A Woman by Design: Analyzing Posters from the Three Waves of Feminism
By Miranda Romano

Introduction

I was inspired to begin this project after seeing a poster that was created in 1989 by a feminist activist group called the Guerilla Girls. This bright yellow poster presents an image of a lounging nude woman with the head of a gorilla and the text “Do women have to be naked to get into the Met Museum?” My first thought observation upon seeing it was that it was very reminiscent of second wave feminism, and then I wondered why I thought that. How had images contributed to my ideas, and the ideas of the general population, about feminism? Are the images presented in posters the ones that feminists want to be known for? What do people think about feminism after seeing a feminist poster of a nude woman in a gorilla mask? How do third wave feminists feel about this image in comparison to second wave feminists? I considered whether this might be something that has contributed to the confusion about the purpose and goals of feminism. I assumed that there was a major distinction between posters created in the different waves, but that they all utilized rhetorical strategies to try to communicate to an audience.

To gain a better understanding of each poster’s rhetorical situation, I also used an art history lens to consider where each poster is situated historically. This allowed me to look objectively at the design elements while remaining aware of the influences that may have been present at the time of each poster’s creation.

The purpose of this study is to analyze the effectiveness of rhetorical design elements in promoting feminist messages across the three waves while still considering the historical context of each poster as a piece of art of its time.
Rhetorical Analysis

Background

In order to study and talk about feminism, scholars break up the history of the movement into separate time periods, or waves. The exact start and end dates of the time frames may vary depending on who is asked, but there is consensus regarding the approximate time frames. For the purposes of this study, first wave feminism is accepted to have begun in 1848 and continued until 1960. This wave focused on suffrage and specifically on winning equal rights for middle-class, white women. The second wave began in 1960 and continued until the 1990s. This wave of feminism is known for being concerned with reproductive rights and sexual expression; it is often stigmatized as the “bra burning” era. At this time, women were breaking out from under the male domination they had faced in the past. They felt a kinship with other women, based in what they considered their innate sisterhood (Ringelberg). The third wave began in the mid 1990s and as of 2016, is still in progress. Feminists in this wave are dedicated to raising awareness about sexual assault, reclaiming derogatory words, and encouraging an intersectional feminism, to name a few causes. (Harnois 120-140)

This is just a brief overview of feminism as it is broken into waves. Its full history is much more complex and often includes smaller groups within feminism itself. Considering the waves broadly allows for the inclusion of a more diverse set of documents and makes it possible to choose a few documents to study rather than hundreds.
Choosing Documents

To study a variety of posters from each wave, many posters from each time frame were considered. In order to complete the analysis within the time frame of the project, four documents from each wave were selected, adding to a total of twelve documents. This provided enough documents to gain a clear understanding of the design trends occurring in each wave and to compare across eras. The documents that were chosen were thought-provoking, complicated, and were reminiscent of the time period that they represent.

The first and second wave posters were found in the National Archives’ online archives, which contain copies of historical posters along with information about their origin. Because the third wave is currently happening and new posters are constantly being created, there are no popular or influential third wave posters available in the archives. Consequentially, the best place to find posters that are being used by today’s feminists is on the Internet on sites like Tumblr, Facebook, and Instagram. The third wave posters used in this study were collected from social media sites such as these. This assured that the posters were actually in use and accepted by a large group of feminists.

It was also a goal of this project to consider how feminist representations of the female body have changed over time, and to consider whether these representations are empowering or lacking. To this end, all of the posters contain a representation of the female body, in portion or in whole.
The posters that were chosen were posters either made by feminists or for feminist events. This was to ensure that it represented how some or many feminists of the time wanted to represent themselves. In this way, it is an internal look at feminism, and how feminists wanted to be seen, rather than propaganda created by individuals outside the movement.

**Approach to Rhetorical Analysis**

Because the purpose of the research was to study how different elements of the posters interact and how they influence the viewer, a rhetorical approach was used to analyze the rhetorical situation of each document. This means that each document was analyzed to consider the relationship between text, author, and audience. As a third wave feminist, the researcher was also considering the interaction between past posters and the mind of a third wave feminist.

