

# Video Cellphones, War, and Vidblinks: Exploring the Rhetorical Constraints of Time and Place

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*Web-enabled cellphone video recording devices, such as the Nokia 3650, provide a site for creating and broadcasting rhetorical discourses adapted to the time and place constraints they present. Our project explores the rhetorical constraints of time and place as they relate to the production of persuasive multimedia messages with video cellphones. We employ rhetorical strategies of enargeia to meet the time and place constraints posed by current video cellphone technology and its media of audio-visual and text-based communication. Among other presence-inducing rhetorical techniques, we employ audio-visual repetition, association, rhetorical questioning, and key dialectical terms to persuasively display the conflicts over conflict -- the operative positions advanced in arguments for and against war.*

## Introduction

Rhetoric has always borne its interests to the site of particular cases -- artfully employing its means of persuasion to influence the judgments and actions of intended auditors. Accordingly, rhetoric's effective engagement is always negotiated anew as its aims are constrained by circumstances constituting what are called "rhetorical situations." Rhetorical situations require *phronesis* or practical wisdom -- the apt adaptation of communication to the complex of autonomous people, measured times, and cultural contexts. It is through the strategic adaptation and mediation of symbols that rhetoric coactively induces cooperation without coercion -- that rhetoric achieves its persuasive aims in the "realm of the probable and contingent" at particular times and places.

Web-enabled cellphone video recording devices, such as the Nokia 3650, provide a site for creating and broadcasting rhetorical discourses adapted to the time and place constraints they present. Most video-enabled cellphones allow up to 10 minutes of recording and playback (in Europe and Asia video cell phones have greater functionality than in the United States because of early service provider decisions to standardize methods of data transfer, thus allowing more effort to be directed toward functions within a

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particular phone model). The videos may immediately be sent over the Internet as multi-media messages. In turn, the videos can be received and viewed by video-enabled cellphones, handhelds, or by web- and video-enabled desktop and laptop computing devices.

On cellphones, the video clips are displayed on screens ranging from 1 inch X 1 inch to 1 inch X 2.2 inches. On handheld devices (e.g., PDA's, Tablets) the video clips are displayed on a slightly larger screen. On desktop and laptop computers, the media player's viewing window can be enlarged with considerable loss of quality to the video images. The sound quality of the original footage is fairly good at 16 bits mono with an 8000 Hz sample rate. On a cellphone, sound is mediated through the speakerphone function and the volume is adjustable as it is on all computer-based media players.

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## Vidblinks and Rhetorical Presence

Our project explores the rhetorical constraints of time and place as they relate to the production of persuasive multimedia messages with video cellphones. Specifically, we focus on the production of multimedia messages that persuasively display attitudes toward war.

Rhetorical presence may constitute a fundamental rationale of a given discourse's persuasive appeal. In the history of rhetoric, presence has been associated with visualization through stylistic devices of *ekphrasis* or *enargeia*. *Enargeia* is understood as a quality of vividness that strategically operates under the maxim that "seeing is believing" and the cultured assumption that vivid discourse can induce a sense of "being there" that provides the discourse's creator and receiver with a sense of witnessing and experiencing the dis-

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course's claim. In his *Orator's Education* (6.2), Quintilian refers to this quality of experience as *phantasia* -- a sort of "functional" hallucination -- prescribing that speakers mentally engage a visual representation of their subject at the time of a given speech's utterance as an inducement to deliver the speech in an emotional tone commensurate with the speech's intention. For example, mentally "seeing" a husband and wife stranded in the ocean with sharks encircling them during the course of speaking of their plight will induce an emotional tone in the speech that evidences the speaker's emotional connection to the subject. Similarly, the vivid depiction and emotional speaking of the couple's plight is designed to evoke an emotional tone in the listener commensurate with "being there" closing the experiential gap between simply "hearing" the report of their plight and eye-witnessing it.

The strategic manipulation of strategies of *enargeia* provides an orientation toward a given discourse that aligns its emphases with its intention to induce a given judgment. That is, any given "observation" of any given event is perspectival -- it is derived from a standpoint that is usually underwritten by values or cultural and other screens that call attention to features of phenomena and, therefore, conceal, or put out of awareness, other features of the same phenomena. Accordingly, two people can witness the "same" event and judge it differently under different hierarchies of interest that highlight and downplay aspects of the phenomenon under view.

