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Suasive speech: A stronger affective defense of rhetoric and the politics of cognitive poetics

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ABSTRACT

A review of empirical data on involuntary affective responses to 'rhetorical' speech establishes the need to reexamine Jean-Jacques Rousseau's so-called 'Weak Defense of Rhetoric,' which considers rhetorical tropes to be dangerous because they seduce the body. Evaluating empirical findings also challenges Richard Lanham's 'Strong Defense,' which dismisses Rousseau and rejects any condemnation of 'rhetorical speech' in asserting that all utterances are already rhetorical insofar as they are contextual and selective. Ultimately, experimental psychology and neuroscience studies give good reason to adopt a new, Stronger Affective Defense of Rhetoric, one that prioritises the body and its degrees of affectability, embracing Rousseau's idea that democratic deliberation must be concerned with how the body is intimately and often automatically moved by rhetorical speech.

"*Music can pierce the heart directly; it needs no mediation.*"

Oliver Sacks (2007, 300).

1. Introduction

In his book, *Saving Persuasion*, Bryan Garsten (2009) explains why "rhetoric" is so often a bad word. Popularly understood in terms of ideologues spouting "radicalized versions of their positions," rhetoric is that which alienates and/or attracts (p. 7). The rhetorical is, thus, not surprisingly, "decried as manipulative or dismissed as superficial" (p. 4). Carolyn Miller (2010) discusses the history of rhetoric as one peppered with both alluring and repulsive imagery; she cites Plato who notes that rhetoric holds "affinity with arts such as cosmetics, seduction, enchantment, hunting, and military strategy" (p. 21).

A negative tendency toward rhetoric goes way back, at least as far as the Greek Sophist's instruction to wield rhetorical appeals to one's own advantage in society (McComisky, 2002). Even Aristotle, a critic of Sophist wizardry, offered the slightly unsettling recommendation that good rhetoricians should "compose without being noticed and appear to speak not artificially but naturally" (Aristotle, 2007, 3.2, 4–6). The recommendation, despite its use-value, surely casts suspicion on the trained rhetorician.

Disputes about the value and role of rhetoric recur for millennia. Although it is not pertinent here to review the long debate, charges equating rhetorical forms to verbal manipulation advanced by philosophers "against rhetoric"—Jean-Jacques

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Rousseau among them[1]—have waned, in humanistic circles at least, ever since Richard Lanham's (1993) "Strong Defense of Rhetoric" (p. 155). Lanham proclaims that all symbolic formations are rhetorical insofar as they include and exclude, illustrate and interpret, structure and situate. In light of the Strong Defense, the so-called "Weak Defense" championed by those like Rousseau—forwarding that rhetoric is value-neutral while specific deployments are "good" or "bad"—is disarmed because "goodness" and "badness" itself is "a matter of judgment" always already constructed through rhetoric (Lanham, 1993, p. 158). Put differently, concerns over ethically appropriate rhetorical formations are subsumed by the rhetorical nature of all discourse (p. 155–167).

Yet, this is precisely where Rousseau's concern over the enchantment of vocal performance proves relevant for rhetoric once again, especially in light of new neuroscience research into the affecting sounds of speech. Involuntary affective responses to rhetorical features (Jacobs et al., 2015; Jacobs, 2015; Menninghaus et al., 2015; Zhang et al., 2014; Ponz et al., 2014; Moseley et al., 2012) expose the need for a new, Stronger Defense of Rhetoric. The body's attunement to the sounds of speech and the external environment suggest that some ways of speaking may, indeed, be inherently more repulsive or seductive than others. If this is the case, then merely saying that all discourse is value-laden does not go very far toward addressing the concern embedded in the Weak Defense, i.e. that particular rhetorical deployments manipulate and tempt and, thus, need to be measured against some "arhetorical measuring stick" (Rivers, 2012, p. 1). As a response to the Weak Defense, Lanham's current Strong Defense relies on the idea that the social and the discursive comprise all rhetoric, a notion that not only elides the vast differences in rhetorical effects but ignores the asignifying forces of the body. The suggestion that involuntary, affective bodily reactions may expose the forceful impacts of some rhetorics is not forwarded here to make the obvious observation that some speech seems more persuasive to some audiences but, rather, to propose the possibility that some speech *consistently* proves affecting, often below conscious awareness, to a broad range of bodies having physiological similarities.

