Contemporary Rhetorical Perspectives to Persuasion:

Presentation and Criticism

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Abstract

Since its inception in the Greek period, the rhetorical theory has undertaken a multiplicity of paths. Although it has been discarded at times, its resurrection in the twentieth century has given rise to diverse theories, whose cruxes differ entirely from the ones established by Aristotle. In this paper, I intend to supply critical snapshots of only the contemporary rhetorical theories which still maintain the original object of the study of rhetoric: persuasion.

Keywords: rhetoric – rhetoricaltheory – persuasion

الملخص:

منذ نشأتها في العهد الإغريقي، سلكت النظرية البلاغية دروبا مختلفة. ورغم الانصراف عنها في بعض المراحل التاريخية، فإن إعادة بعثها في القرن العشرين سمح بظهور نظريات متعددة يختلف جوهرها عن ذلك الذي وضعه أرسطو. لذلك يرمي هذا المقال إلى تقديم لمحة نقدية مجملة حول النظريات البلاغية المعاصرة لكنه يتطرق فقط لتلك المتعلقة بموضوع الدراسة الأصلي للبلاغة: الإقناع.

الكلمات المفتاحية: البلاغة – النظرية البلاغية – الإقناع

1. Introduction

The term rhetoric has, undeniably, always been associated with persuasion, and the rhetorical theory has, since the classical period, always offered methods for discovering the means of persuasion. The views have altered immensely in a myriad of ways, however: the rhetorical theory has veered from the course traced by Aristotle. The meaning of rhetoric has been extended to consider anything and any symbol whose aim is to persuade as its study subject including: stop lights, paintings, architecture, novels, films, advertisements, conversations, songs, and websites (Foss, 1999). The list might be expanded to comprise: guns, gold and colours, to name but these (Bryant, 1973).

Indeed, the shift in rhetorical studies is attributed to the renewed importance of language and persuasion in an age that is witnessing a proliferation of mass media and advertising. It is also due to the rise of cultural studies. The rebirth of rhetoric paved the way to various theories to emerge in contemporary times; only eight of them will be treated here for they are the only ones, according to the extensive research I conducted, which are applicable to persuasive discourse- the very first subject matter of rhetorical studies. All in all, I will supply a short overview of the theoretical bases of each perspective followed, when possible, by a procedural part in which I lay out steps for the application of the method, ending by the criticism(s) that approach has received.

2. The Neo- Aristotelian Method

It was Black (1978: 31) who coined the phrase “neo-Aristotelian”, but, in reality, the approach stems from the work of Wichelns (1925). In this method of analysis, the Aristotelian concepts of ethos, pathos and logos and the classical five canons of invention, arrangement, style, memory and delivery stand out as the elements on which a rhetorical analysis is based. Discourse is also examined for other intrinsic qualities such as ideas, structure, style, topics, speaker’s personality, and public perception of the speaker, audience, effect on audience and influence on time, among others (Stewart, 2004). With regard to the procedure of doing a neo-Aristotelian traditional analysis, it involves: selecting an artifact and analysing it in terms of the rhetor, the audience, the occasion, and the three appeals.

Undoubtedly, Wichelns provided a broad agenda for critics as he focused on both the rhetor and the work but failed to offer a precise method to accomplish the goals he outlined. For example, he did not provide the steps to be followed by a critic to know the effects of a rhetorical piece on audience or on time as the speech was considered to be formative of events. Moreover, the proposed aspects of analysis led criticism to be principally centered on oral rhetoric (speakers and speeches) as in the classical period with the exclusion of the written discourse.

3. The Social Movement Approach

A social movement isan organized collectivity that promotes or opposes changes in societal norms and values. Since their aim is to shape society, persuasion is pervasive in the rhetoric of social movements' actors.

By launching the investigation of social movement criticism, Griffin (1952) has shifted the purview of rhetorical criticism away from the study of single pieces of oratory and attempted to lay out questions about how to study a mass of discourses of orators belonging to the same movement to discover the rhetorical structures peculiar to that movement. Griffin does not provide a method with which to analyze social movements' rhetoric: he simply presents a series of questions to be considered by the analyst like "what rhetorical criteria should the student use in evaluating the public address of the movement?" and "how should the student go about the process of synthesis involved in reporting the movement?" (Griffin, 1952: 187), and the like. His answers to such questions incorporate three imprecise steps to criticism: (a) an overview of the historical background of a movement, (b) a summary of the studies describing, analysing, or criticizing several periods of the movement, and (c) an attempt to set a matrix of the history of the movement that will summarize the rhetorical pattern (Griffin, 1952).