As far as rhetorical narratives intend to constrain listeners' judgments of given events, actions, artifacts, etc. in accord with the rhetor's intention, strategies of *enargeia* project orders of emphasis that are designed to preclude conflicted ways of seeing among a group of observers. Where audiences are symbolically / rhetorically induced to cooperate in seeing similarly they are able to coordinate their judgments, arrive at collective decisions, and undertake conjoint actions with a perception of deliberate, democratically-formed consensus. This tactic of concealing and revealing is also metaphorically understood as framing and reframing, where perceptions are induced and actions motivated by linguistically or visually contextualizing or re-contextualizing phenomena under view. In visual media, verbal narrative may frame what is seen by providing linguistic prompts that pattern interpretations. For example, the same painting with different titles may induce different judgments of the painting's significance, different interpretations of the artist's motives, and different interpretations of the painting's meaning. With regard to a literal frame, different textures, widths, colors and materials may also induce different experiences of the differently framed painting's significance - - even to the extent that some ways of framing are prescribed for some ways of painting. For example, expressionist painting is typically framed with gilded material. This operation may also be understood by

the turn of phrase punning on the homophones "gilt" and "guilt": "Gilt by association." In this view, a given phenomenon is framed, identified, or associated with some other phenomenon thereby blending their meanings. This is especially effective in visual rhetoric where, for example, people who are seen together may be considered related in some way -- either by guilt or gilt where the character of the dominant part of the pair may "rub off" on the other. Of course, for better or worse, this strategy of physical positioning resonates with the cultural maxim "Birds of a feather flock together."

Our project queries the rhetorical limits of web-enabled video cellphone media, under the constraints of time and place, for creating rhetorical presence and inducing judgments of war's efficacy. Using Toshiba VM 4050 video cellphones and cellphone service provided through Sprint PCS Vision with average data transfer rates between 50 kbps-70 kbps (Sprint/Qualcom 3G CDMA 1x), we produced 43 "vidblinks." A vidblink is the video counterpart of a sound bite -- a brief, vivid, memorable, and rhetorically effective message. Operating under the time constraint afforded by the Toshiba VM 4050, each vidblink is 15-seconds long. The vidblinks display value-judgments of war's efficacy. Some of the vidblinks engage war's efficacy-in-general. Other vidblinks indirectly address current conflicts.

Each vidblink consists of a visual image and an oral narrative. They employ rhetorical strategies of *enargeia* to meet the time and place constraints posed by current video cellphone technology and its media of audio-visual and text-based communication. Among others, the vidblinks employ narrative repetition; visual and oral association, antitheses, metaphor and synecdoche; rhetorical questioning; and a variety of camera-movement techniques to persuasively display the conflicts over war -- the operative positions advanced in arguments over war's efficacy. These stylistic strategies enable the creation of rhetorical presence within a relatively brief time-period; within the size- and place-constraints of the cellphone's screen; and the recording, editing, broadcasting, and playback capabilities of the device.

Most of the vidblinks draw their visual substance from objects "found" in the local environment -- gasoline cans, baseball diamonds, playgrounds, chessboards, ceiling fans, and road signs. Using the readily observable environment as their visual scene and context, each vidblink's narrative rhetorically frames its objects as relevant to contemplating war's aspects in different ways. Additional presence is created through the combination of visual commonplaces and uncommon rhetorically framed narratives that bring to awareness "meanings" embedded in the everyday environment that may transform their commonplace observation into sites of contemplation as taken-for-granted sur-

roundings are imbued with meanings induced by the vidblinks' narratives. For example, one vidblink portrays a gasoline container sitting on a wrought-iron patio table. It is narratively framed by a rhetorical question that metaphorically associates gasoline with blood: "How much blood does it take to fill your tank?"



Figure 1. Blood and Gas

Given the current war in Iraq, and the relevance of blood and gasoline to its prosecution, an association is made between a commodity and a conflict that may bring to awareness an economic rationale for the war that calls into question pronouncements characterizing the war as an operation in service of liberation and democratic social reform. All this happens in a 15-second time line, that, in its brevity and intensity as a re-contextualization of the commonplace, rhetorically induces presence and the possibility of remembrance of the message's associative import the next time the observer purchases gasoline, and so long as the war continues. This may, in turn, stimulate a repetitive recognition of a disjunction between the claims of the government and the realities of the war's interests: humanitarian vs. commercial.

In addition, one inducement to attend to some of the vidblinks relates to the already-established symbolic significance of given props. For example, one vidblink is set on a baseball diamond. The camera moves around the bases and each base is characterized by a term related to war's tragic losses. As the camera crosses home plate, the narrator asks "Isn't it time we came home?" In this vidblink, there are kinetic associations (movement around the bases) as well as associations to the game of baseball and a play on the word "home" as the camera crosses "home" plate. In sum, given baseball's commonplace characterization as "America's pastime", the baseball diamond is a site of strong cultural-symbolic significance to many "Americans." Its association with war will probably be especially memorable, and possibly alienating, to baseball fans. As a potential site of alienation, the vidblink may prompt anger, thereby raising consciousness of the observer's taken-for-granted position.

