

The Circulation of Visual Rhetoric—Vincent Van Gogh’s “The Starry Night”

Vincent van Gogh’s famous artwork, “The Starry Night” (1899), has been and remains a significant visual text that pervades contemporary culture. However, the painting has travelled far from its original context of being presented as a work of art in an art museum. Today, one can find the image in the form of prints, posters, fan art, phone cases and laptop skins, in films, across the net and more, to the point that almost anyone could recognize it, even if not by the artist’s name or artwork’s title. I want to explore how the different contexts of the image transform its rhetorical meaning and examine it in the three contexts of the painting hanging on the wall of the Museum of Modern Art in New York City, the image being incorporated into the movie poster for Woody Allen’s film, “Midnight in Paris,” and finally, the reproduction of the image on iPhone cases displayed at Books A Million.

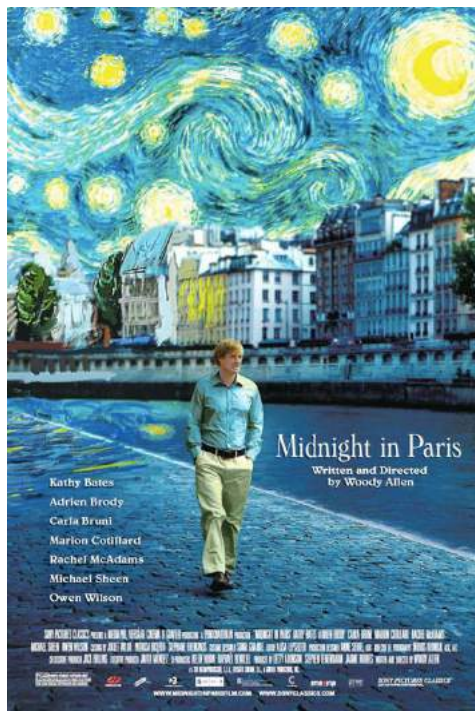
When examining these texts, I want to mostly look through the framework of visual rhetoric posed by Rose in *Visual Methodologies*, due to her high interest in the compositional and social aspects of visual texts and how they make images rhetorical. When looking at the original “Starry Night” painting in the MoMa, we must first consider Rose’s “site of production,” looking at the technical, compositional, and social modalities of the image throughout its production, and how they contribute to the image’s effects. Technologically, “The Starry Night,” as an oil painting, is limited to what a painter can achieve using paint and a paint brush. That doesn’t necessarily limit the painter to the subjects he can choose to paint, but it limits him to a two-dimensional surface, therefore emphasizing the painter’s rendering of perspective, visual depth, and volume, which can affect how the viewer experiences and interprets the painting. The outside conditions of “The Starry Night,” govern its composition: for example, Van Gogh, being heavily influenced by Impressionists, Neoimpressionists, and Pointillists, created a composition highly relative to those of his contemporaries, characterized by loose brushwork, expressive lines, and bold colors. And finally, social aspects of “The Starry Night” could have affected much of the subject Vincent van Gogh painted: painting nature was a popular subject in nineteenth-century art because many artists, dissatisfied with the modern city, sought out earthly paradises firsthand that served as references for their work. van Gogh, for example, sought out the scene outside of his asylum window, the Saint-Paul asylum in Saint-Rémy, in southern France, to possibly escape his depression and emotional turmoil. The choices Vincent van Gogh made when painting “Starry Night” were heavily influenced by these modalities, which therefore also influences what the audience sees and then how the audience experiences the artwork (www.moma.org/learn/moma_learning/vincent-van-gogh-the-starry-night-1889).



Following Rose’s framework, I want to explore the painting’s sites of “the image” and “audiencing.” The modality of compositionality becomes extremely apparent when examining the image itself. When exploring the compositionality of the painting, I will use the description of the image provided by the Museum of Modern Art: a night sky filled with a moon and stars,

