

Free research paper on the future of rhetoric in the electronic age

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines some of the contemporary theory regarding rhetoric in the electronic age. It begins by considering the fate of English Departments faced with the much-vaunted 'death of the book', but quickly moves on to the weightier matters of the rhetoric of the visual and the consequent enfeeblement of rhetoric in the electronic age. It considers both the positive and negative impacts of digital media. It goes on to argue and eventually conclude that the deterioration of rhetoric (which it argues began before the digital revolution) and the homogeneity of the rhetoric of the visual is a deliberate policy adopted by neo-liberal politicians who debase rhetoric in order to conceal the emptiness of their policies.

The cultural commentators and theorists who consider the future of rhetoric in an electronic world can, it can be argued, be divided into two broad and very different camps. There are the Cassandras who predict the end of the book, of a common heritage, of a general enfeeblement of rhetoric and, simultaneously, the death of Departments of Literature in our universities - and end to a commonly agreed culture. Aligned against them are the Panglossian heralds of a new age of global interconnection which promises new unity and newer virtual communities of the dispossessed and the marginalized: an electronic revolution in global rhetoric to undermine the forces of globalization and neo-liberalism. Much recent work has been centered on the Rhetoric of Place and its role in the homogenization of rhetoric and the reduction of the importance of rhetoric in a world which consists, in Brookes memorable phrase, of a series of Non-Places where the individual is further marginalized and where rhetoric becomes bland and

anonymous - a far cry from its original function. This essay will examine various arguments on both 'sides' - the doom-sayers and the radical optimists and come to a nuanced and more subtle conclusion - which is more speculative and more political in its overall stance, linking global electronic media, social media, even Twitter, to economic globalization and the control of the mainstream media (and, therefore, the rhetoric that we use).

Brooke's "The Fate of Rhetoric in an Electronic Age" (1997) speculates about the death of the book in the electronic age and speculates that the end is near for Departments of English in our universities. He argues that since there is a plethora of online material to aid a student understand and even interpret the text, then the English Faculty will become redundant in the age of supermodernity. However, he admits himself that such contextual information and interpretative guidance might, paradoxically, force students to grapple more with the language of the texts they are required to study and that, therefore, the study of rhetoric in universities will be boosted. In any case, it could be argued that there are powerful vested interests outside university English Departments - vested interests (publishers, the sponsors of literary awards, the cultured élite themselves - in whose interests it is that English Literature retains a central place in our curricula - not least because in an age of secular supermodernity, it provides a common cultural heritage. On a more central concept, the question of place is considered central to rhetoric. The ancient Greeks referred to it as *epideixis* and it was associated with public occasions and ceremonies: festivals and formal ceremonies, such as marriages and even the Olympic Games. In time, the notion of rhetoric

(the art of persuading through language) began to influence the judicial and the political system. Place matters because it provides an instantly recognizable context within which the aims and skills displayed in the rhetoric can be understood. - enhanced by a shared cultural heritage. As Brooke (1997) comments: " The classical orator could rely upon a common cultural heritage, and upon an ethos that measured his ability to embody the ideal of such a common culture" (p. 3). This, of course, assumes - and it may be an assumption that is fallacious - that there ever was a common culture that entire populations felt they participated in and owned; it ignores the possibility that the " common culture" Brooke refers to ever enjoyed a living currency amongst the mass of the population, rather than being confined to a tiny privileged élite.

Because there is little individual identity in non-places, social relations are minimal, and the passage of time is not marked by monuments of any personal significance the rhetoric within supermodernity can only be an enfeebled one (p. 3).

Interactions are functional and impersonal and consist of functional instructions: thus reducing the individual to an anonymous consumer or travel or tourism or whatever.

Of course, the Rhetoric of Display has always existed and there have always been Non-Places (ancient Pompeii must have bristled with functional messages - visual and verbal). Auge (quoted by Boswell, 1997, p. 2) points out:

The social space bristles with monuments - imposing stone buildings, discreet mud shrines - which may not be directly functional but give every

individual the justified feeling that, for the most part, they pre-existed him and will survive him.

But the problem, as we will see, is that in the visual rhetoric of supermodernity everywhere, every monument, starts to look the same and has a geo-political and economic role which disempowers the individual and discourages rhetorical innovation - be it visual or verbal.