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Other vidblink props with generally established symbolic significance include the American flag, cemeteries, and playgrounds. So, in the found environment there may be objects and sites symbolically charged with political and social significance as well as objects and sites that are taken for granted in their own right as commonplaces of everyday life. It is difficult to determine which set of props are most apt to be framed in the interests of our project. In the case of commonplace objects and sites the rhetorical challenge is addressed by constructing narratives sufficient to symbolically charge them with unprecedented emotional, political and social significance appropriate to the contemplation of war's efficacy -- as in the case of the gasoline container. In the case of the objects and sites with established symbolic significance, the rhetorical challenge is addressed by narratively downplaying their typical associations and foregrounding their place in disputes over war's efficacy. Nevertheless, all of the props are "found" in the environment and may therefore prompt recollection of given vidblinks' narratives as they are encountered in the course of everyday life.

## Assessment

The 15-second format enables and drives the compact and potentially intense engagement of an audio-visual message (1) displayed by the cellphone's small-screen, (2) heard through the cellphone's speaker-phone function, (3) wirelessly broadcasted and received as a multimedia message, and (4) apt to be successively rebroadcast by first-wave recipients to other recipients.

The wireless cellphone video medium affords the potential for the exponential chaining of single multimedia messages toward all web-based nodes of reception, constituting a cyber-grapevine and genealogy of meaning that may surpass the audience-in-view of the message's creators, constituting the message anew as it may be taken up and rebroadcast world wide.



Figure 2. Come Home

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In addition to creating the vidblinks, we are currently in the process of broadcasting them via the Internet to over 100 participants in our project. We have created a survey to (1) assess their influence on the recipients' impressions of the conflicts over conflict, and (2) ascertain the scope of their rebroadcast. This feature of our project will enable us to understand the messages' reception -- how relatively brief small-screen audio-visual cellphone messages may effectively perform a presence-inducing persuasive function and circulate in a global network.

This aspect of the project addresses the recurrent objections raised in critics' judgments of "sound bites" and their potential to over-simplify and subvert time-honored discursive practices characterized as central to appropriately engaging ideals of rationality connected to the formation of appropriate judgments. We are interested in the place of vidblinks in the provision of "good reasons" backing moral judgment. That is, in the history of rhetoric, specific concrete vivid images and examples (nonverbal or verbal/fictional or actual) have played a significant role in the inducement of cooperation -- rhetoric's chief persuasive aim. Operating under the rhetorical rationale of liveliness or vividness, and the idea that seeing is believing, schemes and tropes -- especially metaphors (visual and verbal) -- have been deployed to set striking images serving persuasive functions within the three traditional genres of rhetoric: deliberative (i.e. generally political and future oriented discourse), epideictic (i.e. generally value-educative and present-oriented discourse), and forensic (i.e. generally legal and past-oriented discourse).

We want to address our assessment of the vidblinks' effectiveness and distribution in light of our rhetorical interests in the visual and oral "arguments" of style and delivery -- of symbol choice and media of communication -- operating within the constraints of time and space -- as the vidblinks may be freely distributed across the world-wide-web. At the same time, however, we wish to assess the vidblinks' broadcast and their likely drift to unintended auditors -- where their generic intention as persuasive displays will probably be aborted as they are planted in argument fields unreceptive to their *telos* -- to their actualization as fruitful insights into war's efficacy to be cultivated and harvested by their observers.

## Conclusion

In sum, our project seeks to understand how the time- and place-compressed communication medium of cellphone video can be rhetorically managed to produce persuasive messages with political and social import potentially communicable throughout the World Wide Web. That is, rhetoric has always been associated with persuasion, as far as it may vividly display -- give presence to -- the grounds of judgment in any given

particular case. Our vidblinks follow in this ancient tradition, adapting it to new communication technology.

In a way, our strategy of associating commonplaces of the environment with judgments of the efficacy of war potentially reverses the order of technologically mediated presence by imbuing the found environment with meanings that are derived from their mediated deployment as invitational props to narratives considering war's efficacy. This reversal opens the prospect of the possibility of contemplating war's efficacy in any landscape that comes before one's view. It may induce a hermeneutic of every-day observation with ancient roots, stemming back to the belief in a divine logos permeating all phenomena with messages of spiritual import emanating from an omnipotent, omnipresent creator. In the case of our project, the vidblinks provide a pretext for contemplating their intention at the intersections of everyday life where their props are encountered and possibly recognized as sites of significance, bringing to mind the vidblinks' brief narratives and possibly inducing the daily contemplation of war's efficacy as one moves through environments containing the vidblinks' visual props. For example, when one of the authors filled his lawnmower's gas tank from a red plastic container, he was reminded of the "Blood and Gas" vidblink's rhetorical question: "How much blood does it take to fill your tank?"

The interplay of mediated and unmediated presence may prospect toward inculcating a "way of seeing" that is mindful of the potential insights that can be gained from taking note of the world-as-given through a consciously affected interpretive frame -- inducing a quality of experience that can be gauged by the quality of life it provides its bearers.

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