

COMMENT AND RESPONSE

A RESPONSE TO REBECCA SIMON

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In her essay “Seeing More in Cabinets and Blockbusters,” Rebecca Simon studies the presence of visual rhetoric by looking at the construction of three different museum exhibits that feature artifacts from the tomb of the Egyptian King Tutankhamen. Aristotle’s definition of rhetoric as “an ability, in each [particular] case, to see the available means of persuasion” (1355b) is relevant to Simon’s demonstration of how the same visual subject matter can be rhetorically constructed to create three different exhibits that convey different meanings. The first exhibit that Simon discusses is the Egyptian Museum’s “cabinet of curiosities,” which presents the artifacts of Tutankhamen from a traditional “conserve and display” approach and gives the viewer minimal “meaning-making opportunity” (89). The second exhibit mentioned is the “Treasures of Tutankhamen,” a “blockbuster” exhibit that toured the United States in the late seventies and focused on the “universal quality and aesthetic beauty” of the artifacts (90). The final exhibit that Simon describes is the highly interactive and education-centered “Tutankhamen and the Golden Age of the Pharaohs” that began touring the United States in 2005 (92). Though Simon acknowledges the different strengths and weaknesses of the visual rhetoric behind these three exhibits, she is arguably too quick to dismiss the value of the Egyptian Museum exhibit and perhaps does not fully consider the meaning inherent in its unique geographical and cultural situation.

The exhibit in the Egyptian Museum most obviously differs from the two American exhibits in that it is located in Cairo, Egypt, the land where these artifacts were created, used, hidden, and uncovered. Because rhetoric is highly situational, exhibit designers “rely on the audience’s knowledge when they decide how much context to provide in the display” (Simon 89). Simon argues that the antiquated “cabinet of curiosities” approach used by the Egyptian Museum relies too heavily on the previous knowledge of the viewer and does not provide enough information to create a meaningful experience. Because of the geographical situation of this exhibit and the museum’s overall goal of respecting and preserving Egyptian history, it can be argued that the exhibit creators rightly assume that visitors do not need the interactive history lessons used by the American exhibits to establish its importance. There is no need to re-create the Egyptian setting or reenact the history because the context is outside in the streets of Cairo and the Egyptian culture. Egyptian and foreign visitors are most likely familiar with and interested in Egyptian history. This situation differs from that of the American audiences, to whom Egypt is a distant world with an unfamiliar history. The American exhibit creators must therefore provide their audiences with a more developed context so that they can establish a cognitive and emotional connection with the artifacts.

Simon immediately acknowledges that the ability to grasp an image’s meaning is enhanced through the context in which it is presented, and that meaning-making is a central part of visual communication. Throughout her essay, Simon recognizes that “the images created by each exhibit rhetorically embrace different meanings” (96); but at the same time she claims that there is “very little

meaning-making opportunity” presented to audiences at the Egyptian Museum (89). With this statement, Simon narrows the general idea of “meaning” to a connection with overt historical education. While the American exhibits benefit from this detailed historical background, the specific context of the exhibit in Cairo allows meaning to be made in different ways. According to Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca’s perspective on rhetoric, an arguer has the ability to give an abstract or intangible concept “presence” and importance in the forefront of the mind by using appropriate techniques of presentation to which the specific audience can relate (cited in Foss, Foss, and Trapp 95). Talented exhibit designers must therefore strive to create presence in order to help their audiences construct meaning out of the objects before them (Hill and Helmers 28). The lack of context in the Egyptian exhibit unconventionally enhances the presence of the artifacts by displaying them in a pure and unadorned manner. The Egyptian exhibit’s meaningful omission of details is similar to Aristotle’s rhetorical use of the enthymeme to show that “the pleasure of art does not consist in the object portrayed; rather there is a pleasurable reasoning in the mind of the spectator that ‘this’ is ‘that’” (1371b). Often the most meaningful learning experiences are not those in which understanding is presented on a silver platter, but rather those in which things are left unsaid and audiences are required to reach inside themselves. The exhibit in the Egyptian Museum is meaningful in that it allows viewers to see the artifacts and reflect on their beauty and importance in an environment that is free from the modern distractions of holograms, light shows, and levitating swords. The visual rhetoric that defines the Egyptian Museum exhibit “plays to the encouragement of intellectual thought” (Simon 96) and allows audiences to use their imaginations to fill in the gaps.

Throughout her essay Simon points toward the advantages of modern exhibit design in creating engaging educational experiences. While I understand that the visual rhetoric employed in these exhibits may be the most appropriate means of engaging today’s entertainment- and technology-centered North American culture, I think that a more in-depth look at the situational nature of rhetoric and understanding will reveal a different side to the question. Focusing too narrowly on an American perspective ignores the local context of the exhibit, limiting our ability to embrace the *kairos* behind the construction of an exhibit fitting for Egyptian audiences. As Simon also argues, context is important; I would take this argument further in comparing the effects of the three exhibits.

Works Cited

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