

The rhetoric of objects

Rhetorical phases as a model for generating meanings

Arantxa Capdevila arantxa.capdevila@upf.edu
Doctor of Audiovisual Communication from the Pompeu Fabra University.

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Objects, as vehicles for social values, have a clearly persuasive end. When analyzing them, we can therefore apply a rhetorical method based on rhetorical operations. These enable us to consider persuasive text as a structure divided into different levels. The layers that comprise the persuasive message go from the deepest to the most superficial elements, or rather from the deepest meaning to an expressive manifestation using images, words, materials, etc. All these aspects are designed to persuade and they must therefore be taken into account. This text analyses those aspects which are found in each of these parts and how they influence the persuasive process.

1. The *object* as an instrument of persuasion

The aim of the majority of messages carried by the media is to persuade, that is, they are aimed at achieving an effect on the recipient which could consist of a change of attitude or in them taking certain actions. But this persuasive aim is not only achieved through the media. In fact, the persuasive goal is also present in many objects since in many cases, in addition to their utilitarian function, they transmit a series of values with which they hope that the user will identify. Therefore social values may be added to their normal function, so that a scale of values of use and social values is established on which the majority of objects are situated. One example of a useful object might be the scalpel (which would not easily transmit anything other than its utility). On the other extreme would be a jewel (scarcely any useful value but has high symbolic value). In the middle of the scale might be a car, which has a clear useful

value, but can also transmit values such as the social standing of its owner. The transmission of social values by objects is not incidental but has the clear aim of trying to generate adhesion to these values and therefore carry out a persuasive function. Therefore, in a generic sense, objects may be considered as elements of social discourse carrying the same persuasive strategies aimed at their acceptance by the public.

Given this evidence, it is interesting to consider how public adhesion to values is achieved by means of social discourse. In this sense, one of the elements which contributes most to the idea of persuasion is the transmission of meaning through social discourse. The meaning, from a semantic point of view, corresponds to the fragment of reality shown in the text, although it is not the only element to be taken into account. In other words, discourse persuades because it transmits the

components that the audience can relate to, whether these be values other elements.

Seen in this way, the area of persuasion is one of the most relevant in media societies which are based on the exchange of social values transmitted through discourse. This article presents a method for analysing - and indirectly generating - persuasive discourse, and is based on Aristotelian Rhetoric with the addition of some other theories, such as Argumentation Theory or the Possible Worlds theory, which are different approaches expressed in a way which generates a simple model that can be applied to a variety of discourses.

2. Rhetoric as an instrument for analysing meaning

Rhetoric is the classical discipline which enables the analysis of texts which aim to persuade. From the cradle of western civilization in Classical Greece, a study was made of the ideal elements to be used for persuasion in any given situation. From the start, more than two and a half thousand years ago¹, rhetoric presented a complete theoretical body which encompassed the characteristic mechanisms of persuasion, among which are the *parts of rhetoric*. In rhetoric² the different phases or parts are distinguished, from the first conception of the message to its delivery to the audience, as a system by which the orator can carry out the task of constructing a persuasive discourse.

Aristotle proposed five phases of rhetoric: *Inventio* (arriving at basic arguments), *dispositio* (how to distribute them into discourse), *elocutio* (choice of adequate words and rhetorical figures), *memoria* (memorization) and *actio* (action). Each one has a specific task in preparing the rhetorical discourse. So in the phase of *inventio*, the most appropriate ideas for persuasion are sought from the surrounding reality. The ideas which are found in *inventio* are textually structured in the *dispositio* phase and presented expressively in the *elocutio* phase. These first three phases are those which constitute the discourse. Once the discourse is prepared, the orator must memorise it, in the *memoria* phase in order to deliver it correctly to the audience in the final *actio* phase.