With such image-heavy documents as the subject, it was important to place the visual elements of rhetorical design in the forefront of the process, so the rhetorical analysis became a visual rhetorical analysis. This allowed for an emphasis on elements such as color, layout, etc.

In order to conduct a comparison of all of the posters together, quantitative data needed to be collected. This required an extensive coding process that began with a few elements. A list was made of some possible attributes to be aware of in the documents, such as background color, placement of text, pattern repetition, and so on. The first document was coded for these elements, meaning that for each element that appeared in the document, an “X” was marked for that poster. New or unexpected
elements that appeared in the documents were added to the coding list and applied to the remaining posters. After every poster was coded, a recoding was administered to cover any new elements.

The heuristic was set up with the poster titles listed chronologically in columns, and the “X”s lined up below in the corresponding column, which made it easy to see what trends continued through time and when certain trends died out. The heuristic format is rather reminiscent of a scatterplot graph, showing the sporadic or continuous presence of specific colors, or layouts, or text.
Code 1: Action Verbs

One element that all of the posters had in common was the use of one or more action verbs. The words themselves varied from poster to poster, but the concept remained the same: they all worked to call the viewer to action. In a way, these words implicate the viewer and encourage him or her to become part of the movement.

The word *join* appears in two of the four first wave posters, which attempt to encourage women to work during World War II. “Join” comes from the Latin word *iungere*, which means union and literal *to yoke*. In this way, it represents multiple parties sharing work, just as two oxen yoked together work to share their burden. *Join* brings together and often symbolizes multiple pieces becoming a whole. Because this poster is encouraging women to join a larger group of women working together, it is apt that the poster would utilize an action verb that unity and camaraderie. Similar to this, one of the posters from the second wave uses the word *unite* to urge women to attend the Congress to Unite Women. *Unite* symbolizes camaraderie just as *join* does, and it assures that viewer that if they do what the poster suggests, they will become part of something bigger than themselves.

The verbs used in the second wave posters are more striking. They are not so much invitations as they are statements about what is happening in the movement. For example, one of the verbs is “giving birth”. This is a graphic verb and not one people usually expect to see on a poster. But as a part of the phrase “I am a woman giving birth to myself,” this verb accurately describes what the woman in the poster is doing and how she feels about the movement.
The verbs in the third wave tend to be more encouraging and inclusive. Examples include “help carry” and “we all can do it”. These words suggest participation similar to that of the word “join”, but they are more definite and direct. “Carry” and “do it” are common, everyday words that people are familiar with. The use of words like these attempt to offer more women a space in the feminist movement.

**Code 2: Appearance of All Caps and Sans vs. Serif**

The utilization of text in all capital letters appears in every poster except for the “Sisterhood is Blooming” second wave poster and the “We All Can Do It” third wave poster. The “We All Can Do It” poster instead uses underlining to create emphasis of the word *all*. For the other posters, the use of all caps draws the eye immediately to the text. Professor Paul Luna, from the University of Reading in the United Kingdom, asserts that all capital letters were originally used in formal situations and can be traced all the way back to the ancient Romans (Robb). Once bold and italic texts became available, all caps became less popular. Beginning in the 1980s, Internet users began to equate capital letters to messages that people were trying to shout and this has become an accepted idea in popular culture (Robb). Either way, caps lock remains a useful tool in catching a reader’s attention and conveying a message.

Besides all caps, the font of a text can be important in getting a message successfully to the viewer. As stated on the Purdue Owl website, “fonts can create mood and atmosphere” and they can “give visual clues about the order a document should be read in and which parts are more important than others” (Brizee). There are two defined categories of font types: serif and sans-serif. Serif fonts, such as Times
New Roman, have extra strokes at the ends of the lines while sans-serif fonts, such as Arial, do not. Serif fonts are typically used for large amounts of text because they are generally easier to read. That being said, sans-serif fonts are popular for titles and headings because they are simple and do not distract from other parts of the document.

