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Some Useful Manifestations of Contemporary Rhetoric

In this essay, I hope to begin formulating an answer for two related questions: how does rhetoric manifests itself in contemporary society and to what extent are these manifestations useful for me?

Before I can attempt to identify and qualify the manifestations of contemporary rhetoric, a working concept of rhetoric is required. As it is, there is certainly no agreement across the field on a singular definition of rhetoric. Ultimately, I agree with the broad neo-sophistic conception of rhetoric that is defined by its relationship to knowledge. Micheal Leff proposes a definition of rhetoric that is "a generative force actively engaged in the acquisition and formation of knowledge" (58)[1]. There are a number of implications that this definition posits, some of which I will touch upon in this paper: that knowledge is generated; that it is generated socially, that rhetoric is a tool or process in the generation of knowledge, not the source. In this latter sense, I agree with McKeon's (referenced in Leff, 57) assessment of rhetoric as an art that is more powerfully descriptive than productive. In this distinction I am making a case for the field of rhetorical scholarship as one whose primary value is as a theoretical framework from which other fields benefit. With this assertion of value, I am not taking it to the next

[1] All in-text page number citations refer to our class text, *Contemporary Rhetorical Theory*, by Lucaites, Condit, and Caudill.

step of asserting a ranking of rhetoric in relation to other fields of scholarship. However, after studying contemporary rhetorical theory this quarter, I believe that many fields have benefited by the scholarship that rhetoric has spawned. The interests of rhetorical theory—ontology, epistemology, ideology, communication—are of interest to many fields.

In defining contemporary rhetoric as a tool or a process that acts as "a generative force," I run the risk of implying that rhetoric is simply a tool that generates discourse, thereby leaving off the function of rhetoric that I find the most valuable: the critical function. As I will discuss, employing rhetoric as a tool in the critique of communicative acts is the manifestation of contemporary rhetoric that I find the most useful.

In the 1970's, Donald Bryant defined rhetoric as "the rationale of the informative and sausory in discourse" (55). Bryant's use of the word, "rationale" here is foundational in my interpretation of contemporary rhetoric. To rationalize one's own (or someone else's) communicative act is to make sense of it with reason: to evaluate the act in a way that may describe and situate its meaning, purpose, effect, or potential. For me, this rationalization is best done through a methodical process, or a framework. My understanding of rhetoric as a process and tool, therefore, may best be described as a framework where the simplistic components of rhetoric—the audience, the situation, the speaker, the content—are critiqued as systematic constructs to either generate knowledge or communication, or to critique communication.

In proposing this framework, I am not asserting a definitive set of categories where a given "manifestation" of rhetoric operates in an isolated fiefdom. Instead, my goal with situating manifestations of rhetoric into categories is to sort out the overwhelmingly dense set of overlapping and intertwined rhetorical theory in a way that I can make use of it. Ultimately, I'd like to make use of the theory I've spent so much time studying.

To that end, I lay out a framework that describes manifestations of contemporary rhetoric in three broad categories: “mere persuasion,” “morality and action,” and “ideological critique.” For each type of rhetorical manifestation, I will summarize some theory we’ve studied that best illustrates how I interpret the utility of the manifestation under discussion.

The most elementary manifestation of contemporary rhetorical framework is what I refer to as “mere persuasion.” The discourse in this category is academic in nature in that the effect of the persuasion is not concerned with action. Here, the rhetorical framework is used to introduce the concepts of audience, situation, author, and content as constructs that ought to be studied and rationalized in the context of communicative acts. I’ll discuss the concept of audience as the primary influence for understanding persuasion in this manifestation.

The next manifestation of rhetoric is the most common in our contemporary world; this realm of rhetoric is concerned with morality and action. Here, the contemporary understanding morality as a human construct is central to the rhetorical framework and its power to compel people to action. Persuasion that results in action ought to be ultimately concerned with morality. Given the fungible nature of popular morality, rhetoric assumes a powerful potential to persuade the body politic.

The final manifestation of rhetoric is concerned with the effect of ideology and how it informs discourse. With a rhetorical framework we can apply differing critical perspectives to events, communication, situation, and action with a goal of discovering the ideological positions that give rise to them. In such a context, contemporary rhetorical theory has evolved to provide a rich evaluative critical toolset.