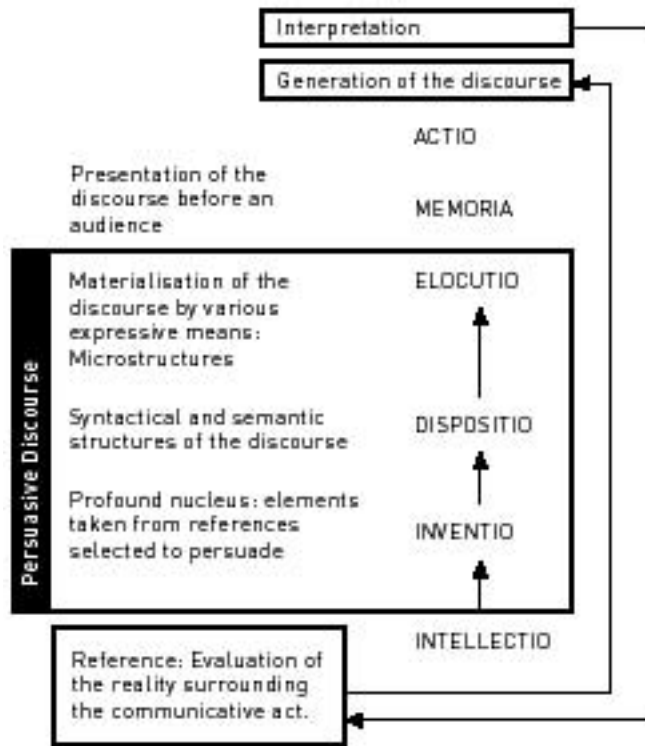
Some minor rhetoricians³ have added a sixth phase to the series: *Intellectio*. In this phase, previous to the others mentioned above, the orator needs to consider all the circumstances surrounding the discourse in order to adapt it to them. It is a question of deciding on an objective, the type of discourse and the public it is aimed at, among other things. It is a fundamental phase because it gives coherence to the rest of the discourse.

As we can see in the following diagram, the system of rhetorical phases allows us to consider a dual process of elaboration/interpretation of the persuasive discourse. The preparation begins with the *intellectio* moving on to the *elocutio* and later to the *actio*, stopping at one or other of the phases, depending on the type of discourse that one wants to generate (or analyse). Written

¹ The beginnings of rhetoric as a discipline responsible for the study of means of persuasion go back to the 5th century BC. The majority of authors talk of a democratic revolt at the time which led to a number of court cases where citizens had to recover lands expropriated by the defeated dictators. The fact that anonymous citizens were faced with the task of convincing the jury of their ownership of the lands led to the emergence of the first masters of rhetoric (Corax and Tísias).

² Aristotle in his work Rhetoric defines the *rhetorical* phases. These were taken and reconsidered in classical Rome by Quintiliano who carried out the great work of recovering Greek tradition to apply it to Roman reality.

³ This phase is accounted for by rhetoricians such as Suplicio Víctor and Aurelio Agustín.



discourses or objects, for example, tend to culminate in the *elocutio*, while oral or audiovisual discourses are set into action by the *actio*. The interpretative path, on the other hand, starts with the *actio* or the *elocutio* to reach the profound nucleus of the discourse.

Two fundamental ideas emerge from this initial diagram. The first interesting question is that the rhetorical phases demonstrate that all the elements of a persua-

sive text are subordinate to the persuasive aim which is defined in the *intellectio* phase. In fact, this aim is what gives coherence to all parts of the discourse. Therefore, all the phases are closely related and none is autonomous in respect of the others⁴. It is, therefore, a coherent system.

The second relevant consequence is that, taking this coherent system into account, the persuasive text may be considered as a whole divided into different levels. At the most profound level is the persuasive nucleus of the *inventio* and at the most superficial level the expressive manifestation of the *elocutio*. All these levels are linked and permit movement among them. In other words, the persuasive text is stratified in levels which show the transformation of meanings into textual manifestation. In the case of the interpretative path, this happens from the most superficial levels to the most profound ones. In the generative path, it takes place the other way round. It is the interpretative path that enables the meaning of the discourses to be reached.

Before giving a short explanation of the functions of each of these phases, it is interesting to focus on two points: the first is that the distinction between these phases is only clear theoretically and that in practice they are all intimately related. The second is that, described thus, they involve a temporal process which covers the constructive process from the analysis of "reality" to the delivery of the discourse. It is therefore a process of textualisation and of putting part of reality into the discourse to persuasive ends.

⁴ An example of the negative consequences of considering some of these phases away from the whole is offered by the historical process experienced by the *elocutio*. The *elocutio*, which for centuries was separated from the persuasive function marked by the *intellectio* and carried out by the *inventio* and the *dispositio*, has been left as a set of rhetorical figures which lack sense.

