing a feeling of being "ashamed for some action or feeling, and [is in a state of] being "punished" (Phillips, 2002, p.96). Looking upon Ms. Watson, in her emotional state, you immediately feel sympathy for her. Sympathy being the first indication for the potentiality of empathy. Sympathy does always denote empathy, but in order to empathize with someone, you must first sympathize for them.

Regarding further symbolic representations of Ms. Watson being a bird-in-a-cage, there is a prevalent and primordial belief that when one dies, "the soul leaves the body in the form of a bird. Consequently, the bird is a symbol of the spirit." (Bruce-Mitford, 2004, p.56). Perhaps, Maya Angelou was inspired by *American Gothic*, or at least inspired by the same style-based signifiers when she wrote her 1983 poem, *Caged Bird*; which describes a caged bird who "stands on the grave of dreams" (Angelou, 1983). According to Jung (1964), this type of symbolism is contrary to the motivations of religious or secular group-consciousness. Instead, it belongs to the earliest known traditions concerning periods of transition within a person's life. This symbolism addresses humanity's desire for "liberation from any state of being that is too immature, too fixed or final" (Jung, 1964, p.73). This imagery of the American flag as a cage, or jail-cell, fits with our understanding of Parks' motivations regarding his subject and certainly addresses an environment of stagnation.

This type of symbolism, used by Parks, is perhaps the most effective vehicle for a rhetors' evocation of emotional appeals. It concerns a "release from—or transcendence of—any confirming pattern of existence, as [one] moves toward a superior or more mature stage in [their] development" (Jung, 1964, p.65). Every person, who witnesses *American Gothic*, can relate to the sensation of stagnation within one's environment, either physically, socially, emotionally,

etc. In the case of Ms. Watson, her stagnation is brought on by the inadequacies of her cultural environment, and the racially motivated demands it makes upon her; demands that require more from her than the “average” citizen, while providing negligible returns.

Sign: Tools-of-labor (mop and broom)

Interpretation: Historically, the broom holds symbolic significance within African-American heritage that originates in the West-African country of Ghana. During the slave-trade in the 18th century, the urban areas of Ghana were kept noticeably immaculate according to visiting European traders. Locally manufactured brooms were used by wives and servants to clean the city. These brooms possessed divine connotations within the household, signifying the sweeping-away of previous sins and eliminating malevolent spirits. Brooms were also incorporated in traditions of marriage in Ghana culture; marrying couples would jump over brooms at the end of ceremonies to represent the wife’s commitment to maintaining the cleanliness of the home.

Within our own culture, the mop and broom represent tools-of-labor, that denote arduous janitorial chores. The work of a janitor is thought of as being demanding, back-breaking, and not allocated for individuals with elevated financial or educational standing. Unlike the photography of James Van der Zee, where African-American’s were portrayed glamorously, wearing fashionable clothes and standing next to classy automobiles; Ms. Watson is defined by her culturally low-standing tools-of-labor. Ms. Watson is portrayed as being far from glamorous, the mop and broom describe her vocation, her life, and her daily narrative.

Regarding the mop and broom, it’s important “to remember that the most banal objects... [may] contain unexpected mystery and wonder” (Meyerowitz, 2016, p.32). Props can be used to help tell a story about who a person is or what they represent. For example, the presence of a

flame from a burning candle, within a portrait, may signify an internal passion that burns within its subject. Conversely, the mop and broom, within *American Gothic*, may not be as introspective. They may merely describe Ms. Watson's profession, which aides in the telling of her narrative. "Often an object a person is holding or the uniform he or she is wearing supports the thrust of the story... [telling] the viewer something about a subject's profession, hobbies, and interests" (Kobré, 2008, p.87). The mop and broom add visual evidence to help the reader go beyond just the topical delineations of the person. This directness of interpretation aide's iconographic signification; icons have a direct physical resemblance to that which is being signified.

However, though the mop and broom certainly contain elements of icon-based signifiers, as previously noted, signs can also possess two or all three types of sign (symbol, icon, and index) characteristics. For example, the mop and broom also have symbolic representations. These tools-of-labor denote the real-life struggle of societal marginalization that disproportionately affects people of certain classes, genders, and races.

This symbolic representation is further externalized, beyond the presence of the mop and broom, with the use of style-based signifiers. This is achieved with the placement of the mop and broom enclosing Ms. Watson within the frame. The broom, on Ms. Watson's right, blocks a large portion of her body, as if earning a greater sense of importance within the frame. Their placement provides a symmetrical 'sandwiching' effect, with Ms. Watson in the middle. When combined with the placement of the American flag, which is directly above her; Ms. Watson is further enclosed, visually immobile within the frame, and by extension, her environment.

Sign: Ella Watson, Middle-aged African-American Woman

Interpretation: There are several elements of note pertaining to the signification of the subject, Ella Watson. All of these significations help visually establish both the explicit and latent content regarding who she is, her profession, and her standing within the confines of American society. Traditionally, the image of the human body indicates “a concern with [one’s] personal image, especially the perceptions we or others have of ourselves” (Bruce-Mitford, 2004, p.75). Any body part that is accentuated by the photographer is done so self-consciously and may concern a potential deeper meaning.