In contrast with Griffin, Simons (1970) regards movement studies as a separate genre that requires a separate treatment. He thinks that the uniqueness of the rhetorical situation of movement discourse calls for the necessity of a new theory of persuasion apart from the "standard tools of rhetorical criticism" (2). Yet, Simons does not set out a specific methodology for movement discourse criticism except his proposition of a "leader-centered concept of persuasion" (2), which outlines the rhetorical requirements, problems and strategies faced by leaders. Simons admits that approaches to social movement rhetoric do not yet have enough theory to draw on.

While Griffin and Simons considersocial movement discourse as "a distinct domain of rhetorical behavior" (Zarefsky, 2006: 137), Zarefsky argues that it cannot be recognized as a genre because he does not believe in its distinctiveness since the "propositions which describe or explain social movements might easily apply to other rhetorical behavior as well" (129). The rhetorical forms of social discourse, for example, resemble those of campaigns. For this reason Zarefsky says that the study of social movement texts contributes neither to rhetorical theory nor to the identification of a new genre of rhetorical studies.

Obviously, social movement criticism is still facing theoretical hurdles: there is no single method appropriate only to the rhetorical analyses of social movement discourse. It is noteworthy that generic criticism (Gustainis, 1982) and fantasy theme analysis (Foss, 1977) areamong the methods that have been used to study this kind of rhetoric.

4. The Identification Approach

According to Burke's philosophy, rhetoric is viewed as the use of words by human agents to form attitudes or to induce actions in human agents (Burke, 1969). Whereas the key term in old rhetoric is *persuasion*, Burke's new rhetoric emphasizes *identification*, which he regarded both as a means and an end of rhetoric. Identification, a Latin term meaning 'the same', is used by Burke to refer to that strategy when the speaker uses linguistic signs to show that his properties (interests, values, beliefs, views, perspectives, attitudes, etc.) are similar to or identical with the listeners' properties, so as to achieve persuasion. Identification occurs via emphasis on the margin of overlap between the rhetor's and the audience's experiences (Heath, 2001). It is essential to know how one can identify with the other. Burke provides an explanation of this by noting: "You persuade a man only insofar as you can talk his language by speech, gesture, tonality, order, image, attitude, idea, identifying your ways with his" (1969, p. 55). Cheney (1983: 145) mentions two less direct types of identification strategies discussed by Burke:

> *identification by antithesis, whereby a speaker promotes identification with a listener by virtue of an 'enemy' both speaker and listener have in common; and identification by an 'assumed we' whereby a speaker uses references such as 'we,' in a way that is largely unnoticed but allows the speaker to group together parties who have little in common.*

A Burkian example on deliberate attempts at identification would be a politician who, when speaking to farmers says, "I was a farm boy myself" (Burke, 1969: xiv).

In fact, what worried me about Burke's theory is that he perhaps fails to mention if the similarities between the rhetor and the audience are real or fake. In case of using 'fake identification' (for instance, when politicians on the campaign trail tend to downplay their wealth and privilege to claim a common-man identity), I may wonder whether or not it would increase the persuasiveness of an address. My other concern is with Burke's emphasis that a rhetor can identify with his listeners semi-consciously. A speaker, for example, may use symbols associated with wealth or class to identify with such nuances without being fully aware of doing so i.e. he/she does so not wholly deliberately yet not unconsciously (Burke, 1969). In such cases, an analyst of this speaker's message might mistakingly consider some processes as strategies for persuasion while they are genuinely unintended messages but mere unconscious processes of the human mind (Day, 1960).

5. The New Rhetoric Approach

Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca's argumentation theory (1969) connects rhetoric to the traditional Aristotelian works on public addresses; therefore, it is called

the New Rhetoric theory – a name that was also given to the Renaissance rhetoric. In this theory, the term rhetoric covers argumentation on all levels from personal deliberations to public discourse (Hairston, 1976).