Mere persuasion

I was one of the few students in our class that has not yet taken Dr. Elder's class, "History of Rhetoric." As a result, my definition of rhetoric at the start of the quarter was, I think, pretty typical of how many students of English conceive rhetoric. I defined rhetoric as field of study concerned with the act of persuasion. Very specifically, it is students of English *Composition* that are likely to view rhetoric as concept related to persuasion. "Most obviously," Leff acknowledges, "there is the pedagogical tradition that links rhetorical scholarship with the teaching of composition" (54). I think there is great utility in this simplified notion of rhetoric. Before discussing that further, it's worth mentioning that it is also likely that students outside of composition or communication courses will only encounter the term, "rhetoric," in a pejorative sense. For example, we might read or hear a statement like, "it's only rhetoric," as a means to dismiss an idea or position. While this is an interesting phenomenon of how rhetoric might be perceived by popular culture, exploring this further is not central to rhetoric's utility as a "containing force" (Leff 53) in composition pedagogy.

Leff describes the containing force of rhetoric as a process that we can use to "respond to circumstances" for the purpose of persuasion in the tradition of the Sophist art (53). The grounding of persuasion in rhetoric is an ancient concept. According to Poulakos, the Sophists saw the goals of rhetoric as both "*terpsis* (aesthetic pleasure) and *pistis* (belief)" (26). While I'll discuss the potential for action in the following section, for this section, I want to artificially separate the notion of belief from a broader potential for action to show how mere persuasion is an effective manifestation for conceiving rhetoric in the context of college composition classrooms, specifically in the context of audience awareness.

Poulakos provides a brief summary (26-31) of how the Sophists conceived of rhetoric as an art to persuade. To those of us teaching freshman composition, Poulakos' summary illustrates the origins of

the ubiquitous “rhetorical triangle” that we teach our students for developing and critiquing persuasive discourse. Indeed, the Sophist’s appreciation and application of style, timing and context, audience and occasion, and the “consideration of the possible” map neatly to the pedagogy of argumentation discourse found in nearly every freshman composition curriculum.

While we teach students that all elements of the rhetorical triangle are critical to developing good persuasive discourse, in my experience, the primary focus of freshman composition is to help students recognize the fundamental importance of audience. To that end, I found many of the theoretical ideas in Farrell’s article, “Knowledge, Consensus, and Rhetorical Theory,” particularly useful. Farrell positions rhetoric in a classical framework, as art that relies on common social knowledge to “inform and guide reasoned judgments about matters of public interest” (140). Clearly, any discourse that “relies on common social knowledge” is problematic, since such a knowledge seems to imply the existence of universality, or worse, Truth. If our readings this quarter have not agreed on very much, the one essential concept most authors would likely agree upon is that objective Truth is at best a problematic concept. But, Farrell claims, persuasion relies on consensus, which in turn, relies on the normative potential of common social knowledge.

Social knowledge, in Farrell’s assessment is the realm of knowledge outside of the scientific. Scientific knowledge relies on consensual process and objectivity. Social knowledge, instead, he asserts, is concerned ultimately with “certain notions of preferable public behavior” that serves to unite “symbolic relationships among problems, persons, interests, and actions” (142). While Farrell ultimately grounds his definition of social knowledge in action (pubic behavior), his discussions of social knowledge in the contexts of consensus and as a normative force are useful concepts that I plan to bring into argument discourse pedagogy.

Farrell says that "consensus is considered to be both a precondition and an outcome of communication; … [s]ocial knowledge rests upon a consensus which is attributed to an audience rather than concretely shared" (144). In teaching argument discourse to freshman, we spend a lot of time discussing the importance of audience-awareness. I think that by framing consensus as an attributable characteristic of the audience, the entire landscape of rhetorical potential might be illuminated. That is, if the "audience" that our students write for is not an ideologically fixed concept to be "persuaded," but rather a fungible entity composed of a range of potential ideological positions, then might the problems of context, timing, content, and ethos emerge as material, relevant concerns?

While Farrell's implications for the normative function of social knowledge on rhetoric are wide-ranging and profound, I find two ideas here particularly useful as a composition instructor. First, is Farrell's notion of "reality testing" your own knowledge in the context of your community. I think applying this idea in the realm of composition pedagogy could be useful. Again, the value here is in using the concept to help students appreciate audience: by challenging students to "test" their claims of knowledge against the prevailing voices of their discourse community, we are encouraging them to recognize how their knowledge, and hence their emerging argument, might be rationalized to sway an audience.

