A classification of classics. Gestalt psychology and the tropes of rhetoric

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A B S T R A C T

In this paper the long-established Gestalt laws of cognitive organisation are employed as a tool to map the complex realm of rhetorical tropes, which have been organised in a number of other ways since the days of Aristotle's pioneering treatise on rhetoric. By mapping rhetorical tropes in this manner, this paper substantiates the claim that Gestalt psychology can work qua descriptive science of cognitive phenomena at large, for such a mapping provides an exemplary and extensive application of Gestalt laws within a field of investigation, i.e. rhetorical tropes, that is relevant to all forms of human communication, scientific ones included.

1. Introduction

Rhetoric is possibly the oldest form of reflexive, organised inquiry in the nature, articulation and ends of human communication. Although the term itself is likely to have appeared for the first time in Plato's Gorgias (ca. 380 BCE/1959), the study and the teaching of what Cicero (46 BCE/1776) described as the art of persuasion had already been practised extensively since at least the days of the legendary 5th-century orators Corax and Tisias (Barthes, 1970/1988).

In contemporary academe, rhetoric still finds ample room for both study and teaching, not only in the field of rhetoric as such or within English and communication departments, but also amongst scholars in literature and poetry at large (e.g. Shen, 2013), philosophers interested in argumentation and persuasion (e.g. Andrews, 2013), explorers of Greek and Roman antiquity (e.g. Hutchinson, 2013), educators cultivating their students' skills in public speaking and composition (e.g. Hale, 2013), keen researchers in media and socio-political studies (e.g. Martin,

2013), psychologists figuring out how people can change one another's beliefs and actions by talking or writing well (e.g. Kaufman & Kaufman, 2009), or more practically oriented coaches in business (e.g. Barker, 2013), marketing (e.g. Rossolatos, 2013), advertising (e.g. Hoyer, MacInnis, & Pieters, 2012), graphic design (e.g. Dabner, Calvert, & Casey, 2009), IT development (e.g. Killian, 2013), architecture (e.g. Spiller, 2013), political lobbying (e.g. Dobrin & Moray, 2009) and photography (e.g. Bate, 2009). Indeed, as the vocational side of academic work is concerned, the study of rhetoric has found fertile soil in the domain of visual communication, which has become so prominent in the age of televisual and computer-screen social interaction (cf. Castells, 2013; Hill & Helmers, 2004; Olson, Finnegan, & Hope, 2008).

Another line of study has been flourishing in the same domain over recent decades, i.e. the rediscovery and wide application of Gestalt psychology, especially with regard to the so-called "laws" or "principles" of organisation of human perception. No contemporary textbook, expert website or university course in visual communication can do without paying ample homage to the "forms" ("structures" or "configurations" being equally valid translations of the German "Gestalten") of perceptual organisation that Wertheimer, Köhler and Koffka identified and investigated

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in the first half of the 20th century (e.g. Hart, 2012; Lester, 2013; van den Broek, Koetsenruijter, de Jong, & Smit, 2012). Despite gradual marginalisation in universities and research centres during the Cold War years, Gestalt psychology never died out completely, unlike earlier schools such as structuralism or functionalism, and much has been done since the fall of the Berlin Wall to further its founders' original discoveries (cf. Luccio, 2011), including pursuing the genetic study of the forms of perception (e.g. Spelke, Breinlinger, Jacobson, & Phillips, 1993) and developing additional and/or substitutive laws or principles (e.g. Pinna, 2009).

2. Topic, scientific literature and aims

Despite their conspicuous and simultaneous flourishing within the same set of academic and practical interests, one significant aspect of rhetoric, i.e. its tropes, and the Gestalt laws of perceptual organisation have hardly met each other. On the one hand of the scholarly spectrum, contemporary rhetoricians have not been focussing particularly on tropes, but rather on broader theoretical issues such as the nature of human language, rationality and interpretation (McKerrow, 2010). On the other hand, operating at a higher level of abstraction, "tropology" and "gestalts" qua cognitive schemata have been combined together in an interesting way by neuropsychologists (Rail, 2013; cf. also Tuller, Case, Ding, & Kelso, 1994). However, with the exception of Tucker (2001), no researcher appears to have been interested in exploring how the rhetorical tropes observed and classified since classical antiquity may relate to the Gestalt laws so frequently presented in the textbooks of a vast array of disciplinary and vocational fields.

