The Mythical Status of Situational Rhetoric: Implications for Rhetorical Critics’ Relevance in the Public Arena

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Thirty-five years ago I argued that portraying rhetoric as the inexorable result of real situational demands, as opposed to competitive persuasion, creating perceptions of situational demands, would relegate the field to secondary disciplinary status and ethical irrelevance. Since then, this prediction has been largely fulfilled, but a change in perspective can make rhetoric a primary study with ethical significance.

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Thirty-five years after I wrote “The Myth of the Rhetorical Situation” (1973) and 40 years after Lloyd Bitzer wrote “The Rhetorical Situation” (1968), I thought this might be a propitious moment to reflect on some important academic implications of those two articles.

This article of reflection is not meant to be yet another refinement of the arguments therein, but instead an overview of what the implications of this seminal clash in perspectives have meant to the field of rhetoric’s view of the relationship between situations and rhetoric and the study of persuasion. This is also the title of a course, “Persuasion,” that I have successfully taught and which has been the focus of many teaching awards for about 35 years. I should add, parenthetically, that this dispute has significantly informed the three areas of personal expertise on which I have written, consulted, and commented in media for decades: political rhetoric, psychiatric rhetoric, and media criticism.

My purpose is to explore an omnipresent concept in life: the choice of what we talk about and the choices of what it means -- that has critical importance to rhetorical practice. In Plato’s day, whether one sided with Plato or the Sophists was not an idle matter, of importance only to the intellectuals of the day. It was, instead, a matter of “life and death” with respect to how one might interpret reality and enact values in the world.
Lloyd Bitzer’s “The Rhetorical Situation” (1968) argued that rhetoric was situationally based, which made rhetoric a determined result of whatever the reality of the situation was: “Rhetorical discourse is called into existence by situation” (p. 9); “So controlling is situation that we should consider it the very ground of rhetorical activity” (p. 5); and, most unambiguously, “[T]he situation controls the rhetorical response” (p. 4).

My “Myth” piece, as a counterpoint to Bitzer’s view, was based on the following premises: the study of rhetoric has always been integral to, and perhaps synonymous with, the study of persuasion. Rhetorical study and/or persuasion encompass necessarily the depiction of reality to chosen audiences through chosen media. In all of its forms such representation involves a rhetor’s choice or choices in trying to determine what should have the attention of chosen audiences and what the chosen situations should mean to those audiences. In short, discrete “situations” are largely mythical concepts, rhetorically based and circumscribed (Vatz, 1973, 1981, 2005, 2006).

I argued in “The Myth of the Rhetorical Situation” that, contrary to Bitzer’s arguments, situations do not produce rhetoric, but rather that rhetors strategically promote saliences and meanings for chosen audiences, and, when successful, these pass for real situations to which it seems we must pay attention.

As I argued in the “Myth” (1973) piece:

The essential question to be addressed is: What is the relationship between rhetoric and situations? It will not be surprising that I take the converse position of each of Bitzer’s major statements regarding this relationship. For example: I would not say ‘rhetoric is situational,’ but situations are rhetorical; not ‘. . . exigence strongly invites utterance,’ but utterance strongly invites exigence; not ‘the situation controls the rhetorical response . . .’ but the rhetoric controls the situational response; not ‘. . . rhetorical discourse . . . does obtain its character-as-rhetorical from the situation which generates it,’ but situations obtain their character from the rhetoric which surrounds them or creates them. (pp. 158-159)

Finally:

Rhetors choose or do not choose to make salient situations, facts, events, etc. This may be the sine qua non of rhetoric: the art of linguistically or symbolically creating salience. After salience is created, the situation must be translated into meaning. (p. 160)

Honesty dictates the observation that if the competition between these perspectives has been a 35-year footrace, it has been won by Bitzer’s philosophy. More articles and
professionals in our field cite his situational perspective (although quite a few use the "Myth" perspective, and some do without realizing it) than my rhetorical perspective. The situational outlook implies that rhetoricians qua rhetoricians have a perspicacious perspective on reality that allows them to dictate to audiences what the hierarchy of situational importance is in our society, indeed the world, and then they can declaim on such matters and analyze the rhetoric which they claim inexorably follows from what they arbitrarily define as controlling situations and/or exigencies.

The Question of Relevance

The situational take on rhetoric has a presumptuous starting point, and it has crucial and material political and academic implications for our field. Professors of rhetoric and communication who reflect that view in their teaching, publishing, and commenting can assume that their rhetorical analyses merely reflect the truth as dictated by the situation, a ‘truth’ which in actuality only corresponds to the values and perceptions of the professor-critic.

There is overwhelming competition to being able to interpret reality, particularly in the political realm, and there are those who have a much better claim with more significant audiences to be able to perform such interpretation than we rhetoricians. The reason that rhetoricians have never preponderantly been the primary sources that media go after is that we are just one of many competitors interpreting reality, and often we are looked at as purveyors of “mere rhetoric,” which perception the situational point of view stated above fosters. Thus, assuming as valid the situational root of rhetoric also means that rhetoricians, although they are often aligned with the political zeitgeist of academia, must compete with other high-ethos sources in political or social commentary sources which, again, have more bona fide credentials to be able to sort out reality: political scientists, historians, journalists, bloggers, etc. In fact, the fragmentation of prominent sources of rhetoric demands even more the approach to rhetoric argued in the “Myth” piece. Imagine how increasingly irrelevant situationally-grounded rhetoricians’ depictions and interpretations of reality must seem to political principals, political professionals, and even average citizens.