Regarding icon-based signification, the image of Ms. Watson clearly represents her likeness. She is a middle-aged, African-American woman, who works as a charwoman within the FSA building. Her expression is one of agonizing discomfort and pain. Parks told Ms. Watson to recall the death of her mother, father, daughter and additional maladies before she gazed upon the camera. This facial expression directly speaks to the emotional state of Ms. Watson and to our interpretation regarding the quintessence of the image.

Of all the elements in a photo, the face still carries a disproportionate amount of psychological weight. Studies show that children, almost from birth, recognize the basic elements of a face, including the eyes, nose, and mouth. Whether true or not, people assume that the face is the “mirror to the soul. (Kobré, 2008, p.89)

Much like the mop and broom, Ms. Watson’s cotton smock provides both icon and symbolic representations; the cotton smock of a charwoman is “traditionally worn by working people, homespun cotton is a symbol of simplicity” (Bruce-Mitford, 2004, p.84).

The placement of Ms. Watson, facing forward, gazing toward the camera, contributes to the idea of seeing a reflection of yourself within the subject. This straight-forward placement

gives the viewer a more direct understanding of who Ms. Watson is and a clear view of her current emotional state. If Ms. Watson was slightly turned away from the camera, it would be more difficult to see her facial expression and relate to her emotional state. The subject's placement is a deliberate attempt by Parks to evoke an empathetic response. Ms. Watson addresses the viewer directly; "this conveys a sense of interaction between the depicted person and the viewer" (Kress & Leeuwen, 2006, p.117). The placement of Ms. Watson provides the act of a 'direct address.' This act acknowledges the viewer overtly. Halliday describes this style-based signifier as a visual 'demand'; Ms. Watson's placement compels the viewer to enter into a profound relationship with the subject (Halliday, 2014). This relationship that is formed is then furthered by other style-based signifiers, for example, Ms. Watson's facial expression and gaze.

"One glimpse into her eyes reveals the depth of her understanding, of the dichotomy between beauty and tragedy, and the irony implied by the limp flag hanging over her head" (Brookman, 1997, p.78). The demands presented to the viewer, by the placement of the subject, is accentuated by the indirect gaze of Ms. Watson. Her eyes are slightly off-centered, which provides a different signification for the viewer. Though we can see her eyes fully, the act of not looking directly into the camera expresses a deficient sense of communication. Ms. Watson's gaze "invites us to make direct eye contact, to look for a long time into the face of another human being, and to inspect the details" (Meyerowitz, 2016, p.28). Halliday (2014) refers to this style-based signifier as an image "offer." The image "offers the represented participants to the viewer as items of information, objects of contemplation, impersonally, as though they were specimens in a display case" (Kress & Leeuwen, 2006, p.119). Both Ms. Watson's placement within the frame and her gaze offer the viewer information, in the form of a statement, and seeks an agreement or contradicted response in return. As a result of this highly vulnerable gaze and

the relationships it has established, the “photograph has become a portrait of both America and one unique individual” (Brookman, 1997, p.56).

Point-of-view, much like the subject’s gaze, provides a further means of relational development between the subject and viewer. “Perspective rests on an impersonal, geometric foundation, a construction which is a quasi-mechanical way of recording images of reality” (2006, Kress & Leeuwen, p.70). Perspective provides the artist tools to allocate an empirical reality and also a visual abstraction, which are both designed to portray semiotic properties.

Low angles generally give the impression of superiority, exaltation and triumph... high angles tend to diminish the individual, to flatten [the subject] morally by reducing [the subject] to ground level, to render [the subject] as caught in an insurmountable determinism. (Martin, 1968, p.37)

Note the use of lighting on the face of the subject. “Light is elemental and everywhere...to “see the light” is to understand something more clearly or in a new way” (Meyerowitz, 2016, p.34). Half of Ms. Watson’s face is lit and visible, while the other side is not visible due to a heavy shadow. The extremity of light and shadow puts a black veil over a significant percentage of Ms. Watson’s face. Black is not semiotically insignificant; black is the symbolic representation of “death, [and] mourning” (Bruce-Mitford, 2004, p.106). Parks deliberately underexposed the image to accentuate the shadow on Ms. Watson’s face; perhaps to symbolize Ms. Watson as being under-represented and not truly seen within her current societal confines. It could also speak to the symbolic dichotomy of her nature, as a citizen of America, but one who has been historically marginalized.

This use of underexposed and side lighting also accentuates the wrinkles on Ms. Watson’s face, especially on her forehead. Side-lighting accentuates the textural minutiae of the

face and is a method particularly appropriate for bringing out wrinkles on a person's face. Alternatively, fashion photographers "often light people with a large, flat light located near the camera's lens to eliminate shadows...sometimes called "butterfly" lighting, tends to eliminate wrinkles, giving a youthful look" (Kobré, 2008, p.84). With Parks' extensive experience in fashion photography, one can assume that the lighting used in *American Gothic* was a deliberate, style-based, artistic choice. But why would Parks want to accentuate his subject's wrinkles? Perhaps as an index-based signifier. Wrinkles could point to a suggestion of tiredness, stress, pain, an apprehensive mind, etc.

