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Rhetorical Critic's Role and Mission in Communication

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Abstract

The Classical Greco-Roman rhetoric is considered to be the humanist basis of the Western cultures. This study aims to highlight the importance of the rhetorical tradition in the study of human communication. Rhetorical criticism of the communication sciences is one of the main approaches to qualitative textual analysis. In a meta-theoretic approach our work tries to establish the specific rhetorical criticism as a qualitative, interpretative and subjective discourse research method in our contemporary communicative society. We argue that the teacher who teaches his students rhetorical criticism provides a range of methodological and educational clues such as: understanding other people, clarification of the values, aesthetic appeal, community consensus and changing of the society. After all, the rhetorical critic's role is to internalize and propose a humanist alternative opposed to the dominant objective paradigm. Rhetorical critic's mission is to come up with his own discursive voice which is meant to communicate about the contemporary social and political challenges. In the spirit of the methodological pluralism we consider that in the field of communication, the practitioners of quantitative and qualitative methods should enjoy recognition and mutual respect.

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1. Introduction

Our Western society has been many times called as communicational society. The Ancient Greek rhetoric (especially the sophists, Plato and Aristotle) and the Roman one (Cicero and Quintilian) had offered the cultural background of today's European Union. Values such as: democracy, equality, freedom of expression, argumentation

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and persuasion of ideas were provided by the rhetoric discourse. The Western tradition proposes a model based on the competition and the agreement of the majority as opposed to the Eastern tradition based on the lack of competition and non-violence (Baiaş, 2013, 38). We consider that this cultural background should be part of our students' education. We should be open to any alternative perspectives that might appear to other cultural traditions, outside of Europe. A first step in this direction is the familiarity with cultural difference.

Our study is mostly related to the communication sciences. As teachers of rhetoric and communication we face in our teaching and scientific work with a number of problems. Some of these problems are related to the theoretical aspects while others are related to methodological ones. What should be the legitimate modality for us as teachers and students, of a college under the name of "Faculty of Communication Sciences" (from Romania, Timisoara) to enter in the field of scientific research, if we want to take advantage of the above cultural difference?

The question of our study is the following: "What are the critic's role and mission in the field of communication?" Our question refers to the researcher who has already assumed and internalized the methodological and epistemological exigencies of the rhetoric criticism. Our main aim is to justify the work of the rhetorical critic in the field of communication sciences. The rhetorical criticism is a quasi-American trend. Therefore another significant aspect of our study is the familiarization of the European researchers in the field of communication, and in the other related fields with the specific of the rhetorical criticism as theory and method in order to use it in teaching and research activities. In this respect the present study is of interest both for the teachers and the researchers.

To answer to our question the best method of investigation is a meta-theoretical approach. The present approach may be included in the area of the communication philosophy. We propose a "pyramidal approach" that begins with the most general themes towards the specific ones, namely to the self of the researcher. Our study will present subjects related to: Western research traditions, scientific and interpretative characteristics of the theories, main qualitative and quantitative research methods from the field of the communication sciences, of the specific rhetorical criticism and of the rhetorical critic's academic activity.

Thus, the main paradigms in our field of interest can be found in the theory of communication. In this area we want to highlight the main research traditions (i.e. socio-psychological tradition, cybernetic tradition, rhetorical tradition, semiotic tradition, socio-cultural tradition, critical tradition and phenomenological tradition). Our approach places a great emphasis on the rhetorical tradition. We will not present only the classical Greco-Roman rhetoricians, but we intend to bring to light another approach. Although less known in the European space since the 20th century, the rhetorical researchers in the United States proposed a new epistemological current in the study of human communication: rhetorical criticism.

To better understand the relevance of the rhetorical criticism in the communication sciences we have to analyze both the specific of the theories and the qualitative and quantitative methods. Based on these characteristics we can partly sketch a portrait of the rhetorical criticism. To complete the picture we add specific features or descriptive epistemological presuppositions of the rhetorical criticism, which give originality in the field of rhetoric in general and in particular in the field of qualitative methods.