taking up three fourths of the picture plane, dominates the composition of the average sized, oil-on-canvas painting. The moon and stars, Venus being the largest, are rendered as bright circular orbs. The sky appears turbulent: achieved by van Gogh's intensely swirling patterns. Beneath the sky is a "hushed village of humble houses" surrounding a church, whose steeple sharply rises, cutting the background of blue and black mountains. A flame-like cypress sits in the foreground of the composition, reaching all the way from the bottom to the top edges of the canvas. Symbolically, the cypress could be seen as a "bridge between life and death," or simply a bridge between the skies and the earth. Although it is dangerous to assume each viewer interprets and experiences the painting in this way, the "site of audiencing" shows us that multiple meanings can be created depending on what audiences bring themselves when viewing the work, i.e. previous ideologies, interests, knowledge. In the case of the painting in an art museum (that one must also pay to enter), however, most of the rhetorical meanings created would probably result from the audience members being previously interested and somewhat knowledgeable about art, although we could also probably expect a number of students, middle-class adults, and tourists as well, considering the price and location of the museum. However, the rhetorical meanings of the painting in the context of the MoMa would be about the image as a work of art in relation art history and other significant works of art: whether or not the audience creates meanings symbolically, emotionally, or by gaining knowledge. The painting could also function rhetorically as it inspires people to use the image in their own way, examples of which I want to explore to examine their rhetorical differences.

In the context of the movie poster for Woody Allen's "Midnight in Paris" displayed around a movie theatre, the painting, as a work of art, is no longer what is interpreted or



emphasized. While "The Starry Night" is incorporated into the image, as seen above, its rhetorical purpose is now to advertise a movie. Technologically, this image is mass produced, being displayed around countries with the purpose of drawing people's attention and inspiring them to see the film. Compositionally, this is suggested by the replacement of the characteristic cypress tree of "The Starry Night" with the figure of an actor (Owen Wilson) as well as the text reading "Midnight in Paris: Written and Directed by Woody Allen." The title and director of the film replaces the title and artist of the original painting, again taking away from the painting as a work of art by Vincent van Gogh and transforming it into the context of filmmaking and advertising. Socially, the audience is a different one: now we are moving from lovers of art and art history culture to movie goers, film enjoyers, and people that want to be entertained. While the audiences may interpret the movie poster which uses elements of the original painting and be inspired to go see the movie, they are no longer interpreting the painting but the movie

poster, concluding if the movie looks entertaining and worth seeing. In this example, the rhetorical purpose is much more clear, inspiring a specific action. When compared to the rhetorical analysis of the original painting, the modalities of the site of production and site of the image impact the rhetorical effects of "The Starry Night" much more heavily than the site of the

audience, while the site of the audience has the largest impact on the rhetorical effects of the movie poster.

In the context of the “Starry Night” being transformed into a phone case skin sold at Books a Million (the image of the phone case above is taken from Books a Million’s website, but I’ve seen the cases sold there in person before), the emphasis on the original painting remains, but the modalities of the three sites changes due to its unique rhetorical purpose: to sell.

Technologically and compositionally, the image is produced to fit a phone case, changing scale and playing with the cropping of the image. In the example above, the image is cropped to highlight the cypress tree, cropping out the swirling patterns of the sky and town below it. The phone case, therefore, features possibly the most characteristic element of van Gogh’s painting, the flame-like cypress. This is important when we think about how that functions socially: the audience includes bookstore shoppers, and most likely already have an affiliation with the image due to the amount of notebooks, stationary, and art books filling the shelves. Shoppers might be inclined to purchase the phone case if they simply like or know “The Starry Night,” and by highlighting the most significant aspects of the work would “sell” the phone case more easily than if it highlighted an “unimportant” detail or texture.



These examples are important because they show how visual rhetoric can take many forms, and that the ambiguous and interpretive can be just as rhetorical as verbal texts. One can also see how an image’s rhetorical purpose affects its technological and composition elements, but then also vice versa. I feel that an image standing alone by itself, like the original painting in the MoMa, has a more ambiguous and open-ended rhetorical purpose. Because there is nothing the audience can directly do in response to the image, versus seeing a movie or buying a phone case in the other examples, the interpretation of the image and creating meanings by doing so becomes more important than the traditionally verbal rhetorical purposes of initiating change or persuading. An image like a painting, though less obviously “rhetorical,” does not mean it is less rhetorical than other texts, it simply has unique consequences. In this case, “The Starry Night” circulated across many contexts, that in itself I think makes it a rhetorical text. The social aspects of images, then, are extremely important, supported also by the other examples—for no movie would be seen or phone case purchased if not for the audience and circulation of the image.

Works Cited

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