Wrinkles also indicate old-age, which provides an archetype character for a potential narrative. The wise old character could represent "wisdom, maturity, and access to the spiritual realm, but may conversely lead you away from a higher state of consciousness" (Phillips, 2002, p.92). Perhaps this aged woman represents all African-American's in the year 1942; storied, wise, with an experiential sense of one's past, present and future prospects within the American culture, and perhaps the outlook is grim.

An older woman also signifies motherhood; which represents "the unconscious and of intuitive, beneath-the-surface wisdom" (Phillips, 2002, p.87). Mother representations naturally provide spontaneous personal and emotive responses within narratives. Depending on your perspective, you may see your own mother or yourself as the mother figure within this representation. Both of these significations inspire a confrontation of "issues in your past, or a need to resolve issues at home" (Phillips, 2002, p.87).

Finally, note how Ms. Watson is framed within the image. "The shape of the subject in relation to the format of the frame clearly has an effect" (Freeman, 2007, p.80). Within the realm of photography, the analytical principles of space are a "complicated matter because of the

juxtaposition of real, mythical, and fictional spaces and the explicit merging of subject and space” (Lörke, 2013, p. 246). We don’t see the subject’s legs or hands; this is a deliberate style-based sign. Consider the function of the legs and hands. Legs help us move from one place to another, without them we are immobile; without legs, Ms. Watson is then immobile. Also, due to the framing of the subject, one could envision Ms. Watson in quicksand, sinking slowly downward below the frame. Similarly, “hands, by their gesture, can signify blessing, protection, justice, and authority” (Bruce-Mitford, 2004, p.75). Without these major appendages, we are not fully human and we are unable to be fully productive members of society.

- Interpret the subject matter (or topic) of the image:

“For over 150 years, the photograph has retained a special privilege, particularly situated as a technology capable of subject formation” (Kim, 2009, p.50). The subject matter of *American Gothic* surrounds the structural framework of racial discrimination within the confines of America; this is achieved with the expression (both literal and symbolic) of the downtrodden African-American woman, holding tools of backbreaking labor, as she stands below the domineering, all-powerful flag of American hegemony.

- Interpret the narrative of the image:

Consider the signs within *American Gothic*: (1) the American flag, (2) the tools-of-labor, (3) the middle-aged African-American woman. Next, consider the enumerable representations these signs (symbol, index, icon) could potentially represent. Note that this is an exercise of personal exploration, one that should be attempted without external interference. Within the realm of visual narrative, signs act as visual building-blocks that are responsible for the development of a narrative. Depending on your life experiences, perspective and sympathies, you will build a narrative that is of pertinence to you.

“Placement” is the one word that persists when I consider the narrative of *American Gothic*. Parks places Ms. Watson in an environment that acts as a microcosm for where Parks’ idea of where African-American standing within the American society and culture of 1942. “Light in all its various incarcerations usually determines a picture’s mood” (Kobré, 2008, p.84). The mood that is told within *American Gothic* is bleak. This mood represents the past, present and future prospects for Ms. Watson and thus the African-American people. “Photographers often choose lighting that will leave large areas of the picture in shadow” (Kobré, 2008, p.84).

Photographs don’t have to tell a complete story, and Parks certainly does not. He simply presents objects of significance, which act as building-blocks, then he allows the viewer to construct their own narrative. Those who consider the subject’s perspective should formulate an empathetic narrative for Ms. Watson and those who are marginalized within our society.

Ambiguity within art usually holds a possessive effect that leaves the viewer wanting to know more. However, confronted with the narrative of *American Gothic* makes one want to know less. Wanting to know less about America’s history regarding the enslavement of people. Wanting to know less about our tribalistic tendencies that marginalize others due to the most infinitesimal of trivialities.

“Photography has the power to record all the details and information contained in a moment, and yet, you’re not quite sure of the real story” (Meyerowitz, 2016, p.62). *American Gothic* describes the history of American culture that is not discussed in grade-school textbooks. The narrative provided is confrontational and arouses images of horror. Today, this confrontation is arguably more necessary than it was in 1942; this is because we need to be reminded about our not too distant past. Those who take the time to attend to the story *American Gothic* describes are exposed to experiential historical actualities and societal truths. These actualities and truths are

important because they cannot be denied. The image remains prominent today because it speaks to us with a hopeful optimism toward a more tolerant collective understanding. If we can empathize with the subject matter, perhaps we can procure a greater understanding of ways in which to eliminate such burdensome historical truths.

Stage 3. Evaluate

- Evaluate the effectiveness of the image's narrative in telling a coherent story:

Overall: The following signs were used for the development of narrative within *American Gothic*: (1) Ms. Watson's somber expression, (2) the American flag, (3) the overall grayness of the image, (4) the tools-or-labor, (5) the claustrophobic feeling of imprisonment symbolized by the jail-cell bars of the American flag. These signs were then merged with the analyst's personal perspective, which consists of an understanding of the racially motivated, historical and current, discriminatory practices against African-Americans within our American society.

