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Classical Rhetoric and a Limit to Persuasion

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Abstract. Classical rhetoric was the first discipline concerned with persuasion and in fact still has a lot to offer. This is exemplified by a short discussion of the persuasive appeals known from classical rhetoric as well as the so-called ‘*aptum*-model’. It is suggested how these sets of rhetorical concepts may be developed into guidelines for persuasive design. Moreover, classical rhetoric can be related to social psychology in an interesting and informative way. This combination of classical and modern disciplines of persuasion however also suggests that there is an inherent limit to the power of persuasive strategies.

Keywords: Rhetoric, persuasive design, social psychology, persuasive appeals.

1 Introduction

The very idea of persuasion – and indeed, the term itself – as a crucial component of communication was brought into the world by classical rhetoric. For obvious reasons, modern studies of persuasion are informed by other disciplines too, notably social psychology, anthropology, marketing and advertisement studies, usability and IT-design etc. Yet in our view we can still be informed on crucial points by rhetorical theory, modern as well as classical. Moreover, rhetoric has been related to social psychology in a striking manner which may help elucidate both – and in particular, draw attention to a possible limit to persuasion.

2 Rhetoric and Persuasive Design

First of all, let us take a brief look at the potential of rhetoric in Persuasive Design (PD). Rhetoric and its role in persuasion has been developed by some of the best minds of Western thought for a period of 2500 years. So it is no wonder that a huge body of relevant material for PD can be found. Let us illustrate this with one set of fundamental rhetorical concepts, namely the persuasive appeals known as *logos*, *ethos*, and *pathos*.

Aristotle (384-322 B.C.) systematically observed speakers and speeches and thus identified the persuasive appeals. Broadly speaking, *logos* is the appeal to rationality, *ethos* is the appeal meant to establish plausibility, and *pathos* is the appeal to emotions. Cicero (106-43 B.C) later described these appeals as the task of informing (*docere*), the task of establishing the speaker’s personal credibility (*conciliare*), and the task of involving the feelings of the listeners (*movere*) [2]. The crucial point for

both of them was that these three parameters had to be brought into an appropriate balance according to the situation, if the presentation was to stand any chance of persuading an audience. It should be noted in passing that the roots of persuasive technology in rhetoric were noted from early on. Thus in [3], Fogg wrote:

For example, Aristotle certainly did not have computers in mind when he wrote about persuasion, but the ancient field of rhetoric can apply to captology in interesting ways [3 p. 230-231].

The need for the right balance between informing, involving and being credible leads us directly into the concept of *aptum* and the concomitant rhetorical model of communication known as the *aptum*-model. This model comprises five elements developed by Cicero. In Scandinavia the model is often depicted by a pentagon:

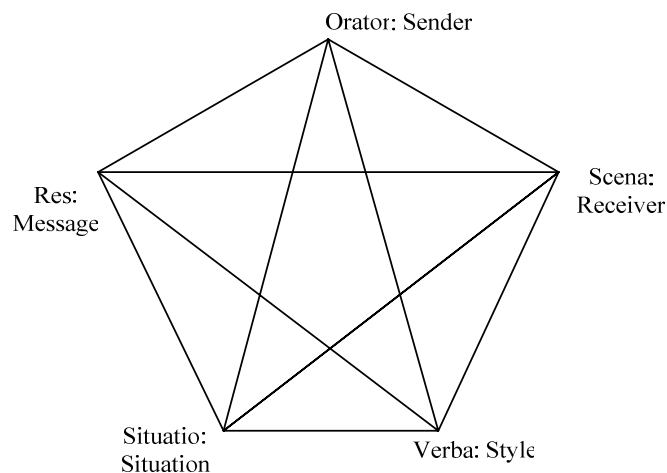


Fig. 1. The *aptum*-model

The point about the persuasive appeals as well as the *aptum*-model is in both cases that certain parameters have to be adjusted properly.