This theory does not focus on rhetoric as having one particular audience; instead, it is concerned with any kind of audience regardless of its size or level of knowledge (Hairston, 1976). Perelman defines audience as: "the gathering of those whom the speaker wants to influence by his or her argument" (Perelman, 1982: 14). When tackling a controversial point, the speaker should begin with an argument[1] that is built on a premise that the audience already adheres to, in order not to falter. Perelman puts it this way: "To adapt to an audience is, above all, to choose as premises of argumentation theses the audience already holds" (23).

As mentioned above, at the start of the activity of argumentation, the orator should choose propositions the audience already accepts (Perelman, 1982). In case of absence of any shared values between the speaker and the listeners, the former must establish a presence with the latter in order to make the arguments seem closer to them. This rhetor's effort to connect the starting point of the argument to the desired conclusion is the effort to create *liaison*. Liaison is a type of argument that forms an association between the accepted premise and the conclusion that the speaker wishes to gain adherence to (Perelman). An example on liaison could be the use of quasi-logical arguments which look logical but with closer examination, they become distinguishable from logical reasoning although they are based on a premise that the audience supposedly adheres to. There are numerous types of argumentation that fall under the subcategory of quasi-logical arguments like reciprocity, transitivity, and probabilities, etc. (c.f. Perelmane, 1969).

Perelman's theory has also been subject to criticism on the basis that it does not include all the different modes of persuasion. It centers entirely on the structures of arguments; it seems to be too preoccupied with logos; and it neglects the apathetic and ethical appeals. However, in a reply to this criticism, Perelman (1982) states that since rhetoric addresses man in his entirety, he must necessarily utilize all three modes of persuasion. To conclude in a positive note, Frank (2003) considers that the positive reception of New Rhetoric far outweighs its criticism.

6. Toulmin's Approach

As articulated previously, a persuasive discourse is, without doubt, about convincing others of one's views; consequently, the ability to form an argument is a critical factor for a discourse builder. A widely used model for analysing the validity and form of an argument is that of Toulmin. At the outset, Toulmin's model was purely a theory of argumentation. His objective was "to criticize the assumption . . . that any significant argument can be put in formal terms" (Toulmin, 2003: 3). He aimed at setting forth a practical structure of arguments that is composed of a claim

followed by the justification for that claim. In fact, Toulmin's work opposed the theoretical arguments which arrive at a claim by making inferences from a set of principles. Later on, this model was adopted by scholars of rhetoric as a tool for developing and analysing arguments. It allows us to break an argument into its diverse parts so as to make judgment about how well the parts work together, and how they influence us to respond in the way we do.

To analyse an argument,Toulmin (2003) proposes a schema of six interrelated components: the claim, the evidence, the warrant, the backing, the rebuttal, and the qualifier.

The claim is the main point of the argument; it is the conclusion whose merit must be established, be it explicitly stated or implied. For example, if a lawyer tries to convince the judges that his client, Jones, is the president of a committee in a company, the claim would be "Mr. Jones is the president of the committee" (1).

As its name suggests, the evidence is what the writer/speaker uses to back up their claim. It takes the form of causal reasoning, definitions, examples, factual examples, comparisons, opinions of authorities, appeal to audience needs and values, addressing the counterargument, to name but these. For instance, the lawyer introduced in (1) can support his claim with the data "the committee members elected Mr. Jones" (2).

The implicit understanding that relates (1) to (2) is called the warrant; it is not stated in most arguments. In our example the warrant would be "If a committee elected Mr. Jones, the elected man will be the president of that committee".

The fourth component is the backing which is designed to certify and support the warrant so that to make it more acceptable to the audience. The backing is introduced when the warrant itself is not convincing enough to the recipients. If the judges do not deem (3) credible, the lawyer will supply additional information like "If a committee elects a man by the majority, that man will be the president of that committee" (4).

Words or phrases that modify the argument such as 'probably', 'certainly', 'presumably' or 'always' are the qualifiers as in "Mr. Jones is necessarily the president of the committee as he is elected by the majority"(5).

The final component is the rebuttal which is a statement(s) that recognize(s) the restrictions that may be applied to the claim. They may even stand for new arguments which represent different points of view or possible objections to strengthen the claim. The rebuttal can be exemplified as follows: "Mr. Jones is necessarily the president of the committee as he is elected by the majority unless he has betrayed and has become a spy for another committee in the rival company" (6).

It goes without saying that the first three elements claim, evidence and warrant are essential in a practical argument, whereas the second triad (qualifier, backing and rebuttal) is not necessary.