Setting: Regarding the image of *American Gothic*, the setting is literally inside a room with an American flag hanging on the wall; however, this interpretation of setting is negligible when compared to the setting of the larger confines of the narrative. This setting does not concern the physical location of the subject but instead embodies a far more textually prominent and metaphoric landscape. The setting of the narrative for *American Gothic* extends throughout every corner of the United States. From Money, Mississippi, where Emmett Till, was beaten beyond recognition for a minor social 'offense' he did not commit; to Chicago, Illinois, where Fred Hampton, a progressive American civil-rights activist, was assassinated in his home by members of the local police department. The setting of *American Gothic* metaphorically extends to anywhere a racially motivated injustice has occurred.

The theme of *American Gothic* regards racial discrimination and the ‘standing’ of African-Americans within American society. The setting helps establish this theme by ‘placing’ the subject directly into the environment where such ‘tensions’ are occurring. The setting is essential to the narrative being told. For example, if the American flag were to be replaced with the Icelandic national flag, the theme of the narrative becomes convoluted.

Furthermore, the character, or characters, provide greater contexts for the setting of the narrative. For example, if you were to replace the African-American woman with an equally somber Caucasian woman, the narrative shifts. The theme, or notion, of an ‘Americanized’ struggle persists, but now a narrative is more closely related to that of Dorothea Lange’s *Migrant Mother*. Or now consider the character trait of Ms. Watson’s facial expression. What if the subject was smiling from ear-to-ear? How does this new facial expression change the narrative being told? Whatever the new narrative, it’s clear that Ms. Watson’s expression is a crucial ‘building-block’ for the formulation of a narrative. These two examples demonstrate how changes of signifiers result in changes of that which is being signified.

Character Development: The protagonists of *American Gothic* are those within the African-American community who are being oppressed, with the antagonist being the oppressive discriminatory American state. Of course, these characters are not directly signified, instead, they are symbolically present within the frame. This development of character is achieved with the amalgamation of artistically injected rhetorical building-blocks, and the multitude of signifiers, regarding the American flag and Ms. Watson. Clearly, a statement is being made that pertains to a greater audience than that of Ms. Watson alone. Regarding narrative, the subject is standing-in as a representative for her African-American brethren. In both the literal and metaphoric sense, the characters are physically and mentally downtrodden, upset, and troubled.

Point-of-View: The narrator of *American Gothic* can be either Gordon Parks (the author), Ms. Watson (the protagonist), or the viewer (the reproducer of the image). Regarding my interpretation, the narrator of *American Gothic* is the photographer, Gordon Parks. This is significant because it then denotes the presence of an omnipresent narrator. A narrator that sees all is indicative of Parks because of his ability to understand various backgrounds of American culture. Parks can make his narrative proclamations from the outside-looking-in; which leads to a more complete interpretation of societal complexities. It's clear that Parks did not look favorably upon the narrative that is being told; being of and amongst those he was representing, Parks had plenty of experiences with the egregious practices of racial discrimination.

The question regarding the narrator's attitude toward his audience is a far more complex inquiry. Depending on the viewer's interpretation and personal perspective, the audience for *American Gothic* can any person who views the image, or it could be condensed further to specific demographics; be it white Americans, black Americans, Native Americans, white Americans sympathetic to racial discriminatory practices, white Americans not sympathetic to racial discriminatory practices, etc.

When you consider that the image was published in a magazine that had a predominantly white audience, it is safe to assume that Parks understood who his intended audience was. If this is the case, then the attitude Parks had for his predominantly white audience is one of complexity and where his principal motivations for the evocation of empathetic appeals lie. Its complexity lies in the idea that Parks understood his audience was both the perpetrators of and potential agents of change for the reduction of racial discriminatory practices. With this in mind, Parks is speaking directly to those in the white community who might be empathetic towards the strife of the characters depicted, but who haven't yet experientially faced the struggle because of their

personal privileges. Think of the reaction that was had in 1942 when a white, affluent, middle-class person opened their weekly *Life* magazine, only to be confronted an individual within the confines of Ms. Watson's situation, as so thoughtfully portrayed by Parks. This confrontation could have had an immediate paradoxical shift in one's perspective. Some in this audience may have never had any meaningful conversation with an African-American in their life. Therefore, how could they possibly understand their perspective? Thus, *American Gothic* is Parks' attempt at bridging this divide, by introducing his characters to his audience.

Temporal Relations: There are some slight deviations when comparing the narrative obtained upon the publication of the image in 1942 to the narrative obtained today. In many respects, racial inequality in 1942 was far more prevalent than it is today. Jim Crow Laws were still legal in the south and African-American's experienced much more blatant forms of racial discrimination.

Today, race relations within our country have improved, however, there are still racial injustices that occur. These injustices shift the narrative slightly, while still addressing many of the same issues that were prevalent in 1942. For example, the symbolic representation of Ms. Watson being behind the linear 'bars' of the American flag has far greater relevance today than it had in 1942. This is because today "African Americans are incarcerated at more than 5 times the rate of whites" (naacp.org) and America makes up 5% of the world's total imprisoned population. Additionally, according to Bonilla-Silva (2006), minorities "lag well behind whites in virtually every area of social life; they are about three times more likely to be poor than whites, earn about 40 percent less than whites, and have an eighth of the net worth" (p.2).