We rhetoricians and political communication experts thus end up being second-class citizens by playing the more accepted experts’ sport on their home territory, and much of what we do constitutes an embarrassing redundancy. A minority in our field is much sought after and excel in the public arena, but the rank-and-file cannot burst through because they have no unique perspective or philosophy to offer, or else they have a viewpoint which is understandably not seen as sufficiently different from other standard academics.
Moreover, most of the rhetoricians who are successful in often being cited and quoted by media are those who claim, whether they realize it or not, that we have some special perspicacity in ascertaining not what issues impinge on our reality, but how rhetors compete to make salient their chosen agendas and how they compete for interpretation or spin.

Thus, the temporary victory of the realists of our field is a Pyrrhic victory. Fortunately, though, the victory cannot be accurately claimed as completed, because not only is the competition a marathon and not a sprint, it is a never-ending marathon.

Over the last few decades, several terms have emerged in the public lexicon which correspond to the terms “creating salience” and “creating meaning.” These terms are, respectively, “agenda” creation (creating salience) and “framing” and “spin” (creating meaning). The term “agenda” has been popularized and has come to signify the issues that a given source wishes to be discussed. The terms “framing” and “spin” creation have come to mean a strategic slant put on information directed to various audiences, with the former term seen as less tendentious than the latter. The term “spin doctors,” derived from “spin,” has come to be a pejorative phrase referring to allegedly base rhetors who consciously inject false infusions of meaning. All of these concepts could have been part of an acknowledged lexicon of rhetorical analysis if the majority of our field had not opted for the anti-rhetorical philosophy dictated by “The Rhetorical Situation.” It is, incidentally, difficult to account for the motives which have led to our sociologically devastating majority choosing the situational perspective: it is partly the field’s hierarchical support for that perspective, but it may also be that a situational perspective allows the academic to claim his or her interpretation of reality is superior. Unfortunately, again, the situational choice leaves rhetoricians competitively without a distinctive raison d’etre.

Courses and books about persuasion, so critical to rhetorical study, have given the rhetoric situation war short shrift. Many books about persuasion do not even reference either perspective, despite the integral connection of the battle to this wholly rhetorical study.

One of the interesting questions that arises as regards the rhetoric-situation debate is whether there is a liberal-conservative divide attending this ostensibly politics-free difference in viewpoint. Bitzer’s examples in his 1968 article tended to be conventionally liberal: he saw as a rhetorical hero John F. Kennedy, not Dwight David Eisenhower; he saw as rhetorical exigence or problem in his original article “the pollution of our air,” but not the apposite profit-reducing constraints on a then major steel industry produced by enforced reduction of pollution. Scholars in
rhetoric in fact typically use the rhetorical situation to foster liberal points of view. Peruse major rhetoric and communication journals and notice how many conservative United States presidents or politicians or actors in general are written about positively, in contrast to their liberal counterparts.

In the “Myth” piece and subsequent writings, I have argued that one of the paramount issues in rhetoric is the responsibility that the source of rhetoric has for the agenda he/she has chosen, and the interpretation of that agenda. President George W. Bush’s insistence on Iraq’s salience and being part of his agenda can reasonably be part of that which is cited as his legacy. However, how did he rhetorically make the case for Iraq’s inextricability from the issue of terrorism, and how did he successfully depict, for national and international audiences, the “War on Terror” as actually a “war?” These issues are appropriate fodder for rhetorical analysis, according to the “Myth” perspective, but do not lend themselves to our field’s performing situational analysis. In fact, there is nothing inherently liberal or conservative in either approach that lends itself to liberal or conservative argument. The essentials of each type of argument are apolitical, but those of the situational approach are more easily used to promote a political point of view — usually liberal when the scholar is in academia — whereas the rhetorical approach encourages more disinterested analysis and criticism.

Examples regarding the differences between situational and rhetorical analysis are literally inexhaustible, but there has been recently an especially revealing debate which may serve as synecdoche for some of the preceding observations. The matter concerns capital punishment and the claim that execution of criminals creates a new victim class: the relatives of the deceased perpetrator (Associated Press, 2006). This new focus (creation of salience/agenda) on a matter heretofore relatively unimportant to many of us, states that even though members of the families of convicted felons haven’t done anything wrong (selected facts and interpretation), those family members are “victims too” (interpretation/spin). This is not a new phenomenon, although a relatively new group, Murder Victims’ Families for Human Rights, an anti-death penalty group, has written a text called “Creating More Victims; How Executions Hurt the Families Left Behind.” Thus, through a new creation of salience and agenda accompanied by a new infusion of meaning and spin (and framing of the concept of “victim”), a new persuasive action is attempted: to stop capital punishment.

The “Myth’s” “salience-meaning” or now perhaps “agenda-framing-spin” perspective on rhetoric is one which makes rhetorical study a primary study. The situational perspective argues that there is a reality which dictates that to which we pay attention and what its significance is. The latter perspective puts rhetoricians in the weak position of claiming in the face of higher ethos experts what the political reality is,
and that depiction serves as the entire basis for what rhetorical analysis has to offer. The former focuses on the study of persuasion and makes our discipline a more important player in the national scene of politics, a player that offers a unique critical perspective for analyzing and commenting on persuaders’ choices of that which to give rhetorical focus and the meaning, framing, and/or spin they argue for their chosen saliences or agenda.

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