Since it is a theory of argumentation, Toulmin's work lacks the perspective of audience, an essential feature of contemporary rhetoric. Despite that, I think that the audience is not completely ignored because the rebuttal component takes into consideration the adversaries in the argumentation which implies that the listeners are not really regarded as passive spectators. In addition, this theory, like that of Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteka, is too focused on logos and must be used jointly with other theories to account for the various modes of persuasion.

7. The Metaphoric Approach

First and foremost, a definition of metaphor is necessary. Wilkinson (2008) defines metaphor as "a means of expressing one thing in terms of something else" (ix). Two parts form the basic structure of a metaphor: the tenor which designates the compared entity and the vehicle which: (a) represents the entity to which the tenor is compared, (b) acts as the lens through which the tenor is viewed, and (c) gives the metaphor its figurative power (Ullmann, 1972). For instance, in 'time is life', *time* is the tenor and *life* is the vehicle.

To speak of metaphoric criticism is to speak of a form of rhetorical analysis which allows the location and evaluation of metaphors within texts in an effort to better understand ways in which authors appeal to their audiences. In fact, metaphors are not used only as ornamental tools but also as part of the argumentation process and a means to arouse audience's emotions as well.

Burgchardt (2010) notes that metaphors are: "[a] means by which arguments are expressed" (305). This is inevitably true because "metaphors are capable of both highlighting and hiding aspects of a phenomenon" (Lakoff&Johsnson, 2003: 10). As such, rhetors use metaphors to emphasize and further their own take on the issue so that to move the audience to be in line with the thoughts they seek to inculcate. For example, a politician trying to persuade parliament members of voting for a bill to protect the environment may say: "Once problems are recognized ahead of time, they can be easily cured. If, by contrast, we wait their appearance, the medicine we will prescribe, will come too late for the disease will have been incurable." The use of the medicine metaphor here shows that it is better to react sooner than later against this issue but masks, at the same time, the economic losses this suggestion might cost.

In addition to its use in argumentation, the metaphor's persuasive power may rely in its ability to evoke emotion. To explicate this point we resort to Aristotle's ideas. He states that: "Men feel toward language as they feel toward strangers (xenouns) and fellow citizens, and we must introduce an element of strangeness into our diction because people marvel at what is far away and to marvel is pleasant" (Aristotle, 1991, para. 1404 b). So, the metaphor, by comparing two seemingly unrelated entities, can arouse astonishment and create pleasure and an audience who is pleased is one who is more open to persuasion.

As for the way of conducting metaphoric criticism, Foss (1995) outlines a four-step procedure: (a) reading the artifact as a whole with particular attention to its context, (b) looking for metaphors with an attempt to examine ways in which the tenor and vehicle share similar features, (c) classifying metaphors according to the tenors or vehicles, and (d) revealing their possible effects on the intended audience. These steps could be applied to carry out analyses whose aim is to answer various types of questions as: how does a rhetor use metaphors as persuasive tools in a given text? how familiar and recurring metaphors create persuasive appeal across time and/or across cultures? and do metaphors which are adapted to local culture and values have more persuasive power than those which are not?

In fact, studies of metaphor are rooted deeply in history and they "... have multiplied astronomically in the past 50 years" (Booth, 1978: 49). However, there is no rhetorical theory of metaphor which is grounded in rhetorical studies; it is really needful to (i) provide an explanation of how the rhetorical metaphor can serve as a device for persuading the audience of the speaker's or writer's argument and (ii) identify the qualities of a metaphor that help it achieve its function of persuasion successfully.

8. The Fantasy Theme Approach

The phrase fantasy theme was first coined by Bales (1970) to refer to the stories and talk exchanged by group members. Bormann (1972) borrows the concept and defines a fantasy theme as a telling of an incident with plot and characters. Fantasy, here, does not mean unreal but it refers to the dramatization of genuine or fictional events. Put another way, it is a term that refers to the way we see our world and cast it into dramatic form. Bormann also utilizes Bale's concept of 'chaining out' to explain that a fantasy theme is widely accepted when it signifies group values. As Bormann (1972) puts it, "when group members respond emotionally to the dramatic situation, they publically proclaim some commitment to an attitude" (397). This is to say that studying fantasy themes enables learning about a group's values, the values which can be exploited to persuade them. Indeed, when a group shares a fantasy theme, its members come to symbolic convergence on the matter and they envision that part of their world in similar ways. Thus, they create some symbolic common ground and others can, then, use that shared basis to convince them.