- Evaluate the effectiveness of narrative in evoking pathos, specifically empathy:

It's difficult to view this image and not feel sympathy for Ms. Watson. Even the most adherent member of the KKK would feel an immediate emotional response when looking at the subject's expression. This is because, from an early age, we innately mirror the emotions of those we see. This initial response we experience is an example of the rhetorical appeal of pathos.

Upon first-look, the viewer's focus is almost immediately sucked-into the center of the frame, where Ms. Watson's somber expression subsists. Somewhat notoriously, Parks was able to document this expression after he asked his subject to recollect all the emotionally traumatic events that overshadowed her life. Her expression becomes the emotional epicenter of not only the frame but it is also where a significant amount of the tension within the narrative can be found. Depending on your perspective, these tensions are not necessarily easy to determine, but they remain deep and enduring.

If you were to look upon *American Gothic* in 1942, you would have a greater understanding of the remnants regarding the generational enslavement of African-Americans in this country. You cannot see Ms. Watson without also seeing the domineering presence of the American flag. These signifiers create an obvious tension and discourse between what is and what has been; Parks uses these tension to place Ms. Watson, and thus African-Americans, within a metaphorical position of inferiority within such confines. This tension also speaks to the establishment of empathy within the image. Those who understand American history understand what Ms. Watson and the American flag signify.

- Evaluate if the narrative addresses a pervasive societal truth that is experientially relatable:

The three apparent signs within *American Gothic*, the American flag, Ms. Watson, and the tools-of-labor are all universally recognizable representations within our society. These signs are recognizable due to their experiential and learned pervasiveness within our daily lives. This

'*pervasiveness*' is an essential component when developing the narrative of an image. The more pervasive a sign is, the easier it will be for the reproducer of a text to fill in the necessary components to formulate a narrative. The American flag is a pervasive symbol within our country; students pledge allegiance to the flag every day in school, multiple songs discuss its symbolic national importance, its likeness adorns clothing, doorways, and businesses across the country. Therefore, the American flag comes with more connotations that can be used to build a stronger, more saturated narrative, when it is visually depicted.

- Evaluate the effectiveness of the narrative in persuading someone, who perceives the narrative, to do something within their own lives to address the subject matter addressed within the artifact:

For those who understand the narrative of *American Gothic* might consider speaking out against injustices within one's community, or perhaps might address certain discourse that is deemed ignorant to the subject matter portrayed. Ms. Watson's figure standing before the flag is relatable for people who have experienced and understand discrimination. This relatability can then result in the breaking of social barriers with people of other races, or donating money to organizations that address racial inequalities. At the most intrinsic level, the simplicity of *American Gothic* offers all who look upon the image an opportunity to consider the perspective of others and consider ways in which they can address ignorances prominent within our society.

V. CONCLUSION

Summary

This analysis further illuminates the greatly underappreciated life and portfolio of Gordon Parks, specifically regarding the cultural significance of his most iconic photograph, *American Gothic*. For some, Parks is praised solely for his work documenting African-American society and culture; though this is a prominent feature, his work should also be considered more broadly. Parks should be amongst the echelon of photographers Ansel Adams, Dorothea Lange, Diane Arbus, etc. for his overall cultural, social, and artistic contributions within the confines of American photography.

This systematic method isolates semiotic signifiers within visual imagery and describes how these elements can formulate effective correspondence between artist and audience. Ultimately, this framework can be used throughout a broad spectrum of mass communicative fields, such as advertising, public relations, graphic design, etc. A greater understanding of this framework will only strengthen a media practitioner's ability to create effective rhetorical discourse through visual stimulation.

This analysis isolated and explored how Parks used certain artistic techniques specifically to elicit the rhetorical appeal of pathos within *American Gothic*; the emotion of particular interest within this analysis being empathy, and how it was evoked to the reproducer of this iconic text. The thesis provides a potential framework for determining how visual texts cultivate empathy within certain demographics.

Visual media practitioners and activists can benefit from a greater awareness of this potentially persuasive framework; hopefully, in the spirit of Parks, this framework can then be used as a tool for shifting socially inept cultural paradigms.

Implications

“Because we live in a visual age, pictures count as never before” (Hart, 1997, p.188).

With this in mind, results from this analysis can perhaps contribute to a better understanding of the intricacies of association between the presence of sign usage and coherent narrative development within visual imagery. The framework found within this analysis is designed to procure visual rhetoric messages, which are often desired in many disciplines of visual media, both through scholarly and applicational processes.

Practitioners and theorists of advertising and public relations are always striving to understand methods for obtaining the most effective means of coaxing consumer demand, usually with capitalistic gains in mind. As examined in this analysis, understanding semiotic signifiers, which are the rhetorical building-blocks in which producers of visual media convey their rhetorical messages, can only assist those who desire to sway public opinion. This analysis can potentially clarify which types of signs deliver the most ascertainable dialogue amongst the widest demographic of prospective viewing audiences.