3. The rhetorical phases in the interpretation of persuasive texts

3.1. *Intellectio*, the pragmatic proposal of persuasive discourse

The *intellectio* is a phase which precedes the construction of the discourse and is of an eminently pragmatic nature. In this phase the orator analyses the surrounding reality and outlines the basic points of the discourse. These principles are those which will provide the structure for the other rhetorical phases. It guiding principle and that which gives coherence to the structure of the discourse is the *aptum*, or that which is appropriate for the act of persuasion at any time. The discourse should adjust itself to the circumstances which surround it: the public that it is aimed at, the type of discourse and its aim etc.

Therefore it is a phase for selecting the elements which will later be taken into account for the preparation of the discourse. This evaluative function enables the study of the reference from which the discourse is prepared and from there, the choice of elements that are considered pertinent to the communicative aim. With this operation the foundation are laid for the world of conceptions and representations which put the discourse into play.

Through each of the decisions that the orator takes during the phase of constituting the discourse, a rhetorical field is marked out in which the possible world will take root⁵, which at this level can be considered a discursive pre-structure. Rhetorical analysis aims to find out

which plot of reality the orator has chosen to base his discourse on. As Umberto Eco⁶ pointed out, in order to undertake the interpretation, the orator should construct a model reader – or model audience – on which to build the textual strategies that will carry the final meaning. This model audience does not exist empirically; in the words of Eco (1993: 80) “an author should refer to a series of aptitudes (an expression which means more than just ‘understanding the codes’) capable of giving content to the expressions that he uses. He should assume that the set of aptitudes he refers to is the same as those referred to by his reader. Consequently, he should envisage a Model Reader capable of cooperating in the updating of the text in the way that he has forecast and to actively interpret in the same way as he actively generated it(...). Envisaging the corresponding model reader does not just mean ‘waiting’ for it to appear, but moving the text in order to construct it.”

In summary, this preliminary discursive phase provides the basis for the argument and considers the elements that will be influential, in some way, in a possible world. The criteria by which the world is recognisable in rhetorical-communicative terms are established. This means that from the first moment, the audience is present in decisions taken by the orator because the discourse needs to be adapted to it from the beginning in order to be effective. Therefore the model audience appears in this phase and by virtue of it the orator may build his possible world, and interpretative cooperation will be possible as a result of it. The decisions taken in this phase inspire all other persuasive decisions.

⁵ For the definition of the possible world and its characteristics see PERICOT, J.: “Transitar pels móns possibles”, in *Temes de Disseny*, 14. pp. 151-175. See also ECO, U.: *Lector in fabula. La cooperació interpretativa en el textu narratiu*. Barcelona: Lumen, 1993 and *Los límites de la interpretación*. Barcelona: Lumen, 1992.

⁶ ECO, U.: *Op. Cit.* 1993.

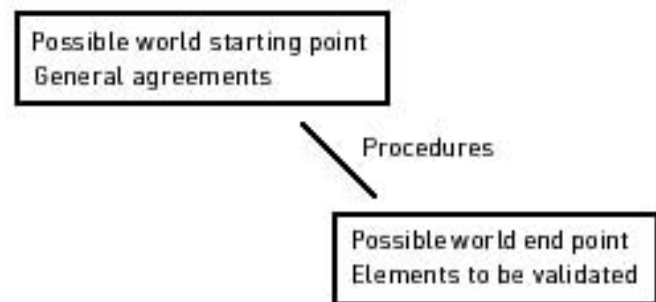
3.2. *Inventio*, in search of persuasive ideas

This is the first really constituent phase of the discourse. It is a phase of conception in which the orator must take from reality the elements which will form part of the profound structure of the discourse. Obviously, the elements chosen are those that will favour the cause and connect clearly with the audience at which the discourse is aimed. It is precisely at this point that its persuasive power lies.

The *inventio* is a phase involving the localisation of suitable persuasive ideas which shape the other rhetorical operations. It is therefore a key phase in building persuasion. The main function of this phase is to establish which elements will make up the possible world. In other words, it is a question of giving substance to the structures localised in the previous phase. In order to achieve this, the orator needs to take from reality the elements he considers are necessary for persuading the target audience. For example, if in an advertisement for a refreshing drink the advertiser wants to reach a young audience, he will introduce elements into the discourse such as the freedom or fun to be experienced when drinking this product. On the other hand, the same product aimed at an older public might include elements such as the tranquility produced by drinking the product. Obviously, one has to be sure that the target public will relate to these values.