After briefly discussing Rousseau's engagement with rhetoric, I review the relevant experimental neuroscience literature in order to 1) examine the political implications of a body deeply affected by dramatic speech, per Rousseau's ideas, as well as to 2) demonstrate the need for a Stronger Affective Defense of Rhetoric.

With respect to the former, I develop two conclusions. First, Rousseau's understanding of expressive vocalizations as having inherent, physiological impacts that influence people's viewpoints is attuned to the human body and positions raw feeling as an important, legitimate element of democratic deliberation.[2] Second, I propose toward the end of this paper that discussions of "arousal" and "valence" as explored in experimental studies might prove useful to rhetorical scholars as an interdisciplinary entry point for examining more of the complexity of our suasive bodies.

In pursuing this line of inquiry, I recognize the socio-cultural contours of neuroscience and do not intend to overlook the representational dimensions of neuroscience, as elucidated by Gross (2012), Gruber (2014a,b), Jack (2011), Johnson Thornton (2011), and others. Rather, I aim to contribute to recent work in the "neuroscience of rhetoric" (Gruber, 2013; Ingram, 2013; Jack, 2013; Littlefield et al., 2014) within the burgeoning field of "neuro-rhetorics" more generally (See: Gibbons, 2014; Gruber et al., 2011; Jack and Appelbaum, 2010; Mays and Jung, 2012), asserting that neuroscience research illuminates some physiological effects and affects involved with words and spoken language.[3] In doing so, I do not adopt a simplistic logical strategy of suggesting that because X (the body, affect, etc.) is now interesting to the field of Rhetoric, therefore Y, (neuroscience) is needed. Rather, I hope to show that neuroscience proves its own value within context of this discussion and offers new avenues of exploration to rhetorical scholars.

In fact, bodily persuasion inherent in speech proves to be a compelling area of research now because certain words and tropes appear in numerous experimental studies reviewed here to be affectively charged, carrying testable, predictable physiological responses that occur involuntarily and prior to rational decision-making. The findings reviewed in this paper motivate a Stronger Defense of Rhetoric, one that prioritizes the body and its degrees of affectability amid an acceptance that symbolic formations are inherently rhetorical—*but also* bodily. A Stronger Affective Defense would dismantle the domination of discourse over rhetoric, upending Lanham's focus exclusively on situated discourse. A Stronger Affective Defense would also welcome a reintroduction of enchantment in rhetoric; that is, a Stronger Affective Defense admits that innately tricky, seductive formations are a real possibility. Another way of putting this might be to say: Peitho, the traditional Greek goddess of seduction, is still the goddess of persuasion, and she still serves Aphrodite as a handmaiden.[4]

2. Background on Rousseau's rhetoric

At the height of the Enlightenment period, Rousseau (2007) resists rhetoric on the basis that skillful vocal and embodied performance might trick people into bad or false belief. Rousseau warns against coercion, proving particularly apprehensive of the musical talk of politicians and evangelists on the basis that the dramatic sounds of their speeches might manipulate

[1] Garsten uses this phrase "against rhetoric" (11) in discussing Hobbes, Rousseau, and Kant in his book.

[2] Whereas Rousseau might argue that raw feeling is important to understand so that one can control and suppress it amid deliberation, I argue that raw feeling is important to feel, hear, and evaluate, in terms of force and direction, for deliberation.

[3] The term neurorhetorics often refers to efforts to uncover the rhetorical-ness of the neurosciences as well as to rethink rhetorical theory and criticism in light of neuroscience findings.

[4] According to ancient mythology, Peitho, Horae, and Charities were the handmaidens and companions of Aphrodite, the goddess of love. See Buxton, 1982, p. 44.