Scholars have described that, due to the highly litigious nature of society, there has been a transfer in advertising away from the products “appeals in utility” to the products “appeals of the senses.” “Why is this important? Because it means advertising has become a cultural discourse, not just a mercantile one” (Hart, 1997, p.2). An understanding of this discourse is essential for those who wish to reap the benefits of the pursuits of marketing.

Visual media artists, especially those in their nascent stages, could benefit from exploring the framework of this analysis. Many artists only strive to obtain a personalized breadth of knowledge through their own experiences of creative epiphany. Though this individualized

approach is perhaps the most innately profound, artists can still benefit and are in many ways immune to, the examination of other artists across the creative-arts spectrum.

It's essential that artists understand societal deficiencies and strive to produce content that tirelessly works toward the amelioration of such deficiencies. Therefore, any means of exploration that provides tangible frameworks for understanding effective methods for persuasion in the affirmative is imperative. Referring to the representational contemplation of knowledge, Frederick Douglass said "poets, prophets, and reformers are all picture-makers—and this ability is the secret of their power and their achievements. They see what ought to be by the reflection of what is, and endeavor to remove the contradiction."

With the advent of a growing mistrust in mass-media messaging platforms, media-literacy is a growing field of scholarship and practice amongst a wide demographic of constituents. This analysis can provide this growing field a framework for such use; one designed to explore messaging structures with an emphasis designed to incorporate one's, ever-necessary, need for personal objectivity.

This personal objectivity is the white-elephant grazing through the landscape of media within the first quarter of the 21st century. Hart referenced Patterson's [1993] theory of the news producing an '*alternative authority structure*', where messaging from political leaders is being increasingly de-emphasized "in favor of news personal" (Hart, 1997, p.200). This alternative authority has not translated into a reformation of hegemonic foundations; "in fact, numerous scholars have shown how the rhetoric of news is a source of system maintenance" (Hart, 1997, p.202). Noting how news punditry often chastises individuals holding political office, but rarely challenges or offers venues for improvement regarding structure furthering social inequality. As we continue to march through the 21st century, perhaps there is a growing need for scholarship

exploring the increasing ‘*alternative to the alternative authority structure*’; where reproducers of the news, through social media platforms, are de-emphasizing the news personal who have been de-emphasizing the political leaders. We have already seen examples where non-professional reproducers of news messages have had a great impact on changing, or influencing, societal narratives. For example, cellphone footage from layman bystanders has brought examples of police brutality to the forefront; a doctor in Flint, MI used social media platforms to describe the growing crisis of unsafe communal drinking water, etc.

Critics of visual texts should always ask complicated questions regarding not just what a picture means but how a picture means what it says. Critically speaking, there are potentially enumerable paths toward this determination. This analysis explores one framework for determining the means in which an image can be persuasive and why some images are potentially more effectively persuasive than others.

Omnipresent visual media platforms have inundated our society with an array of divergent, market-driven narratives. These narratives are propelled by a besiegement of signs and sign systems, which in turn subsist for predominantly material gains and are beset by giant retail corporate conglomerates. This analysis heightens the awareness that should be given toward individuals of the ilk of Gordon Parks. Simply put, the world needs more highly intelligent, highly empathetic, individuals who are morally sound enough to sacrifice a percentage of their personal gains for the amelioration of the greater communal good. Gordon Parks could have simply, and exclusively, been an inordinately successful fashion photographer. However, beleaguered by an innate moral awareness to change deleterious communal paradigms, Parks spent much of his artistic life creating a vast portfolio that placed the progression of civility over

personal profits. There is a need for more morally righteous media practitioners like Gordon Parks.

“Those communities which included the greatest number of the most sympathetic members would flourish best and rear the greatest number of offspring” (Darwin, 1981, p.45). Bekoff suggests an interpretation of this Darwinian notion that has relevance to the empathic elements found within this analysis; he proposes a shift of consideration regarding our understanding of the dominant species. “Survival of the fittest” has always been used to refer to the most successful *competitor*, but in fact *cooperation* may be of equal or more importance” (Bekoff, 2007, p.87). He continues to identify the likelihood for all species to require both traits of competition and cooperation. However, he notes that if our species, which is a social one, requires a shift of suitability away from the competitor and toward the cooperator for there to be continued evolutionary gains.

Moving forward, younger generations are the first to have matured totally embedded within a global electronic public square where these visual media messages are fully embedded within their social networking platforms. This exposure has the potential to allow individuals to understand and empathize with the hardships of others.

New surveys and studies suggest that the distributed nature of the new information and communications technology and the collaborative relationships they spawn are increasingly reflected in the collective psyche of the [younger] generation. (Rifkin, 2009, p.586)

These studies are promising when you consider additional statistics that show younger generations are “the most tolerant of any generation in history in its support for gender equality and the most willing to champion the rights of the disabled, gays and or fellow creatures”

(Rifkin, 2009 p.588). There is a clear correlation between the capacity of being exposed to visual stimuli and having a greater appreciation for constructs beyond the self. It is important that a greater percentage of media practitioners embrace this responsibility for the continued advancement of a common good and not for trivial or nefarious impetuses. This analysis provides a framework for continuing the trend, established by Parks, for “human beings to express themselves in deep and meaningful ways [designed] to advance common understandings, shared meanings, and empathetic connections” (Rifkin, 2009, p.589).