Only one poster utilizes a standard serif font. The first wave poster that reads, “the only way” has more text than some of the other posters that is necessary to explain the image. Large amounts of text are easier to read in serif fonts and serif fonts are easier to see in smaller sizes (Brizee). The other first and second wave posters tend to use decorative fonts and sans-serif for smaller, more explanatory text at the bottom. For example, in the “women are happening” poster, the text women are happening is in a curly, decorative font while the time and location of the event is written in sans-serif at the bottom.

The third wave posters all tend toward sans-serif fonts. This gives the posters a smooth look and does not distract from the images, which are supposed to be the center of attention (Brizee).

**Code 3: Use of the Word “Woman/Women”**

The direct use of the word *woman* and/or *women* was employed in every poster except for the third wave “We All Can Do It” poster. The word itself specifies who the movement is for and who should be the focus of all of its endeavors. The use of the word *woman* can be seen as both inclusive and exclusive. It is used as a way to encourage everyone that identifies as a woman to involve themselves in the feminist movement. It can also be seen as exclusive though, because individuals that do not
identify as women, but want to be part of the feminist movement may feel uninvited to participate in the cause.

**Code 4: Layout**

Layout is an important component of rhetorical design because it has a large impact on the delivery of a document. Layout is a form of rhetorical organization that works to lead the viewer through the document (Brizee and Stolley). Repetition of patterns and colors encourages the eye to move a certain way along the page. For example, in the “We all can do it” poster, the left woman’s lips, the middle woman’s headband, and the right woman’s hijab are all the color red and this repetition draws the eye from left to right along the page so that all three women are viewed. The headband and the hijab even both have white polka-dots, which visually links the two women and places them as part of the same team.

The design must be eye-catching and engaging for the viewer upon first sight. Many of the documents, including “Women are Happening”, “Join the land women’s army”, “We could do with thousands more like you”, “she was asking for it”, and “We all can do it” use bright, primary colors like red, yellow, and blue, to attract the viewer’s eye and keep it engaged. For all of the posters, the image is the main focus, so it is presented on a majority of the page in the middle of the poster.

The layout also dictates where text lays on the poster (Brizee and Stolley). All of the images position text at the bottom of the poster because this is presumably where the eye falls last as it takes in the page. This is the place to really hammer home the message of the poster and to leave a lasting impression on the viewer. Text at the top
of the poster was most frequently used in the third wave. This text often functions as a headline that sets up the image and is further explained by text lower on the poster.

**Code 5: Abstraction of Image**

Beginning in the second wave, figures present in the posters began to get more abstract and less recognizable. Especially apparent in the poster that says “I am a woman giving birth to myself” where a white figure drawn with quick, black brush-stroke-lines, rests in a Child’s Pose position. There are no clearly defined body parts or facial features on the figure and we can only assume it is female because of the text that accompanies the image. A similar representation is presented in the third wave “Help Carry the Weight” poster. The figures in this poster are silhouettes, and although they are recognizably female, they are vague and have no defining characteristics. These abstractions are a rhetorical choice by the creator that allow for the viewer to place their own features on the figure. The viewer can imagine whomever they like to be in the poster, even possibly placing themselves in the situation. Without any defining features, the figures can be anyone and this opens up the poster for a more inclusive interpretation. The same idea is achieved in the “Votes for Women” poster because the girl’s face is not visible to the viewer. She has a definite race, but her hidden features still leave an openness that allows the girl to be anyone.

**Discussion**

The rhetorical situation varied greatly between documents, so one might expect that they use drastically different methods to convey their messages. And while some
things, like the definition of images changed over time, it turns out that many rhetorical strategies can be seen being utilized across decades. Having an effective layout was and remains a vital part of any successful document. Making the document easy to understand and leading the viewer through the message has always been an important part of any document that is created for an audience. The use of action words is another element that did not disappear. It aids in implicating the viewer and encouraging them to take action, which was the purpose of all of the posters in the first place.

**Art History Analysis**

**Approach to Art History Analysis**

Art history is the study of historical pieces of work with the goal of contextualizing the time period in which they were created and the art that follows. The study of art history is naturally interdisciplinary because it incorporates elements of material works with history, art and philosophy dating back to the time of the philosopher Hegel (Hatt 23). Its interdisciplinary nature lends itself well to this project because it shares many elements of design and purpose with rhetorical strategies. Together, both disciplines allow for a deeper analysis of the documents in question. The rhetorical analysis places the work in its proper rhetorical situation, while the art history places it in its historical context and illuminates details about the work’s purpose and its place in Western culture.

