

Envisioning Rhetoric: Sensation, Orientation, Imagination

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Abstract: I propose *envisioning* rhetoric as a feminist rhetorical pedagogy that conceptualizes vision as an embodied, affective, and material practice. Drawing on scholars like Hawhee, Poole, and Ahmed, *envisioning* rhetoric frames seeing as a situated, multisensory act—one that orients us to the world, and that allows imagining otherwise. I explore this framework through a visual rhetoric course structured around three conceptual anchors: sensation, orientation, and imagination. Students engage in exercises that foreground embodied perception, examine how visual technologies shape attention and affect, and create zines that visualize otherwise invisible systems or identities. *Envisioning* rhetoric challenges dominant regimes of visibility by attending to how perception is conditioned by power, infrastructure, and sensory experience. It offers both a pedagogical method and a theoretical lens for a feminist rhetorical approach to visuality and visual culture.

Keywords: [visual rhetoric](#), [feminist pedagogy](#), [feminist science studies](#)

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Introduction

While histories of visual culture often emphasize empirical observation, a feminist rhetorical reading of “the visual” attends to the material, embodied processes that shape perception. Rhetorical scholarship has explored the sociocultural dimensions of visual culture (Cram et al., 2016; Fleckenstein et al., 2007) and vision as a rhetorical medium (Gries, 2015; Hawhee, 2011). Feminist scholars, especially in science and technology studies (Haraway, 1988), have also considered vision’s biological and affective dimensions—both central to an embodied approach to visual practice and culture. Yet there is a lack of sustained engagement with how we, as rhetorical educators, might enact a pedagogy that acknowledges these aspects of vision, particularly in the visual rhetoric classroom. A pedagogical focus on these dimensions of vision invites further exploration into how images persuade, how bodies see, and how vision is shaped by and contributes to uneven experiences across identity categories.

I thus propose “*envisioning* rhetoric” as a feminist pedagogical approach that conceptualizes vision as a rhetorical capacity rooted in affective structures, embodied experiences, and material environments. This approach begins from the premise that seeing is not a neutral or disembodied act but a socially and politically situated process. *Envisioning* rhetoric insists that vision is not just shaped by rhetorical culture—it is itself a rhetorical practice, conditioned by the body’s sensory engagement with the world. In doing so, it draws on feminist theories of embodiment, affect studies, and feminist science studies perspectives to account for how vision is not merely a tool of representation but also an instrument of orientation, differentiation, and power, and situates the classroom as a prime site for experimenting with vision as a rhetorical practice—one through which students can trace how perception both constructs and contests meaning. *Envisioning* rhetoric thus invites a rethinking of rhetorical pedagogy, where the visual is not simply added onto existing assignments, but integrated into how students invent, process, and revise their thinking. The following section grounds *envisioning* rhetoric in a feminist science studies approach to visual rhetoric, emphasizing material and affective dimensions of knowledge-making.

A Feminist Science Studies Approach to Visual Rhetoric

While visual rhetoric is a well-established subfield of rhetorical study, shifting focus to the bodily experience of interpreting visual rhetoric moves us toward biological considerations of vision, perception, and the body. These conversations are taken up by feminist rhetorics of science, which challenge traditional conceptions of objectivity, neutrality, and rationality in scientific discourse. Instead, this scholarship merges concern for the ways in which gender, power, and positionality shape relations with a new materialist emphasis on the entanglement between discourse and matter. As Booher and Jung (2018) put it, while a humanist rhetorical approach views inequality as arising from symbolic actions, a feminist posthumanist approach understands oppression as “material-discursive relations that produce distinctions undergirding asymmetrical relations of power” (p. 30). Building on the insights of feminist science and technology studies scholars like Haraway and Barad, feminist rhetorics of science largely consider reality to be “a dynamic process constituted through material-discursive practices” (Hill, 2021, p. 283).