However, what is so worrying about the Non-Places of supermodernity is their ubiquity, their uniformity and their visual hegemony - and this, as this essay will later demonstrate, is a direct result of the successful exportation of the neo-liberal values of rampant globalized capitalism - one feature that is little stressed in the studies I have read - they lack a cutting political edge and fail to connect the globalization of Visual Rhetoric with economic globalization and the excesses of neo-liberal capitalist colonization - not just of the world's economies, but the world's rhetoric and its visual sense of itself. In a sense, now in the age of supermodernity, everywhere is the same and everywhere is nowhere. This sense is, of course, not just because of the electronic age and the swift transmission of visual images through the electronic media, but also the relative ease and relative cheapness of tourism - even to parts of the world that were once considered remote. Of course, there is a more optimistic view of the future of rhetoric in the electronic age. Negroponte (1995) could imagine the internet and digital culture which would serve to unify and, therefore, be a promoter of social cohesion across the web:

As we interconnect ourselves, many of the values of a nation state will give way to those of both larger and smaller electronic communities. We will

socialize in digital neighborhoods in which physical space will be irrelevant and time will play a different role (p. 7).

In these words the irrelevance of physical space is seen as a positive thing and a way of bringing together special interest groups from across the world, uniting electronically and gaining more power through that act of unification and joining together. Halloran (1975 - quoted by Brooke)) too expresses excitement at the notion that the internet has the potential to give a voice to the marginalized, a platform for radical and subversive views:

This is not the dream of a common language, but of a powerful infidel heteroglossia. It is an imagination of a feminist speaking in tongues to strike fear into the supersavers of the new right. It means both building and destroying machines, identities, categories, relationships, space stories (p. 181).

There is evidence of this having happened: special interest groups - through websites, blogs and social media forums have been able to unite in common purpose. But what has been the effect on rhetoric? Is anybody even listening - unless they belong to the group itself? In commenting on the quotation from Halloran above, Brooke (1997) wryly comments: " Instead of persuasion of others to act and think by referring to a shared culture, rhetoric becomes the construction of partial and competing cultures by monadic selves" (p. 3). The monadic selves of special interest groups, facilitated by electronic culture do not need to use rhetoric to persuade: they simply state their position. Therefore, the age of supermodernity offers unique global possibilities for the marginalized and disempowered to unite and to organize, but will not necessarily improve their rhetorical skills. Indeed, Halloran's use

of Bakhtin's term 'heteroglossia' should sound further warnings: for all the Babel of electronic and digital texts and messages in our cyberspace of supermodernity, where is the originality? Or is every electronic text susceptible to the mere quotation of others?

Nonetheless, the practical and seemingly beneficial effects of the electronic age have been seen in the last few years in the events of the Arab Spring - where an up-to-the-minute media allowed ordinary people to know what was going on and where Facebook and Twitter were used extensively to organize protests and demonstrations. Without the age of supermodernity we would be less aware of what is going on in Syria - with tweets and blogs emanating directly from Damascus. But the protestors in Tahir Square were not suing rhetoric effectively; they were using slogans, so opposed were they to the regime they were attacking. As Brooke (1997) notes:

For Halloran modern rhetoric affects a reversal of that relationship represented by the classical tradition. Instead of persuading others to act and think by referring to a shared culture, rhetoric becomes the construction of partial and competing cultures by monadic selves (p. 3).

Electronic media serves a similar role in the ongoing Occupy movement, but at the same time recent revelations about N. S. A. surveillance raises concerns about the freedom of the internet and social media sites.

What has the rhetoric of the visual got to do with verbal rhetoric? Why has the language of rhetoric become so enfeebled? The homogeneity of visual rhetoric mirrors and reinforces the verbal rhetoric used to "manage the herd" - to steal a phrase from Chomsky (2002, *passim*). In *Media Control* (2002) - although he rarely uses the word 'rhetoric' - Chomsky demonstrates

that the debasement of rhetoric began well before the digital age and occurred as a means of control, so that the mass of the population could be manipulated by propaganda while believing they were free. The electronic revolution may have made that task easier - think of politicians' soundbites, rolling news coverage and the exclusion of the rhetoric of those of whom the establishment disapproves. If rhetoric is in decline, the fault is not wholly that of the electronic revolution. Chomsky demonstrates that as early as 1916 the American government was running highly professional and highly effective propaganda campaigns to change public opinion (in 1916 it was to convince the population that participation in the First World War was a good thing). Now neo-liberal politicians promote global capitalism and foreign wars with a form of debased rhetoric - debased because it is not argument and often uses words which are divorced from their real meaning. Thus, Chomsky demonstrates that words like 'freedom', 'democracy', 'terrorism', 'patriotism' can be used without any rhetorical methods but just as words to manipulate a population to acquiesce in policies they understand imperfectly. Similarly, the political élite use slogans with which it is impossible to disagree or take issue, such as 'Support our troops'. This is not debate; it is not argument; it is not even persuasion. The electronic age may facilitate such practices, but it is not responsible for them.