Thus both the persuasive appeals and the *aptum*-model have analytical as well as constructive uses. They are concepts which aid in analyzing communication as well as suggestions of how to create communication meant to persuade. We illustrate this by figure 2 below (comprising just these two sets of rhetorical concepts, although many more examples could be given; for a more detailed account, see [4]). Obviously, these guidelines need to be made more specific, but it should give a fair idea of the analytical as well as the constructive uses of rhetoric in PD.

3 Rhetoric and Social Psychology

Classical rhetoric has been systematically related to social psychology by Michael Billig [1]. The central tenet of Billig's *Arguing and Thinking* [1] is that we can gain

Rhetorical concepts	Analytical use (e.g. for an existing website)	Constructive use (e.g. for a future website)
Persuasive appeals: Logos Ethos Pathos	Which appeals are used, how are they balanced or adjusted to each other, are they used consistently etc.	Consciously choose balance between persuasive appeals. Make sure chosen balance is used consistently.
Aptum Orator / Sender(s) Scena / Receiver(s) Situatio / Situation, context Res / Message, content Verba / Style, expressive means	How are the <i>aptum</i> -relations implemented: orator-scena, orator-verba, res-verba etc.? Does the site seek an apt balance? If so, has it been achieved?	Throughout development, ensure that the <i>aptum</i> parameters are well adjusted – such that the expressive means befit the case and the sender, that a suitable relation between sender and receivers (users) is achieved etc.

Fig. 2. Uses of rhetorical concepts

considerable insight into thinking by studying argumentation and especially by studying what classical rhetoric has to say on the subject. Billig observed that social psychology had had a tendency to identify thinking with rule-following.

From classical rhetoric he learned, however, that while arguments and thought may well be based on rules, rules themselves arise from arguments, and indeed, may be disputed by arguments. That is to say that while rules do exist, they are not deterministic. One should not rely on the assumption that following certain rules will always yield the desired results. Any rule may be challenged in some circumstances. Moreover, there is always more than one side to any matter, or argument. Billig attributes great importance to the thought of Protagoras in this respect:

From all Protagoras’s innovatory ideas, it is those relating to the two-sidedness of human thinking which primarily concern us here. According to Diogenes Laertius, Protagoras was “the first person who asserted that in every question there were two sides to the argument exactly opposite to one another”. [1 p. 71].

Now in thinking human beings follow the same patterns as in argumentation – we weigh the pros and cons and the relevant arguments when deciding how to act and what to believe – i.e. when making decisions crucial to our *attitudes and behaviour*.

In the Protagoras-quote there is a focus on exact opposites. But classical rhetoric in fact says that there are not just two but many sides to any subject matter. A subject matter of which some understanding is sought is called the *quaestio* in Roman rhetoric. Quintilian says:

“Question” [quaestio], in its more general sense, is taken to mean everything on which two or more plausible opinions may be advanced. [6]

So an argument – and by extension, any concept or image – may evoke not just its exact opposite but any number of different images, which may be contrary, competing, supplementary or merely introduced as an association.

Comprehension is a dynamical process, since any argument, concept or image may produce counter-examples, often in an unpredictable manner. The conditions of the persuasive designer are in this respect subject to the same limitations as were those of the classical speaker:

Being author ... does not mean, however, that the [author] owns or otherwise may copyright the image he has created ... having once performed and presented his role, he will have to put up with the fact that a new creative process, however erroneous its products may seem to the original author, has started to circulate and spread its images. [5 p. 35-36]

Similarly, the persuasive designer can hardly expect that the results of her endeavours are entirely safe and predictable. Rather, she must put up with the fact that having done her job “a new creative process ... has started to circulate and spread its images”.

4 Conclusion

The way Cicero, Quintilian and many other classical rhetoricians describe persuasion indicates a dynamics of persuasion which makes the whole process partly indeterministic or unpredictable. This insight is *inter alia* supported by Billig’s work within social psychology and Nielsen’s work on rhetoric as comprehension. On the other hand, classical as well as modernized rhetoric incorporate a large number of concepts and a huge body of experience which should be systematically investigated for the purposes of PD. For one thing, this will be a supplement to principles of and guidelines for PD. For another thing, it is an indispensable part of the historical and systematic foundations of PD and hence should be an important part of the development of the entire field.

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