Through the art history analysis, elements important to historical movements or eras in each document were coded. Where the rhetorical analysis focused on very tiny
elements of the posters, the art history approach focused on elements that influence the overall message and connect the piece to other works of the same time period. These codes represent ideas such as: subjects and their relationship to the viewer, colors, relationships of the body to other elements, features of artistic movements, and representations of power in the images. If the document incorporated the listed element, the document was marked with an “X”.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Code</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Votes for Women</th>
<th>We could do with...</th>
<th>Join the Only Way</th>
<th>Women are Happening</th>
<th>Giving Birth to Myself</th>
<th>Congress to Unite</th>
<th>Sisterhood</th>
<th>Stereotype Leg</th>
<th>Help Carry</th>
<th>Asking for</th>
<th>We All Can Do It</th>
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**Code 1: Object of the Gaze**

An important idea to keep in mind while analyzing images is the idea of the gaze. In feminist theory, it is accepted that, in art, “men act and women appear” (Berger 47).
In this way, women in art are made into objects of sight instead of being represented as human beings. Often, the viewer of the work is the surveyor and the positioning of the woman’s body and the line of her eyesight present her as an object for viewing. Even when the woman in the work is not looking out at the viewer, her body may be on display for him. The idea of the gaze is captured in many of the posters.

In the first wave poster “The Only Way”, a group of stylized, matronly figures sit or stand together in a room. The illustration and linear style of this poster place it firmly in the Art Nouveau movement that began in the 1890s (Ringelberg). Although the women look strong and wise, none of them are attempting to reject the gaze. They do not make eye contact with the viewer, but their bodies remain on display. This usurps some of the power that they could have had in the image.

Similarly, in the second wave poster that says “We could do with thousands more like you”, the woman in the poster is the direct object of the gaze of both the men in the poster and the viewer(s) of the poster. She is smiling and leaning back in a way that allows her body to be seen more easily and she has makeup on and her hair perfectly done even though she is supposed to be working on a farm. She is posed to be viewed. This representation does not offer the woman any agency in the image.

The same idea is present in the second wave poster that says “Join the women’s land army”. The woman is alone in the image and she appears front and center so that she is easily seen. She is drawn as the epitome of beauty for the time and she is motionless and silent in the scene. Her body is forward and open while her eyes look off in the distance. This position is an inviting one, as if she is giving the viewer permission to look at her.
The women in the third wave “We all can do it” poster are also positioned in the forefront of the image and only from the waste up. However, the women have their fists raised and are making eye contact with the viewer. This gives them power and allows them to catch the viewer in the act of viewing them (Ringelberg). The viewer can no longer look without consequence because he or she has been spotted.

There is a different representation in the first wave poster “Votes for Women”. The poster shows a young boy in overalls being pointed at by a young girl in a winged hat and checkered dress. The young age at which the girl is being represented desexualizes her and allows her to be something more than just the object. The way she is standing, with her back toward the viewer and her face facing away, prevents her from being the object of the gaze (Ringelberg).

**Code 2: Pointing**

Although it may seem like a simple gesture, pointing plays a big role in the power dynamics in the posters. Two of the posters include figures that are pointing. The first is from the first wave and it is called “Votes for Women”. It presents a young girl with her back turned to the viewer pointing sternly at a young boy standing in front of her. Supposedly, she is speaking the words at the bottom of the poster which say, “for the work of a day, for the taxes we pay, for the laws we obey, we want something to say”. The style of the poster resembles that of a children’s illustration from the 1910s (Ringelberg). This style may have been used to make the feminist movement seem less threatening and more playful. Typically, one would think that the gesture of pointing would give the girl the authority, because it insinuates that she is admonishing the boy...
for something he has done, however, in this representation, the pointing is aggressive and the boy looks alarmed that she is pointing at him. The shocked face of the boy, which looks as though he has no idea why the girl is pointing at him, and the childish representation of the girl removes the agency that the poster could have given the movement it was trying to represent.