To answer the question "What is the rhetorical critic's role in the academic life?" we explore the specific of the qualitative research method called rhetorical criticism. We argue that the communication and rhetorical teacher who teaches his students rhetorical criticism provides a number of methodological and educational landmarks opposed to those provided by the statistical quantitative methods. After all, we consider that the rhetorical critic's role is to internalize and propose a humanist alternative as resistance to the dominant objective quantitative paradigm.

To answer the question "What is the rhetorical critic's mission in the social life?" we appeal to current epistemological presuppositions. We argue that the rhetorical critic's mission is the valuing of the subjectivity and his active involvement in society. The rhetorical critic's mission is to come up with his own discursive voice, communicational built on the contemporary cultural, social and political challenges.

2. The research traditions in the field of the communication theories

The history of a domain is closely related to the theories appeared in it. What is the history of the communication field and of the communication approach? Such a history of the domain can be found in the 3rd edition of the excellent book entitled *A First Look at the Communication Theory* written by Professor Emory Griffin (1997) from

Wheaton College, Illinois. In his work, professor Griffin (1997, 20-28) presents seven important historical stages: the rise of rhetoric in the early years (1900-1950), communication and social science (1930-1960), the empirical revolution (1950-1970), the turbulent sixties of interpersonal communication (1960-1970), new rhetorics (1965-1980), the hunt for a universal model (1970-1980), and the ferment in the field (1980-present).

In what follows we present the first two stages of the evolution in the field of communication as it was developed within the borders of The United States of America. The first historical period is set up by the classical rhetorical teachers or by the rhetors in the second and third decades of the last century. In 1914 a small group of teachers from the "speech schools" separated from the English Language departments and from *National Council of Teachers of English* to which they belong and they constituted *National Association of Academic Teachers of Public Speaking*. This humanistic movement was extended later. The most outstanding representative of this period was Herbert Wichelns. In his famous article "The literary criticism of oratory" (1925) Wichelns (2000, 23) differentiated the literary criticism from the rhetorical criticism: "It is not concerned with permanence, nor yet with beauty. It is concerned with effect. It regards a speech as a communication to a specific audience, and holds its business to be the analysis and appreciation of the orator's method of imparting his ideas to his hearers." Thus we consider Wichelns, who brought to the fore the rhetorical research in the first decades of the last century, the first of the "founding fathers" of the communication sciences. The proposed method of the analysis of public discourse, which was the standard for several decades, was a neo-aristotelian method that focused on the aristotelian persuasion directions: ethos, pathos and logos. In 1935 there were offers of over 2000 autonomous departments of oratory in the colleges and universities of The United States of America. In the fourth decade of the last century the speech schools received the current name of schools of communication or departments of communication.

In parallel, in the period between the two World Wars and post-war, teachers belonging to fields such as: psychology, sociology, anthropology, economy or political sciences, in an attempt to study the problems related to the human communication sphere, joined the new research field and brought with them specific scientific research methods of social sciences field. From this point of view "the founding classic fathers" of the intersection field are: the political scientist Harold Laswell, the social psychologist Kurt Lewin, the sociologist Paul Lazarsfeld and the experimental psychologist Carl Hovland. Wilbur Schramm, the director of the Institute for Communication Research at Stanford (Stanford Institute for Communication Research) had a special merit for the development of the field. He initiated the first doctoral program in Communication Sciences. Some of the trained students joined the other departments of communication and promoted programs and methods of empirical social research.

The two currents, the one of rhetoric and the other of social sciences, are those which made and still make communication possible: "In other words we have, on the one hand, the researchers from the old «speech schools» who deliberately set themselves to address the problems of communication by using the instruments of the rhetorical theories and, on the other hand, the practitioners of the statistical methods, the old contributors to the development of social sciences" (Gabor, 2014, 24, our translation).

There is a certain fragmentation of the different theoretical approaches concerning the traditions, as well. There are seven distinct intellectual traditions that were described and systematized by Robert T. Craig (2009, 958-963). They are: semiotic tradition, socio-cultural tradition, socio-psychological tradition, cybernetic tradition, phenomenological tradition, critical tradition and rhetorical tradition.