Fantasy theme analysis is applicable to subject matters ranging from television programs to political speeches. In order to apply this method, the analyst must identify the fantasies, the elements within them (values presented by a story line, characters, setting, resolution of a plot), and the themes which chain out as they represent the shared individual experiences, dreams and meanings. Since we assume that listeners would not accept a narration only if it implies their values, the detection of the fantasies will permit revealing particular values in a drama that have motivated the

audience to accept it, to do some action, or to hold certain beliefs. That is, we can deduce what motivates the recipients and we can, in this case, predict what will move them i.e. predict persuasive factors which we can insert in a discourse aimed at persuading that particular audience as in campaign speeches, for example.

We know also that the audience would accept a given dramatic narrative if it contains a character with whom the message receivers identify (a protagonist) and other characters whom they oppose (a negative persona). The fact of identifying with some elements in the drama may push the audience to do certain actions or embrace certain beliefs in their own lives. The dreams embodied in the fantasizing can have a persuasive power in that they may drive the audience toward particular actions to realize them. So we can say that fantasies are accompanied by emotional arousal.

Fantasy analysis, though largely influential, has been a subject for many critics among them Mohrmann. He charges Bormann with providing a new and confusing language "a hierarchy extending from fantasy themes to fantasy types of rhetorical visions is far from inviting" (Mohrmann, 1982: 119) for doing rhetorical criticism. Mohrmann vehemently argues that "basic definitions lack precision"; for example, what Bormann means by'motivation' in "sharing fantasies is closely connected with motivation" (Bormann, 1982: 289) is unclear. Thus, ambiguity of basic terms "invites mechanical application" (Mohrmann, 1982: 119) ofthe theory. All that fantasy theme analysis seems to achieve, claims Mohrmann, is "the discovery of themes, types, and visions" as a "self-contained exercise, not signaling that life is drama, only that it can be described in dramatic terms" (Mohrmann, 1982: 119-120). Therefore, criticism, within the fantasy theme framework, turns to a descriptive enterprise that goes nowhere. For him, knowing and being able to describe a fantasy does not mean that one can predict behaviors or divine motives (119); these could not be discerned on the basis of surface texts and apparent fantasies.

9. The Narrative Approach

To begin with, narration, the key concept in this paradigm, includes any verbal or nonverbal account with a sequence of events to which listeners assign a meaning Fisher (1987). This paradigm is based on the assumption that human beings are naturally story tellers and that story telling is an effective means of persuasion (Fisher, 1987). The most persuasive messages are generally void of rational facts; they are rather based on stories which express "ideas that cannot be verified or proved in any absolute way" (19). Narratives are loaded in "metaphor, values" (19) and they boost persuasion by tapping into the listeners' values, emotions, aesthetic preferences and by awakening dormant experiences and feelings.

Individuals need a way to judge which stories are believable and which are not. For this reason Fisher (1987) proposes narrative rationality as a logical method of reasoning by which to evaluate the quality of a story. Narrative rationality operates on

the basis of two different principles: coherence and fidelity. First, coherence refers to the internal consistency of a narrative in terms of its structure, the amount of important detail, reliability of characters (do they behave or think consistently?). Second, fidelityis a principle judging the credibility of a story. Stories with fidelity are reliable: they ring true to a listener, provide good reasons to guide the listeners' future actions, and are imbued with values.

The narrative paradigm has been criticized on the basis that the concept of narrative as encompassing all communication seems to be too broad. Moreover, almost anyone can see the point of a good story and judge its merits; thus, anyone, not only analysts, can evaluate the quality of a narrative or rhetoric. The paradigm does not also specify how values are recognized in narratives by an audience. Furthermore, it is not clear that it leaves room for texts that attempt to lead rather than reflect audience values.

10. Conclusion

During the contemporary era, theories of rhetoric applicable to persuasive discourse have multiplied. From the supplied overview, we notice that all theories have yielded deductive methods of analysis and that none is perfect: the debate over rhetoric is still to continue.

Strikingly, the classical tradition, however, has never been supplanted entirely by the new rhetoric of the twentieth century. Most of the modern rhetoricians continue to acknowledge their debt to the ancients, and most still embrace the ancient three appeals of rhetoric: logos, pathos, and ethos.

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