The second wave poster that says “we could do with thousands more like you” uses pointing in a completely different way. While this poster was made in Britain, it is incredibly representative of posters being created in the United States during World War I. The similarities between this poster and the American one are very apparent including the type of text, the phrasing, and the rural background. It includes a perfectly made up woman supposedly working out on a farm under the supervision of men.

In this image, the man who is supposedly speaking the text is pointing his pipe at the only woman in the picture. The text at the top of the poster suggests that he is saying something positive, but the pointing is condescending and works to assert his dominance over the woman. This is very suggestive of the time, considering that Freud’s psychoanalytical theory had become very popular in the 1940s and 50s (Ringelberg). Freud’s studies on psychoanalysis and his obsession with finding phallic symbols in everyday objects led to the acceptance of cigars, cigarettes, and pipes as phallic symbols, which was then furthered by Eric Hiller’s publication in The International Journal of Psycho-Analysis in which he wrote: “…that is the phallic significance of the cigarette, cigar and pipe. It is thus a substitute for the penis” (Hiller 480). With the popularity of Freud’s ideas in the 40s and 50s, it is unlikely that the pointing of a pipe at
the woman in the image was a naïve choice. It is meant to represent the man’s dominance as a male in society and his patriarchal dominance over the woman.

**Code 3: The Body and Nature**

The idea of an innate connection between the female body and nature is an ancient one that dates back to long before these posters were created. However, these posters represent how the relationship between female bodies and nature have changed over the course of the three waves.

Between the 18th and 20th centuries, and therefore the first wave, female bodies were connected to nature and male bodies were associated with civilization and progress (Ringelberg). At this time, civilization was considered more powerful than nature and culture considered the dominator of nature. This aided in the patriarchal idea that men were superior to women. The connection to nature and civilization is clearly represented in the posters: “we could use thousands more like you” and “Join the land women’s army” and “the only way”. “The only way” illustrates women surrounded by leafy wreathes and garlands and a blooming rose and the text on this poster says “…[make] our appeal through our charm, our grace, and our beauty”. These are all characteristics related to natural things. In the propaganda posters of WWI, the women are placed out in nature with bright shades of blue and green and they are situated as if they belong there. In the “we could do with thousands more like you” poster, the woman is set opposite the male figure. She is closer in proximity to the livestock than the man or any of the buildings and is wearing farm clothing. The man is wearing more formal or “civilized” clothes and is separate from the nature in the image (Ringelberg). In this way,
the woman is connected to nature and the man is connected to the civilized world. After looking at the way he is pointing and looking at her, he is clearly looking down on her and does not respect her as an equal.

In the second wave, during the 60s and 70s when hippies were the focus of popular culture, the feminist movement worked to undermine the idea that nature was inferior to civilization (Ringelberg). People dubbed “hippies” of this time were obsessed with, as author Timothy Miller put it, an “affinity for nature, preference for rural life over urban, anti-materialism, and tribalism” (Turman-Deal 2). Women began to adopt the idea that nature, and therefore a woman’s body, was essential to the world and more valuable than civilization (Ringelberg). They began to connect caring for the female body with the way humans should look after the earth. As represented in both the text and the image of the “sisterhood is blooming” poster in which a giant, abstract flower is blossoming in the middle of the page, women of the second wave adopted their assigned connection to nature and turned it around. In the poster that states, “I am a woman giving birth to myself”, nature is represented by a single tree on a hill in the background of the poster. This lone tree possibly signifies the autonomy and independence the figure in the image is discovering for herself (Ringelberg).

**Code 4: Color Red**

The color red is an element that appears in a majority of the posters. The color red has both a rhetorical purpose and meaning in an art history context. As a design tool, red is a loud color, meaning that it grabs a viewer’s attention. The Purdue Owl notes that in color theory in Western culture, “red is largely associated with danger,
aggression, stimulation, and excitement" (Pepper). This emotional connection that society has built for the color red causes people to notice elements in their surroundings that are this color. Red can therefore be used as a rhetorical device to encourage people to feel emotions like those mentioned before, or to simply take notice of the elements that are such a bright color. The third wave posters use red often as an accent color. In the poster that reads “she was asking for it”, the woman’s clothing and important words in the text are accented with red. Similarly, in the “we all can do it” poster, the hijab and headband of the women in the poster are red, drawing the eye up to their face and the strong expression there.