The semiotic tradition is the study of signs. From this point of view the communication is the process of sharing the signification by means of signs. A sign is anything that can stand for something else. The words are signs we call symbols. The semiotic tradition is trying to explain and reduce the problems and misunderstandings created by the use of ambiguous symbols. The main representatives of the semiotic tradition are: the 17th century English philosopher John Locke, the late 19th century American pragmatist philosopher Charles S. Peirce, the early twentieth century Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure. In the 20th century several authors such as Charles W Morris, Julia Kristeva and Roland Barthes continued to develop the semiotic theories.

The sociocultural communication tradition regards communication as the creation and enactment of the social reality. The premises of this tradition refer to the individuals' talk, they produce and reproduce culture i.e. share rituals, meanings and social structures. A permanent tension appears between macro and micro approaches. Macro approaches favour society as a whole and shows the modality in which stable social structures and cultural patterns function through communication. Micro approaches favour everyday social interaction and show how social

relations are created maintained and altered in local communication. In the early 20th century the American sociologist who contributed to social cultural tradition are Charles H. Cooley and George H. Mead.

The social psychology presents the communication according to the social interaction and influence. Social interaction is correlated to individuals' traits, attitudes, emotions, and cognitive processes. Influence appear among mass media on a larger scale than among individuals. The social psychological theorists and practitioners are concerned with effective communication. The social psychology is the scientific tradition that deals with the understanding of causes that statistically, numerically, and quantitatively determine the communication results. Social scientific communication research has identified with social psychology. In mid-20th century some American researchers: Kurt Lewin, Carl Hovland and Leon Festinger were preoccupied by group dynamics, persuasion and cognitive dissonance and were assimilated in the field of communication theories.

The cybernetic tradition treats communication as a means of information transition; it is a systematic process of information. Cybernetics conceptualizes communication as information processing on the basis of the electrical engineering in the middle of the 20th century. It differentiates human communication from the other types of communication system process (especially artificial intelligence) by the study of information processing, feedback and control. The main questions formulated by the specialists refer to the modality the system functions, to the modifications inside the system and the perspectives of their efficiency in the communication system. Norbert Wiener, the American scientist who worked on MIT was the first who used cybernetics to describe artificial intelligence. Between 1950s and 1960s the anthropologist Gregory Bateson and a group of researchers known as the Palo Alto Group developed a cybernetic theory of relationship and family pattern system that reflect their interaction and feedback regardless their inner intentions.

The phenomenological tradition conceptualizes communication as the experience of self and other in dialogue. This tradition with philosophical roots looks to the authenticity of our ways of experiencing self and other. The problems that appear refer to subjectivity and inter-subjectivity understanding. The barriers that might appear in communication can be the consequence of self-unawareness, non-acceptance of difference, or strategic agendas. The phenomenological interpretation is intentional analysis of the person's everyday life standpoint that is living it. Thus, the phenomenological tradition places great emphasis on people's perception and their interpretation of their own experience and the experience of others in genuine dialogue. The main representatives of this current belonging to the 20th century are: the German philosophers Edmund Husserl, Martin Heidegger, Hans-Georg Gadamer, the religious Jewish Martin Buber, and the French philosopher Emmanuel Levinas and the American humanistic psychologist Carl Rogers.

The critical theory tradition considers communication as a reflective challenge of unjust discourse. It discusses the implicit assumptions behind the discourse. The critical theories sustain that power structure in society prevent real communication by a systematic exclusion of the other peripheral voices, the voices of less power group. The critical theory is connected to the study of ideology and culture industries. The critical theorists denounce in contemporary society: the control of language to preserve power imbalances, the influence of mass media in the reproduction of the dominant ideology and the uncritical reliance in scientific method and empirical findings. The representatives of the critical theory (Max Horkheimer, Walter Benjamin, Theodor Adorno, Herbert Marcuse and Jürgen Habermans) are known as German group scholars named "Frankfurt School" as they are part of the Institute of Social Research at Frankfurt University.