This perspective requires attending to visibility as embodied. While the Western rhetorical tradition has long recognized visibility – through the Greek concept of *phantasia* – as embodied (Hawhee, 2011), a feminist emphasis on visibility places that embodiment within biopolitical regimes of power. In other words, not all bodies (are permitted to) see and are seen the same. Indeed, Rowland (2020) notes that “to be recognized as human is to live-in-hierarchy” (p. 44). Feminist rhetorical science studies contends with that hierarchy. In her examination of the work of Margaret Cavendish, Poole (2021) shows how even early women in science used the embodied nature of vision to forward an optics that countered dominant, male-centered scientific epistemology: “According to Cavendish...the truest knowledge came primarily through the body’s biological way of sensing, through the lenses of the eye, rather than through mechanical instruments” (p. 201). Millbourne and Hallenbeck (2013) also explore this sentiment, considering how the eighteenth century pocket microscope functioned as a “material-rhetorical assemblage” that “enabled different possibilities for the performance of science and gender” (p. 403).

A feminist emphasis also highlights that visibility is affectively experienced and constructed. As Poole (2020) explains, “Sensing is an ongoing rhetorical encounter that occurs in non-rational channels, and rhetorical criticism that is attuned to interpretation at the level of the senses must unpack the affective connective tissue between non-symbolic affect and symbolic interpretation” (p. 616). This attention to affective experience resonates with Ahmed’s (2006) reflections on embodied encounters with the material world, where even the sensation of a doorknob can generate a “becoming strange” of the body – an unsettling that occurs between hand and object, self and world. In such moments, objects take on a kind of liveliness; they impress upon the body and, in doing so, transform both the object and the subject. Ahmed extends this thinking to the social realm as well, where visual impressions are not merely perceptual but normative. Images, whether material or institutional, orient subjects toward particular expectations. “The ‘hey you’ is not just addressed to anybody,” Ahmed writes, emphasizing how institutional spaces recruit bodies that can “reflect back” the organization’s image in a “good likeness” (p. 134). In this sense, visibility becomes a site where norms are reproduced and bodies are sorted – not simply through what is seen, but through how perception itself is

structured by histories of power, race, and affect. Feminist rhetorics thus position visuality as a layered and consequential site of inquiry, shaped as much by sensation and orientation as by representation.

Envisioning Rhetoric

From a feminist rhetorical science studies perspective, I forward *envisioning* rhetoric as a feminist pedagogical approach to visual culture that emphasizes the inseparability of sensing and perceiving visual stimuli from the creation, dissemination, and interpretation of visual media. Indeed, to envision is both “to visualize” and “to imagine,” underscoring two key prongs of this framework. First, envisioning is an active process that reflects the dynamic relationship between viewer, context, and environment. Tsing (2015), for example, emphasizes that our bodies are always part of larger, interdependent systems of humans and nonhumans: she notes that matsutake pickers navigate the forest by sensing connections among mushrooms, trees, soil, and animals. This practice fosters a form of forest knowledge and attentiveness that values the liveliness of beings as subjects, not objects, rather than aiming for complete classification. In this sense, envisioning entails cultivating a mode of attention attuned to relationality rather than mastery. It reframes seeing as a practice of rhetorical engagement—one that recognizes knowledge as co-created through the interplay of bodies, environments, and affects.

This network of relations places visualization as a mode of what Hopkins (2025) calls *dialing in* (p. 2) – of emplacing ourselves in the complex web of social, biological, technological, and material forces that shape how and what we see. Envisioning is also imaginative, both negotiating the relationship between mental and empirical images to produce meaning, and thriving on possibility – it is “a mechanism for seeing the noticed and the unnoticed, rethinking what is there and not there, and speculating about what could be there instead” (Royster & Kirsch, 2012, p. 20). Like the visual performance of the word itself, (en)vision(ing) is situated *within* and *between* systems of interpretation, bodily experience, and material environments.

This framework has significant implications for the classroom, where the visual can enrich practice, process, and product. In what follows, I explore how *envisioning* rhetoric shapes a visual rhetoric course I teach at the University of Texas at Austin. Through this approach, students reflect on how sensory apparatuses affect perception, how visual technologies orient us toward specific ways of seeing, and how imagination can generate just futures for their communities. The course is structured around three conceptual cornerstones of *envisioning*: sensation, orientation, and imagination. This framework equips students to critically examine visual culture, reflect on embodied perception, and imagine more equitable ways of seeing and being seen.