Limitations

The glaring limitation of this, or any other, critical analysis is the lacking plurality of perspective. Therefore, any declaration of critical appraisal should be viewed only as an infinitesimal piece within a larger logistical landscape. A panel discussion, consisting of two or more people, or designated focus groups could address this retrospective malady.

Deficiencies in perspective also address the limited nature of the viewpoint found within this analysis. In other words, the analysis is only realized from the belvedere of certain unwavering personality and environmental traits. These traits have been programmed with ideologies sympathetic towards mass media’s role in addressing past, current, and future societal strife.

Additionally, the perspective of the analyst is highly sensitive toward the presence of societal injustices across the evolutionary spectrum; these woes, according to the analyst, consist of unenlightened constructs concerning: racial, cultural, existential, sexual, financial, material, spiritual, metaphysical, psychological, educational, phenomenological, etc. paradigms. With this staunch, arguably progressive, ideological lens in place, this analysis can be viewed, in some respects, as ‘preaching-to-the-choir’ of liberal idealism. Perhaps a far more interesting, and

semiotically enlightening analysis of *American Gothic*, would be procured from individuals unsympathetic and dissimilar to the philosophies of the analyst and its subject.

The framework provided within this analysis is a somewhat original assemblage of multiple theories and analytical processes; this makes the analysis simultaneously distinctive and inconsequential. The following statement holds actuality with the appropriately fundamental nature of academic research, analysis, and experimentation. One that prescribes relevancy only toward that which has been tried and tested on a multitude of occasions. Combating this awareness is the analysts' most optimistic expectation of a mere casual assimilation amongst the numerous analytical approaches already in existence. Wherever this analysis is placed within the sphere of scholarly significance, the personal and educational gains from this scholastic journey has been fruitful and pertinent.

Suggestions for Further Research

When conducting the three stages of analysis, I was constantly exposed to potential paths of inquiry that germinated from my original analytical intentions. These paths were tempting and often impossible to ignore.

Mirror Neurons. The most interesting pathway not explored within this analysis is the investigation into the neurological workings of empathetic responses to visual stimuli. In addition to direct observation, questionnaires, and surveys, the greatest's scientific returns concerning empathetic responses to visual stimuli would be if we were truly able to understand the inner workings of the human brain.

Academically nascent findings regarding research into mirror neurons have exposed these neurological triggers as being chiefly responsible for an individual's personalized sense of empathy. In 2007, V.S. Ramachandran, an innovator in mirror neuron study, remarked, "I call

these ‘empathy neurons,’ ... for they are dissolving the barrier between self and others” (Goulston, 2010, p.19). And perhaps most significantly, just as with any humanistic trait of differentiation, mirror neurons fluctuate in volume and intensity within the brain, thus altering the degree and severity of potential empathetic responses within a given person.

To locate empathy, researchers check for the presence of mirror neurons. These specialized cells were discovered in 1992, and they have an unusual quality. When you engage in a particular behavior, normal cells in your body fire electrical impulses. Mirror neurons, in contrast, become active when someone else engages in the same behavior. That is to say, mirror neurons react as though it’s your body that is affected. (Wohlleben, 2017, p.128)

The most recognizable example of mirror neurons in action is yawning and the uncontrollable need to mirror someone performing this act. However, aside from these perceived trivialities, mirror neurons potentially possess a goldmine of experimental wealth for a vast array of academic disciplines.

Within mass communication, media rhetoricians are constantly in pursuit of persuasive opportunities for discourse between themselves and targeted audiences. “Studies have revealed that people who score high on tests of empathy are generally excellent mimics” (Greene, 2018, p.98). With this in mind, it’s safe to assume that there are aptitudes media practitioners can have in producing texts that mimic the nature of man, as opposed to just physically mimicking traits.

These aptitudes can perhaps be identified and more skillfully applied when attempting to address societal concerns. There is research supporting the developmental propensity of mirror neurons:

Mirror neurons function only if they've been trained early in life. People who have loving parents or other caregivers practice mirroring emotions and strengthen these neurons from an early age, while the capacity to feel empathy wastes away in people who are denied exposure to this skill. (Wohlleben, 2017, p.126)

Fully understanding mirror neurons can allow media practitioners to consciously use the power of imitation to evoke “the emotions of others, either by literally mimicking their facial gestures [through visual stimuli] or by conjuring up memories of similar experiences that stirred such emotions” (Greene, 2018, p.192).

Gordon Parks' Use of Modalities. This analysis isolated and explored the rhetorical effects of *American Gothic* on its visual merit. However, those familiar with Gordon Parks know that many of his photojournalistic endeavors were often accompanied by written texts he authored. In semiotics, mode refers to means in which one receives semiotic information; therefore, an image accompanied by written texts would consist of two types of modalities.