I've left at the end, the rhetorical tradition, which is the first one, from a historical point of view. It originates in ancient Greece as the practice of oratory or debate. Public discourse has been intimately linked to the democratic political regime in which the Greek citizens of "polis" have the right and the obligation of persuading the audience through the public discourse. Classical rhetoric includes the Greek sophists' works Plato and Aristotle, and the Roman authors among which we can mention Cicero and Quintilian, as well. These ancient rhetorical books have had a powerful influence on Western education during several centuries. In the spirit of such a respectable tradition, Western rhetoric or communication is the practical art of speech. The art of communication can be achieved through practice and criticism on the basis of systematic principles for obtaining good abilities and justifications in different particular situations. In the classic acceptance, the rhetoric is considered the art that uses all the possible ways of persuasion for building arguments, organizing ideas, using language and delivery public speaking.

3. The quantitative and qualitative research in communication

On the basis of an analysis made by professor E. Griffin (2011:26-35) in the 8th Edition of the book *A first look at communication theory* we can distinguish the main features of the two approaches in the field of the communication sciences. On the one hand, we have the so-called scientific theories which apply quantitative methods of research and, on the other hand, we have interpretative theories which apply qualitative methods of study.

Scientific theories are also called objectives or experimental theories, as they meet the classical objectives of scientific knowledge. There are five scientific standards investigated by the objective orientation in the field of communication: a) the explanation and the description of past or present acts through the investigation of events and human behavior; b) the prediction of future events through the discovery of regularities, the invariable models and the universal laws. However we should mention that in social sciences the predictions in cause-effect terms have the character of probability and not absolute certainty; c) relative simplicity i.e. the theories should be as simple as possible, they opposed to complicated explanations that are not relevant; d) hypotheses can be tested. More specifically, as a result of Popper's falsification request, a scientific theory should be testable and if this proves not to be in accordance with reality, the false or error should be demonstrated. This is of great importance, since if it is virtually impossible to prove that a theory is false, then the truth of the theory cannot be confirmed either; e) the fifth standard is the practical utility over time of a good theory of human life. Through theories people are able to guide themselves successfully and to better control different situations they have to face in their everyday interactions with the others.

These experimental theories build their knowledge on the paradigm of explanation and are trying to find out valid universal laws, to formulate predictions of the type "if-then", which look like reality. In addition, in research, objective theories use quantitative methods. As it is known, quantitative methods appeal to numbers to show and support a point of view, by comparing different results. This method has the advantage of offering accurate measurements and calculations in terms of their numeric results, which may be less interpretable and open to disagreements.

On the other hand, interpretative, humanistic or artistic theories do not have a fixed number of rules or standards. Even though there is not a general model, most of the representatives of rhetoric, hermeneutic and critical theory agree on all or a good part of the following standards of interpretative theory: a) a new and unique understanding of the people. The empirical researchers want an objective explanation, while the humanists want a subjective understanding of human interaction guided by the imperative of autoreferentiality, according to which the researcher's personality should be included as an essential constituent of his own theoretical construction; b) values clarification by recognition, identification and expose ideology behind the messages. In addition, the supporters of such theories should be willing to disclose their own ethical assignments, as the researchers cannot keep an ethical detachment against people, whom they study or against the political or economic implications of their work; c) the aesthetic attraction of the theories can capture people's imagination, whereas it is not only the content, but also the style presentation that matters. Although the artistic attraction depends on the receiver's eyes, the clarity and artistic creativity satisfy this requirement; d) a community of agreement of the researchers in the field. The interpretation of significance is subjective, but if the interpreter is reasonable, if he is accepted or rejected depends on an objective aspect and on the other people in the field who validate or not his ideas, namely by the agreement or consensus of other specialists; e) a good interpretive theory helps the reform society or it generates change. Mainly the representatives of the critical theory, who reject any notion of absolute truth or meaning, use the theory to reveal unjust practices of communication which create or merely keep going the power imbalances in the political, economic and religious life of society.

In their epistemological approach, the interpretative theories focus on understanding, on search-for meanings and on interpretation of significance of human actions by taking into account the historical social, cultural or political context. Rhetorical criticism is an epistemology or the way of knowing that many scholars find effective in coming to an understanding about the communication process and the artefact under study.