It is nevertheless a complex task. Where does the orator look for these persuasive elements? In this sense the proposal of Chaïm Perelman is helpful. He offers an interesting classification of categories to refer to in order

to find these persuasive elements. Without going into the detail of the theory⁷, it is important to note that Perelman starts with the idea that any attempt to persuade should begin with the agreed elements, which are taken as the basis of the argument and which also serve to give validity to new proposals. Perelman's model is represented in the following diagram:



As this diagram shows, the starting points are referred to as *general agreements*. There are various types of agreement depending on the extent to which they are linked to reality and the extent to which they are accepted by the model audience. The first group is based on "reality" and includes: facts, truths and assumptions. The second group is based on "preferences" and includes values, hierarchies and places.

The *facts* are general agreements shared by a large number of people and are therefore stable data. The *truths* are general systems in which sets of facts are grouped together and which form a whole from a determined ideological perspective. The *assumptions*

⁷ For a broader view of Perelmanian theory and a more detailed definition of the general agreements see PERELMAN, Ch.; OLBRECHTS-TYTECA, L.: *El tratado de la argumentación. La nueva retórica*. Madrid: Gredos, 1994. PERELMAN, Ch.: *El imperio retórico. Retórica y argumentación*. Santa Fe de Bogotá: Norma, 1997. CAPDEVILA, A.: "Disseny del procés d'elaboració de l'espot de propaganda política: convergència d'estratègies comunicatives". In *Temes de Disseny*, 14. pp. 187-204.

enjoy general agreement but need external elements to reinforce them. They are linked to those which are considered to be normal and true at a given time. The *values* are highly extensive opinions which are difficult to change, which involve attitudes towards what is real and are closely related to the chosen commitments of the audience. The *hierarchies* guarantee the coordination between values, that is, they give them a marked order and highlight the preferences and relevance between them. Finally, the *places* are the very general premise on which the values and hierarchies are founded

Following the choice of possible worlds and their components, they are given validity through argumentational operations⁸ which enable the connection between the profound structures of the discourse and the public at which it is aimed.

All these elements allow the choice of a part of the reference, which is reality, and will be transmitted by the discourse. This choice is one of the most influential elements in the final persuasiveness of the discourse, although it is not the only one. Its strength is based on the fact that the *inventio* forms the argumentational nucleus with which the public will or will not establish a link.

3.3. The manifestation of the argumentational nucleus: *dispositio*, *elocutio*, *memoria* and *actio*

As we have said, persuasion is produced by the acceptance of referential elements in play with the discourse. But these elements form part of the profound structure of the object or discourse and in order to access them in terms of interpretation one has to pass through the other

stages of the discourse. Classical rhetoric defined them as the constitutive phases of the discourse: *inventio*, *dispositio* and *elocutio*.

Just as *inventio* is the referential part of any discourse, so *dispositio* and *elocutio* are the textualising phases. In general terms, it can be said that the ideas found in the inventive phase are textualised through structures in the *dispositio*. Once the ideas have been structured they can move on to the most superficial phase of the discourse, *elocutio*. The last phase consists of shaping everything proposed in the *inventio* using expressive means (words, images, music or others).

Therefore, the *dispositio* is considered to be the second phase of discursive construction. Its basic function is to structure and give order to the ideas found in the *inventio* phase. This phase includes the ordering of semantic material using macrostructures (which some authors have situated in the *inventio* phase), such as syntactical ordering in superstructures. Van Dijk⁹ defines macrostructures as structures of sense which involve the whole text considered as a set of propositions. These semantic structures organize the propositions into a coherent structure and facilitate the memorization and storage of information in such a way that the information can be used to interpret the rest of the information. The same author defines the superstructure as a global, textual, abstract scheme concerning the superficial organisation of text. It deals with its external parts.

Both syntactical and semantic order should be focussed on persuasion since, in general terms, the aim is to

⁸ Perelman calls these operation *Argumentation processes* and he classifies them in two large groups. The first are the *linking processes* which establish the links between the possible worlds which are agreed and those which are not. Secondly, he defines the *disassociation processes* which try to break the links among agreed and non-agreed elements. All these categories are defined in the works of Perelman mentioned previously.

⁹ VAN DIJK, T. (1980): *Texto y contexto. Semántica y pragmática del discurso*. Madrid: Cátedra.

establish a structure which is able to transmit the ideas of *inventio* in the most appropriate way possible to the communicative ends.