Echoing older studies that were even more limited in scope—i.e. Koch (1999) and Talmy (1988) on metonymy—Tucker (2001) concentrates upon one of these laws, i.e. that of figure/ground, according to which perception is possible by means of the subject's projection of the object qua identifiable form or organised structure (i.e. a Gestalt) against a suitable background. As Tucker (2001) argues, rhetorical tropes are aptly called "figures" too, since they allow for human cognition to take place by letting congruous cognitive stimuli coalesce into intelligible structures shaping the objects of cognition, which are projected against the backdrop constituted by the remaining flux of potential information. The law of figure/ground applies to all rhetorical tropes, which he interprets in their diversity as cognitive schemata drawing the boundaries of graspable objects within the subject's field of cognisable experience (as a consequence, to avoid redundancies, I do not include the figure/ground law in the classificatory table below). In ordinary circumstances, we eventually recognise a human being in the fog when a coherent shape of a human body emerges from the haze. Analogously, we identify distinct phenomena as themselves, hence neither as nothing nor as something or anything else, by means of graspable forms or figures cast against the otherwise fuzzy field of cognitive stimuli with which we are presented in our environment. As neurologist David Rail (2011) writes: "Tropes shape thought so enabling our minds to echo our world." (3rd par.)

Tucker (2001) is noteworthy also in suggesting that what is valid for perception in particular is valid for cognition in general, especially as comprehending linguistic meaning is concerned. In this, he is consistent with Rail's (2011, 2013) recent research in neuropsychology, but also and above all with Wertheimer's (1924/1938) original claim that the laws or principles of organisation sought by Gestalt psychology do not deal with perception alone. Whilst the initial studies may have concentrated upon perception, Wertheimer's final goal was the understanding of the relationship between the whole and its parts at large, for "Gestalten" are supposed to be the cognitive structures whereby we interpret very many if not all phenomena, in very many if not all domains of existence, such as biology, society and the arts, which are among Wertheimer's (1924/1938) own examples.

That tropes, along with other rhetorical devices, be cognitive schemata or important means of cognition rather than mere stylistic flourishes is a notion that has been taken most seriously not only in psychology, but also in as diverse fields of research as linguistics (e.g. Hampe & Grady, 2005), computer science (e.g. Barrett, Heracleous, & Walsham, 2013) and business studies (e.g. Aritz & Walker, 2012). Still, in this article, I do not pursue any in-depth analysis of the nature of cognition according to psychology in general or Gestalt psychology in particular, nor do I offer a resolution of the methodological quagmires of the same, or even a sheer assessment of the plausibility of the latest developments in the field. Although the present research could possibly substantiate a tropology such as Rail's (2011, 2013), my aims are more modest and make use of the time-tested Gestalt laws of organisation that populate standard textbooks in a variety of disciplines, so that the definitions of the laws presented below may result uncontroversial. Specifically, the present research aims at:

(1) Employing the long-established Gestalt laws as a tool to map the complex and heterogeneous realm of rhetorical tropes, which have been organised in a number of other ways since the days of Aristotle's (4th c. BCE/1941) pioneering treatise on rhetoric (cf. Barthes, 1988; Burton, 1997–2007; note also that "tropes" and "figures" are used here as synonyms); and

(2) Substantiating Wertheimer's (1924/1938) original claim that the laws or principles of organisation sought by Gestalt psychology do not deal with perception alone and that Gestalt psychology does actually work qua descriptive science of humankind's cognitive phenomena at large by providing an exemplary, extensive and comprehensive application within a field of investigation, i.e. rhetorical tropes, relevant to all forms of human communication, scientific ones included (cf. Baruchello, 2012; Gross, 1990; Kuhn, 1962; McCloskey, 1985).

As concerns the latter aim, it should be noted that, whilst the list of tropes included in this article may appear perplexingly long and, possibly, even overwhelming to the reader, its vastness and completeness are crucial to establishing via substantial corroboration the scientific plausibility of the claim above and, a fortiori, to achieving the aim at issue. It is not just the rhetorical trope of emphasis that is at