The second implication of the normative function of social knowledge has to do with the generation of knowledge. Specifically, Farrell explains how social knowledge can give "form to information," how it enables "isolated 'bits' of information to achieve meaning and significance" (149). A typical and maddening experience of any freshman composition instructor teaching argument discourse is the inevitable slew of hackneyed, standard topics that students propose: steroids in sports, or abortion, or gun control, etc. etc. By coupling the notion of audience-as-attributable with the concept that "isolated bits of information" can form meaningful ideas, perhaps we can move students to locate a

"bit" of the information around these over-wrought topics with a goal of generating a new perspective for discourse. I concede that this is a difficult theoretical position to distill into a curriculum or lesson plan, but it seems worthy of further thought and experimentation to me.

Morality and action

In my attempt to force rhetoric into categories, finding a way to frame morality in a "useful" way has been the most challenging. Given the inevitable collision of multiple traditions and fields that are concerned with morality, and the overwhelming depth of the resulting rhetorical theory that attempts to handle such a broad concept, my struggle has been to tease out the essential utility of rhetoric and morality without getting overly tangled in the intricate theory that ultimately provides what I consider to be the most exploited manifestation of rhetoric. To help centralize the utility of morality and rhetoric, I focus my attention for this manifestation on discourse where the aim is to persuade the audience to do something.

My focus on action as a necessary functional characteristic of morally-concerned rhetoric is a result of reading Thomas Frentz's "Rhetorical Conversation, Time, and Moral Action." Central to Frentz' purpose is his alignment with Alasdair MacIntyre's claim that morality is grounded in *praxis*, that "morality is less a form of knowing than of doing" (290). And while I find Frentz's resulting discussion on how he positions the moral individual in the framework of epic and personal narrative a fascinating notion to examine further, I must let it go to bring rhetoric and morality into the material world of politics and social movements.

When rhetoric is used to catalyze an audience to action—such as to vote, or to change their behavior, or to act against their own or others' interests, or any myriad of actions—I believe that the rhetoric is necessarily moral. Given this belief, it is tempting to explore the obvious question that arises: "what then, is the moral obligation of the rhetor or critic?" This question deserves a thorough treatment

that I'll not be able to provide here, except to say that if we (as rhetors or critics) are engaging in moral rhetoric, then we ought to feel bound by ethical necessity to recognize our position relative to the potential outcomes of the discourse. And so recognizing, we must therefore act accordingly.

In a contradiction to what I understand as the classical view of morality, Condit asserts that morality, insofar as we act upon it, is humanly generated. This view is aptly illustrated by the "caring individuals who believed that discrimination and slavery were morally defensible institutions" (315). In my opinion, it is by grounding the formation of morality in human frailty that makes the power of rhetoric so striking in this manifestation. I assert that it is rhetoric, after all, that enables the most horrific instances of large-scale human suffering we've seen throughout history. Granted, such a rhetoric must be coupled with the appropriate ideology, but I don't think we can have such suffering –or the potential for large-scale happiness—without a tight coupling of rhetoric and ideology.

McGee illustrates this concept brilliantly in his description of how rhetoric can define and develop a popular movement through four stages of what he terms "collectivization" (346). Each stage that he discusses is fundamental to the process, but his "Rhetoric of Myth Creation," I think, shows the power of rhetoric in a moral framework that is relied upon time and again on which political and social movements build popular support. The "Rhetoric of Myth Creation," describes how a leader connects "disassociated ideological commitments into incipient political myths" (346). By corralling those who may share little in common by appealing to vague ideological commonalities, leaders might then create a myth that will persuade a previously disjoined body politic into united action. McGee shows how Hitler was able to achieve his ends by developing and exploiting the power of political myths, which McGee stresses are always "purely rhetorical phenomena" (348). In contemporary American politics, this rhetoric is so effective and integral to the modern campaign process, that one might argue it has

become institutionalized as a result of the Supreme Court ruling, Citizens United vs Federal Election Commission.

Critical ideology

The final manifestation of rhetoric I am covering here is concerned with ideology. The theory in this area is my favorite section of the course, and intellectually, has been the most demanding. As with all of the contemporary rhetorical theory, I feel a newness and uneasiness with my position relative to the discourse, but for the ideologically-centered theory, I am on the most tenuous footing, especially lacking in a firm understanding of Marxist theory. With that disclaimer, I will discuss, without claiming any firm conclusions, two ideas that I found particularly thought-provoking.