On a daily basis we process information conveyed not just in a linguistic code we understand but also in other semiotic systems such as images, music, sounds, and gestures. More often than not, the information we are confronted with and upon which we are invited to act...is conveyed by the combination of more than one semiotic system and is made available in a variety of media and formats.

(Tseronis & Forceville, 2017, p.92)

As captivating as Parks' photographs are, a case can be made that his essays were equally as effective in evoking empathetic responses with his audience. At first, Parks was captivated by the power visual images had in persuading masses, but eventually, he began to understand “how

potent the combination of well-conceived photos and well-written essay could be. To portray racial discrimination, he had to do more than simply point a camera at the problem” (Berry, 1991, p.81).

The combination of photographs and texts create a vibrant and comprehensive account of the period, that dredged up the human condition and had a lasting impact on those who encounter Parks’ portfolio.

Research into the exploration of the effects of these two modalities can perhaps be extensive when considering: (1) which semiotic mode, when combined, has the greatest impact in evoking empathic responses, (2) comparing the advantages and disadvantages the modes have when considering audience interpretation of semiotic significations, (3) considering factors of attendance when incorporating the ubiquity of visual and written texts within the media platforms targeted toward younger demographics.

Furthermore, to explore the effects of modality may necessitate a deeper examination of multimodality theory; which aims to comprehend how we communicate through the amalgamation of a multitude of means and how those means react to each other. Specifically, the theory focuses on communicative modes that are mediated through the human body and developing technologies; theorizing “ways to describe systematically how these modes relate to each other: how the meaning of words might be changed by accompanying gestures; how images of outer space are changed by their combination with a Strauss waltz in Kubrick’s *2001: A Space Odyssey*” (Burn & Parker, 2003, p.5).

Additional Rhetorical Appeals (Ethos, Logos). This analysis focused exclusively on the evocation of persuasive emotional appeals, or pathos, within visual texts. There are, however, two additional persuasive rhetorical appeals, specifically ethos, and logos. “Ethos pertains to

character effects that coincide to create a trustworthy image of the speaker” (Korthals, 2014, p.60). Logos appeals to an audience’s capability to reason logically; this is usually achieved by presenting facts and statistics from a trusted source to prove one’s point. When combined, these three types of persuasive appeals form a rhetorical triangle; “which connects orator (through ethos), addressee (implied and anticipated in the pathos appeal), and discourse it-self (through its argumentative force, or logos)” (Korthals, 2014, p.56).

Almost all texts contain multiple elements regarding these notable persuasive appeals and *American Gothic* is certainly one of them. Parks’ written texts that detail his personal experiences extrapolating his images certainly provide credibility as a trustworthy source; but is it possible for an image to achieve this personal credibility on its own merits? If so, how is this credibility achieved through visual discourse alone? Also, in regards to logical appeals, how can an image encapsulate, or evoke an understanding of data-driven information? This logistical appeal seems even more daunting when considering massive societal deficiencies similar to the topics found within the images of Parks.

Imagery and Activism. This analysis established a potential framework for understanding how an image can communicate a narrative that evokes an empathetic feeling within a given viewer. Hopefully, this empathetic feeling will then inspire those who have acquired this newfound consideration to, in some way, strive to act for the betterment of man.

When considering the historical importance of iconic photographs, Hariman and Lucaites (2007) note that these images “provide an accessible and centrally positioned set of images for exploring how political action (or inaction) can be constituted and controlled through visual media” (p.5). *American Gothic* is certainly an iconic photograph in this regard.

Future research can explore the specific results this image had in inspiring individuals to do something to aide their respective communities. Several questions come to mind: (1) Was this photograph discussed during any civil-rights marches, rallies, or meetings? (2) Did notable civil-right activist, like MLK Jr. or Malcolm X, ever discuss this image when addressing their audiences? (3) Does *American Gothic* communicate different things to certain demographics, and if so what are the results of this communication?

When it comes to the overall effectiveness of an image in inspiring the masses to act, Gordon and Mihailidis (2016) not that “given the range of possible methods of civic participation, questions of efficacy come to the fore” (p.55). Social media activism is often touted as the 21st-century’s primary tool for inciting progressive combat. However, as noted by Marsh (2018), “the use of social media as a tool for assembling like-minded individuals toward a cause is still in its infancy.” With this in mind, any elevated proclamations, regarding the efficacy of these platforms, should be met with a moderate degree of cautiousness. “It is clear that the concept of social movement is either absent or used in impressionistic and ungrounded ways in much of the relevant literature” (Stammers, Shaw & Jong, 2005, p.14).

Gordon Parks should serve as a role model for anyone interested in ameliorating the strains of inequality; because the conditions many 21st-century Americans experience remain amazingly comparable to those portrayed by Parks. Effective visual imagery forces us to confront these continuing matters of desperation. Today, if a producer of media feels too small when faced with the enormity of the demands of the day, they needn’t look far for an example of inspiration; Gordon Parks demonstrated that artists can and should be vital instigators in the amelioration of enduring and difficult societal maladies.

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