The *dispositio* is a basic phase because it gives the discourse coherence by acting as a hinge between the referential fragment of the *inventio* – the value of freedom, for example – and the expression of these ideas through the *elocutio* – through the image of an immense landscape. That is to say, it establishes a link between the structure of possible worlds and the linguistic unity of the text.

So the *elocutio* may be considered a phase of textual culmination in which the elements from the surface of the discourse are chosen. Its role is to shape into words, images, sounds or other expressive materials; all the elements that have been decided in the previous phases. The words, images and sounds should be appropriate to the overall aim of the persuasive text. This is a basic idea because for a long time it was believed that the elocution was a simple phase of embellishment, an addition that did not contribute at all to the persuasive aim of the discourse. That is not the case, and embellishment in persuasive discourses is subordinate to persuasion. A discourse may be embellished to make it more pleasant for the audience to receive, without opposing the argument it contains.

Therefore it is not just an expressive phase of the thoughts discovered and structured in the previous phases but it also adds persuasive values to the final result¹⁰. This phase should possess a series of qualities among which are: the shaping of the discourse to the situation, clarity of expression, stylistic elegance,

beauty in the expression submitted to the ends of the discourse through expressive mechanisms known as rhetorical figures. It is a question of making the text attractive so that the audience can enter into it positively, thus adopting the persuasive goal of the discourse with speed and certainty.

Classical rhetoric defined two further phases, which are placed outside the discourse, that is, they occur subsequent to it. They are *Memoria* and *Actio*. In its classical definition, *Memoria* was a preparatory phase for the *actio* in which the discourse was memorised to be later delivered. In general, it is given little importance, and is scarcely influential in the persuasive process, especially in written discourses. In order to satisfy this phase the orator was given advice on how to memorise and also which parts should be memorized literally and which need not.

Finally, the *Actio* is defined as the final rhetorical operation and consists of the delivery of the discourse to the audience. It may be considered as the staging of the discourse. It is the phase which is carried out through the enunciation of the text (with the textual representations of emitter and receiver from a cognitive and perceptive point of view). This phase also needs to adapt itself to the persuasive aim of the discourse.

4. Conclusions

Through the constitutive phase of persuasive discourse, rhetoric offers a coherent system for the analysis of persuasive discourses in a broad sense (from audiovisual texts to elements which transmit social values). This system of rhetoric takes the different textual levels that

¹⁰ Many authors conceive rhetorical figures as being generative instruments of sense which give a superficial display of the contents of the profound nucleus. Among them is Xavier RUIZ COLLANTES who proposes these ideas in his book *Retórica creativa. Programas de ideación publicitaria*. Barcelona: Aldea Global, 2000.

need to be considered in a persuasive discourse: from the argumentational nucleus, constructed in the *inventio*, to its delivery before an audience, which takes place in the actio phase. This enables it to exceed some of the theories which only consider one phase of the process. This is the case, for example, in the Argumentation Theory proposed by Chaïm Perelman, which only considers the argumentational nucleus, or that of the μ Group or the Lieja Group which centre their work on the expressive manifestations of the *elocutio*.

A consideration of persuasive discourse as a set of coherent phases allows us to move between the superficial and profound sense, therefore making interpretative analysis or generative operations easier. In addition, this structuring clarifies the role played by each phase in the final result and the relevance of each of them. It should be remembered that these phases add semantic content (that is, sense) to the final result. In other words, they bring new values which will also influence the final persuasive effect.

Finally, it is interesting to highlight the fact that some of these phases are common in explaining any persuasive

manifestation while there are other more specific ones, and they vary greatly depending on the type of discourse. So, after an initial consideration in the *intellectio* of the kind of discourse to be carried out, the *inventio*, a phase for the search of ideas appropriate for persuasion, is relatively common to the different languages. This phase functions in a similar way, whatever the means of expression, while the other phases of textualisation and manifestation of ideas contain particular aspects which should lead to their being studied specifically.

This system also allows elements which are specific to the communicative context to be integrated into the discourse. That is, it takes into account basic pragmatic aspects in order to understand the final meaning of the discourses. The rhetorical system shown here takes into account that discourse is always produced in a specific context and this should also be analysed so that the text may be inserted into it. Tasks such as the construction of a possible world or the preparation of a model audience are tools which allow cooperative strategies between the orator and the audience, which form the basis of any persuasive communication.

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