The simple concept that describes the means by which Marx ideology fundamentally informs nearly all postmodern ideological criticism has had perhaps the most profound impact on me. Janice Rushing and Thomas Frentz's "Integrating Ideology and Archetype in Rhetorical Criticism" provided this insight (along with a crash course in basic Marxist theory as it relates to rhetoric). The fact that Marxist ideology informs much of academic postmodern rhetorical theory, is not, on the face of it, a huge surprise, or profound. What takes hold of me is a fundamental utility for defining an "overarching telos that warrants ethical judgment" (513) to which we can compare alternatives. In the material world of stuff, the concept is simple: to determine something's value, compare it to the value of its ideal. But in an ethical situation, as a means to define choice, this simple concept defines the very foundation of how we judge goodness in the public or social sphere. This is the tap root of one's ideological position. So, as Rushing and Frentz point out, Marxists' overarching telos is "some utopian vision of a classless society in which hierarchy and thereby oppression are eliminated" (513). Testing that vision against the composition pedagogy theory that I have been reading for ENGL 511 this quarter has proven that the classless, collectivist utopia appears to be an unquestioned ideal. Do not expect a refutation or a

validation of that ideal from me in this essay. However, I have to agree, if not with the particulars of Rushing and Frentz's conclusion that the Jungian concept of individuated Self ought to be integrated with the Marxist, materialist ideal, I do agree with the need to better account for the individual when it comes to the basis for moral action.

The necessity of recognizing, and more importantly, defining a personal overarching telos against which to compare ideal states is a requirement for morally consistent criticism. And really, such a requirement is essential for ethically sound decision-making in any realm: academic, public, private, personal, etc. Such a claim may sound overly grandiose, but I have found much satisfaction from the essential problem-solving utility of this process, both by pondering my own notion of the ideal and in testing potential decisions against that evolving ideal.

Another profound and difficult ideologically-concerned theory that I've enjoyed thinking about is Phillip Wander's "Third Persona." While there is a great deal of historically and critically-relevant knowledge that Wander assumes of his reader, which I do not possess, I did find his essential theory of the third persona to be strikingly clear. The third persona, in the context of any discourse, is the audience that is "being negated in and through every channel of communication" (369). This audience cannot assemble; it cannot protest; it is objectified, and is "acted upon in ways consistent with [its] status as a non-subject" (369). The implications of recognizing the existence of the third persona are moral to the core. We, as students, critics, writers, academics are well-trained to the identify audiences for the discourses we encounter. If we are concerned with power relationships and ideology, we may problematize our work with a goal of determining who might be marginalized by a given instance of discourse. By identifying marginalized voices, we can further identify theory that supports and speaks to empowering from the margin. But Wander's theory forces a much more uncomfortable identification:

who is the negated audience? And more powerfully, how might such a work be analyzed from the perspective of the negated audience?

These questions that Wander poses have compelled me to interrogate the work, music, and art that I engage with, as a student, as an instructor, and as a writer, from the perspective of the third persona. On the whole it is difficult to identify precisely what people or group a third persona negate, but the process of attempting to identify such a group challenges many assumptions with which I approach various discourse communities. As a result, I hope to be critical of my unchallenged assumptions and resulting behaviors in all of my relations.

In the final analysis, the value and utility for contemporary rhetoric is found by studying and pondering the thresholds of critical boundaries. It seems the field of contemporary rhetorical theory has provided a great service to scholarship by breaking up more fixed perspectives of discourse into a kaleidoscope of perspectives where the process of criticism defines the meaning of the discourse it studies. One area that I did not discuss here, which illustrates my fragmented closing thoughts, is the competing theory that disagrees on the very nature of how meaning is derived from situation. The resulting meaning of situation theory is that the meaning of discourse ultimately depends upon how you align meaning from situation: is it constructed by the observer? Or is it simply an empirical fact that the observer records? How one determines the meaning of situation will ultimately change the perspective of any discourse that is generated or critiqued by that person. And situation is but one theoretical component from which a person must construct a rhetorical approach, an approach that is in an inevitable state of flux. Therefore, the ultimate utility of contemporary rhetoric is, for me, found in the necessity to continually challenge the communicative act by critically examining from many rhetorical perspectives, and to continually challenge my "overarching telos that warrants ethical judgment," and hence my assumptions, thoughts, and behavior.