In art history, the connotations associated with the color red come from cultural ideas and the materials from which the color is made (Phipps 5). Historically, red has been associated with blood, fire, fertility, life, and death across cultures, and these are associations that we still make in the twenty-first century (Phipps 5). Shades of red like ochre were even some of the first colors to be made by humans, and were used by ancient peoples in cave drawings (Phipps 5).

After the 1950s, the color red garnered a new connotation. On the Eastern side of the world the early 50s were marked by a revolution led by Mao Zedong and the emergence of the People’s Republic of China. The color red was so pervasive in this time that Westerners began to associate it with revolution (Ringelberg). This is very apparent in the second wave posters, which incorporate copious amount of red in their designs. The best example is a poster that reads “women are happening” and features a bright red handprint surrounded by the female sex symbol. The handprint in the
middle is intense, almost bloody and the poster calls for women to take action, a revolution of its own.

**Code 5: Critically Recursive**

Some of the posters can be described as, what art historians call, critically recursive (Ringelberg). This means that they use images and text to subvert the typical understanding of a situation and to comment analytically on what society is saying. The most obvious example in this set of documents is the poster that says “she was asking for it”. The background of this poster is a dark alley, which is partially blocked by a pair of legs (presumably female) wearing a short, red skirt. The text at the top, “she was asking for it”, is an unfortunately common statement made by rapists and individuals blaming victims for sexual assault. It assumes that because a person was wearing revealing skin, they wanted to be assaulted. At first, this poster seems like it is sending a message contrary to what feminists would want to say, because third wave feminism is very active in stopping violence and victim-blaming. However, toward the bottom of the poster is text that reads, “What a woman wears shouldn't make her a victim. Stand up against sexual assault”. This is the complete opposite of the first text, so it usurps the text’s meaning and forces the viewer to rethink the first set of words. The combination of text and picture is meant to make a statement about the issue of victim-blaming and to draw attention to how unreasonable the statement “she was asking for it” really is.
Discussion

Through a critical analysis of these twelve documents, it is possible to see the changes that have occurred and the trends that have stayed the same in feminist advertisements over many decades. There were posters that represented women and feminism better than others, but there are elements in all of the posters that contemporary feminists can use to better represent themselves to the world.

In the first wave, posters like the propaganda images from WWI attempted to get women involved in their communities and this, to me, is a feminist goal. However, their lack of representation, unrealistic ideals, and inclusion of male figures reduced their ability to be good representations of feminism. And while both the poster with the young girl and the poster with the matronly women were telling of their time and attempted to earn women their suffrage, there isn’t much that a third wave feminist could use to represent herself.

The second wave moved toward more abstract images and this allows people of all different backgrounds to include themselves in the movement. As exemplified by the Congress to Unite Women poster, minorities were beginning to be represented in this time period. Women began to use accepted ideas, like the feminine connection to nature, to usurp common notions and make them work for the feminist movement.

The third wave works with silhouettes and unidentified figures. Minorities are slowly but surely being seen in more posters as the movement goes on. Feminists have stopped including patriarchal men in their posters, which gives the women, in and outside the posters, more agency. In this way, it appears that as the feminist movement
continues, the advertising materials get better and better at representing what women want feminism to be.

As feminists move toward a more inclusive movement focused on equity and freedom, it is important to remember the way design elements can make or break a message. Whether or not the posters accurately represent the feminist movement, they all possess qualities that can help contemporary feminists learn. From layout to color and text, the makers of each of the posters had to consider the rhetorical situation of their work and how the audience would react to it. As long as feminists are conscious of their audience and make sure to use elements that accurately present their message, their representation can only improve.
Works Cited


Ringelberg, Dr. Kirstin. Personal interview. 12 May 2016.