Envisioning Rhetoric in the Classroom: Pedagogical Approaches

Sensation

The first unit focuses on sensation, emphasizing the embodied and material nature of visual practice. As Lupton and Lipps (2018) remind us, “our sense organs are connected to a head that turns, arms that reach, and bodies that wander and seek” (p. 10). This embodied vision does not occur in a vacuum but within complex, often invisible systems. Hopkins (2025) draws attention to the infrastructural and environmental

dimensions of sensation, noting that “we are knotted, tangled, trapped in webs of extractive intra-action” (p. 2). Vision, then, is not just bodily – it is infrastructurally and ecologically entangled in our material environments. Poole (2020) poses a pressing question addressing this notion: “how might understanding the materiality and sensation of vision alter rhetorical criticism?” (p. 617).

My own response to this question, in the context of the classroom, is to embrace rhetorical field methods as modes of knowledge-making that prompt students to reflexively engage with their own sensing abilities. Senda-Cook et al. (2019) describe rhetorical fieldwork as an approach that considers how material conditions, spatial contexts, and participation in rhetorical performances together shape meaning, audience response, and rhetorical practice. Fieldwork, as a result, expands both what “objects” rhetoricians can study and what methods we use to study them.

In particular, I ask students to take field notes in a space familiar to them, then take field notes viewing a photograph of the same location. Students critically compare their field notes, writing up a reflection that explains how their experiences differed and what that has taught them about sensation. For Pezzullo and de Onís (2018), rigor in rhetorical fieldwork depends less on strict methods and more on a scholar’s ability to draw valid cultural critiques or evidence-based conclusions rather than relying on preconceived assumptions. I emphasize the latter part of this definition, asking students to make a compelling critique of their own experiences based on their observations.

The goal of this assignment is to encourage students to recognize how their embodied presence shapes visual interpretation. This goal is scaffolded by the reading I assign: students engage with Nick Sousanis’ (2015) *Unflattening*, in which the author artfully illustrates through hand-drawn graphics how Western visual culture often “flattens” experience and non-traditional modes of knowledge by siloing off perspectives and contexts from one another. As a class, we consider what it means to *unflatten* our perspective of visuality, emphasizing vision as part of a larger embodied process. Isolating one sense—vision—from the other senses transforms the interpretive possibilities and affective experiences in the space. In fact, that was a point that most students made—seeing the space through only a photograph *felt* different. Most students remarked on this difference: viewing the space only through a photograph both drew their attention to details they might otherwise overlook and, at the same time, disoriented them by withholding other sensory inputs such as sound and touch. This prompted conversation about how 1) when we talk about vision, we are really talking about a multisensory network of perception; 2) how images attempt to isolate one particular sense from the rest; and 3) how visual representations of the world prompt a rhetorical response. This consideration leads us into the next unit, where we focus on orientation.

Orientation

The second unit centers on orientation, drawing from feminist and phenomenological theories to examine how bodies are directed in and through visual environments. Ahmed (2006) defines orientation as being “turned towards certain objects, those that help us find our way” (p. 1), emphasizing that what appears in our field of vision depends on where we are and how we are positioned. Orientation is thus part of a multisensory network shaped by visual technologies that direct attention, structure affect, and determine what is central

or obscured. Poole (2020) extends Kenneth Burke's engagement with orientation to show how "orientation as seeing—and reorientation as seeing double—reveal much about rhetoric's relationship to sensation" (p. 605). Together, these perspectives underscore rhetorical orientation as affective, embodied, and entangled in systems of power.

We explore two axes of orientation in particular: time and scale.