Before this essay reaches its conclusion will it will be instructive to know conduct our own brief examination of the rhetoric of display and how carefully controlled and managed it is by the mainstream media and the oligarchy which rules us through the pretense of democracy. At the end of this paper there are four photographs which are appendices to the essay.

Appendix 1 is an image of the Taj Mahal which is very familiar to the entire population of the world; it is an iconic image which reinforces the sense that in the age of supermodernity we know or think we know or know of or know vicariously India, but it is a very selective image of India: no sense of the appalling poverty that afflicts that country - because if it did then we might be tempted to become active participants in democracy and to develop our own rhetoric to change things. Appendix 2 is a supermarket; appendix 3 is the entrance to a luxury hotel. They are reproduced here as examples of non-places: the reader of the image can immediately recognize their function and purpose - but they could be anywhere in the world such is the neoliberal global dominance of the rhetoric of the visual - intimately bound up with an economic model that favors the homogenization of global rhetoric, as well as to dominance of capitalism and the widening gap between the rich and the poor. Appendix 3 also serves as a form of propaganda, and advertisements if you like - not simply for the hotel itself, but this for the lifestyle that one can aspire to (supposedly) if one works hard enough in the new neo-liberal world. It is at once a symbol of global homogeneity and a leitmotif of aspiration. As Prelli (2006) notes: "The rhetorics of display are nearly ubiquitous in contemporary communication and culture and, thus, have become the dominant rhetoric of our time" (p. 7). He adds: "Rhetorics of display involve questions of political and expressive agency that carry weighty consequences" (p. 25). What he fails to add is that the political agency that the rhetoric of display serves is the neo-liberal geo-capitalist system so helpfully analyzed by Chomsky.

Appendix 4 is included as an antidote, a reason for hope against the bland

non-places dominated by the need of neoliberal capitalism to diminish and this empower the individual. It is a Russian monument in the city of Volgograd (formerly known as Stalingrad) which commemorates the millions of dead of the ferocious Battle of Stalingrad, fought in the winter of 1941 to 1942. We might guess that this image is little-known in the developed Western world. And this should be a cause for celebration. It means that despite all the negative effects of super modernity, there are still traditional examples of the rhetoric of display that we know nothing about. The fact that we in all likelihood are not familiar with this image also helps to prove that the standardization of rhetoric - verbal or visual - is a deliberate strategy to control what's Chomsky calls the common herd - the mass of people whom the ruling élite do not trust with full democratic freedom and whom it is necessary to manipulate through rhetoric. There are 147. 5 million Russians for whom Appendix 4 is an iconic, almost sacred place - not to mention all the millions in the former Soviet republics - and instantly recognizable. So there is hope. The neo-liberal dominance of the rhetoric of display is not yet truly global.

In conclusion, it can be seen that the future of rhetoric in the electronic age - both visual and verbal rhetoric - has enormous social possibilities to bring humanity together, but it also presents manifold dangers which essentially revolve around the dominance of neo-liberal global capitalism and the control it deliberately exerts over what we as the common herd are allowed to see and hear and accept as normal. As a result, visual rhetoric is becoming homogenized and standardized to serve the interests of the world's élites, and the verbal rhetoric of politicians has become meaningless

sloganizing - a pattern that began before the electronic revolution. The electronic revolution offers some comfort to the marginalized - but it is severely limited: taught by their political masters, special interest groups (no matter how laudable their social aims) also tend to substitute slogans for rhetorical debate. At the moment one is forced to conclude that despite the exciting possibilities of the connections between people from all over the planet, at the moment humanity is being brought together largely to serve the economic interests of global capitalism who have no interest in debate and who have reduced verbal rhetoric to childish, assertive assertions.

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Appendix One

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Appendix Two

Appendix Three

Appendix Four