For time, we discuss how orientations, like affects, can accumulate over time, so that historical ways of orienting toward the world are passed on through our technologies. We begin with expanding the definition of what students might consider visual technologies to include analog instruments like eyeglasses and mirrors. This in itself was an orienting move on my part, to envision rhetoric moving beyond the tendency Hawhee (2011) identifies as focusing too much on "paintings, film, photographs, and posters," which she contends has the potential to "limit...the visual to an encounter with pictorial objects" (p. 140). Eyeglasses and mirrors, as orienting examples, resonated considerably with students as parts of their everyday lives. Assigned readings, as well as in-class and discussion exercises, prompted students to reflect on their experiences with these technologies, noting how they carry ideological assumptions about productivity and beauty. For example, students invoked Kelleher's (2023) *The Ugly History of Beautiful Things* to consider how mirrors cultivate a practice of visuality rooted in "looking" rather than "seeing" (p. 20), sparking discussion of how the male gaze persists and adapts through newer visual technologies, from selfies to gym photos.

For scale, we discuss how orientation changes what we see. We focus both on how technologies orient us conceptually and physically—how technologies change not only how we see but what we see. Students used handheld microscopes to take images on campus, noting not only how the image isolates visual sense from other sense-making abilities, but how scale drastically changes their ability to not only interpret what they see but define what they see. In reviewing images in class, some students forgot what the microscopic images actually indexed. This led us into a discussion of the prevalence of microscopic imaging, particularly in medical contexts. For example, Weatherbee (2023) examines how the visual depiction of the COVID-19 "Spike Protein" departed from historical traditions of representing disease through symptoms—how they manifest in the body. Weatherbee argues that this change in visual frame dehumanizes COVID-19 sufferers, since it directs attention away from the visible, recognizable body and towards the microbiological organism. Linking this reading to a recent measles outbreak in Texas, we compared prevention campaigns for measles and COVID-19, analyzing how different visual orientations shape rhetorical representations of disease.

The major assignment for this unit asked students to choose a visual technology to rhetorically examine, explaining how this technology orients users across time and scale, both physically and conceptually. I ask them to delineate how this results in what Berger calls a *way of seeing*—an orientation toward our perceptual field that shapes the pictures we surface with. As Berger (1972) explains, the invention of the camera transformed not just what we could see but how we see: "what you saw depended upon where you were when... it was no longer possible to imagine everything converging on the human eye as on the vanishing point of infinity" (para. 32). In other words, the camera revealed that vision is not fixed or universal but relational, contingent, and situated in time and space.

For this assignment, students traced how other visual technologies enact similar reorientations. I left the parameters of “visual technology” vague, and students chose a wide variety of instruments—from iPhone cameras, to drones, to microscopes, to telescopes. One student, for example, noted how an examination of telescopes oriented them toward the effects of light pollution—an issue they wouldn’t normally have noticed. Another student used microscopes as an example of how visual technologies shape collective behavior and societal values, since the discovery of microscopic bacteria led to different standards of hygiene. Through this assignment, students demonstrated how technologies guide attention, shape perception, and orient us toward particular aspects of the world.

Imagination

The final unit of the course shifts from past and present temporal registers—how we sense and have sensed, how we are oriented and have been oriented—to a future-facing orientation, inviting students to *envision* what remains unseen. This unit draws on two strands of feminist rhetorical scholarship: Royster’s concept of *critical imagination* and Benjamin’s speculative methods. Royster (2000) defines imagination as “a commitment to making connections and seeing possibility,” positioning it as a critical skill that enables scholars to question dominant narratives and remake interpretive frameworks (p. 83). In her work on African American women’s histories, Royster uses critical imagination as a reconstructive tool to recover lives systematically erased from public records—however, I adopt this methodology following her and Kirsch’s claim that imagination can “renegotiate the terms by which visibility... [is] determined” (Royster & Kirsch, 2012, p. 133). Imagination is not only a historical practice but also a generative prompt for students: to dig into their own knowledges, experiences, and observations to ask what they do *not* see represented in their everyday environments, and why those absences matter.

I supplement this approach with Benjamin’s (2016) method of speculative field notes, which she describes as “a way to fashion possible futures and probable pasts, enabling analysts to critically reflect on the present.” By encouraging students to “experiment with the line between fact and fiction,” speculative thinking becomes a way to resist narratives of inevitability surrounding technological and cultural developments. This future-oriented lens guides students in identifying a phenomenon—an experience, identity, community, event, place, or process – that has been made invisible or marginalized by historical, infrastructural, or cultural forces.

Zines were the medium through which students realized these projects, chosen for their historical and rhetorical significance as tools of resistance, representation, and relational knowledge-making. Zines have long been a staple in composition pedagogy, particularly for their alignment with social justice values and their ability to foster “egalitarian social relationships, equity, and social justice” (Licona, 2012, p. 2). As Licona notes, zines “challenge, reimagine, and replace exclusionary and oppressive discursive practices” (p. 2), offering new modes of subjectivity and expression. Encouraging students to disengage from purely digital production in favor of tactile, hands-on design allows them to perform the ethos of imagination, inviting them to consider not only what is, but what could be.

Students responded with a wide array of powerful projects that brought their chosen topics to light, from

a digitally-designed zine on the cultural significance of matcha in Japan, to a tactile, DIY craft-based zine featuring interactive activities for caregivers to use with Alzheimer's patients, building connection through sensory and emotional engagement. Students were encouraged to think about how to utilize the “image part of imagination” (Hawhee, 2011, p. 42), not simply representing the unseen but rhetorically orienting their audiences toward new ways of sensing and knowing. Drawing on prior units, they considered how to guide perception through visual design, material texture, and even sound, using QR codes to link to videos, ambient noise, or spoken word. In addition to their zines, students submitted a reflection that asked them to consider how their own ways of seeing contributed to the topics they chose, and how their view of their topic changed throughout the processes of making the zine. One student, for example, noted how the process of creating their zine—a digital zine on the barriers to genetic testing for breast cancer in rural communities—provided new opportunities to connect with family members, changing what they thought they knew about an already personal topic. In an era where concerns about AI-generated student work are growing, zines function as a reminder that composition can be otherwise: embodied, speculative, and deeply human.

Conclusion: Envisioning Beyond Pedagogy

In an era marked by increased surveillance, algorithmic vision, and the saturation of everyday life with visual stimuli, a feminist rhetorical approach to visual culture reveals that who is seen, how they are seen, and what remains unseen are questions that sit at the core of both visual culture and power. *Envisioning* rhetoric offers a response to this moment, foregrounding the material, embodied, and affective dimensions of visuality. As a mode of orientation itself, envisioning rhetoric expands approaches to visual rhetoric by bridging sensory experience with speculative imagination. It asks not only how pictures persuade, but how perception itself is conditioned—and how we might imagine different possibilities for conditioning how we see. In the classroom, this framework invites students to slow down their looking, to notice what dominant habits of vision render invisible, and to experiment with alternative ways of attending to images, technologies, and each other. These practices cultivate critical habits of attention while advancing core goals of feminist pedagogy: fostering equity, amplifying agency, and grounding learning in lived, embodied experience.

As a result, the possibilities of *envisioning* rhetoric reach beyond the classroom. Future approaches might consider digital interfaces and biometric platforms, where questions of accessibility, legibility, and algorithmic bias are central to how we see and are seen. It offers fertile ground for disability studies, where embodiment and perception are already being theorized in expansive and generative ways. And it invites renewed engagement with archival work, asking how we might visualize what history has hidden or erased. By anchoring visual culture in feminist rhetorical practice, *envisioning* rhetoric offers one response to how we might resist dominant regimes of visibility—those that surveil, exclude, and flatten—and instead cultivate more equitable, embodied, and imaginative ways of seeing, knowing, and relating to and in the world.

Biography

Kimberlyn (Kimber) R. Harrison is a PhD candidate in the Department of Rhetoric and Writing at the University of Texas at Austin. Her research is situated at the intersections of rhetoric of science, technical communication, and material rhetoric. She investigates how evolving human-technology relations shape the rhetorical resources available for imagining digital futures, examining case studies in artificial intelligence, biometrics, and genetic engineering. Her work can be found in the *Journal of Technical Writing and Communication* and *Bioethical Inquiry*.

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