4. Rhetorical criticism as qualitative research method

The most frequently quantitative research methods used by practitioners are the experiment and the investigation. The experiment is a research method that handles a variable in a strictly determined situation in order to find out if this has the predicted effect. Starting from the hypothesis that, generally, the human behavior is not arbitrary, by the systematic manipulation in a controlled situation, the researcher tries to establish the causal relationship of a factor (independent variable) by observing its effect on another factor (dependent variable). The investigation is a research method that uses structured questionnaires and interviews in order to collect information about the respondents which reflect what they believe, feel or intend to do.

Furthermore, the interpretative theories use methods of the qualitative research. Unlike the quantitative methods which use mainly numbers, the qualitative methods use words to support their theories. The tools for the interpretation that a researcher may use include: open or unstructured interviews, focus-group, visual texts, artefacts and introspection. Text analysis and ethnography are the most commonly used quality research methods concerning the way in which people use symbols to create and to infer meaning. Ethnography is a participative observation method, designed to help researcher's understanding with regard to a complex cultural network. The ethnographer gradually enters the group life, he notices, sees, hears and takes notes about the social building of the reality and of the community he wants to understand. A special form of ethnography, autoethnography seeks to reflect on the cultural context where the self of the researcher-author is placed (Baias, 2014).

Text analysis is a method of research, which describes and interprets the characteristics of any type of text (discursive or non-discursive). Rhetorical criticism is the most common form of the text research in the field of communication. Following the Aristotelian classical tradition, in the United States of America has appeared the rhetorical criticism under the form we know today i.e. the classical method or the neo-aristotelian method. Then in the middle of the 20th century new methods of analysis appeared among which we can name: cluster criticism and pentadic criticism initiated by Kenneth Burke, narrative criticism proposed by Walter Fischer, fantasy-theme criticism created by Ernest G. Bormann, generic criticism, ideological criticism and metaphor criticism.

Each of the outstanding representatives of the current has proposed different definitions. We would like to take into account the definition of the rhetorical criticism offered by the American author Sonja K. Foss (2009, 6), according to whom: "it is a quantitative research method that is designed for the systematic investigation and explanation of symbolic acts and artefacts for the purpose of understanding rhetorical processes." From the content of this definition we can extract three general characteristics governing any type of the rhetorical criticism: the systematic analysis is an act of criticism; the acts and artefacts are objects of criticism (examples may include an advertisement, an advertising campaign, an internet site, a speech, a letter, a policy paper, a press release or a visual image); and the theory of rhetoric which is reflected in the understanding of the rhetorical processes that is the purpose of criticism.

Rhetorical criticism is rather an art than a science that may be included to the humanist view. Rhetorical criticism is concerned with the description, interpretation, and evaluation of the uses of human communication. The rhetorical critic asks, "how", "why", and "to what effect." We agree with Jim A Kuypers (2009, 14) who asserts that: "In short, criticism is an art, not a science. It is not a scientific method; it uses subjective methods of argument; it exists on its own, not in conjunction with other methods of generating knowledge (i.e., social scientific or scientific)."

5. The rhetorical critic

If we take into account the characteristics of the interpretative theories and qualitative research methods we can outline the rhetorical critic's features. Thus from the epistemological point of view, a rhetorical critic should not get at the truth, but on the contrary, he has to create multiple realities. In other words, in the field of knowledge his aim is to create new directions, to propose different alternatives.

With regard to the conception of the human nature the rhetorical critic has a humanist point of view. Unlike the quantitative researcher, the rhetorical critic favours, takes advantage and advocates for freedom and free will. Making use of his subjective power he aims to influence the attitudes, the beliefs, the opinions and the other participants' behaviour towards the rhetorical act. Opposed to the researcher who uses statistical quantitative methods, the rhetorical critic has more freedom and ethical responsibility. At the same time the rhetorical critic's mission is governed and focused on the communicator's character rather than on the act of communication; the ethic principle refers to the understanding, and the respect of the other participants in the process of communication before

the evaluation of their messages. In case these standards are respected, both the teacher and the researcher may become models or guidelines to be followed by the youth and students.

If a theoretician and practitioner of the scientific theories has, from the axiological point of view, as his highest belief the value of objectivity, a critical rhetoric as a theoretician and practitioner of the artistic theories has as his highest value the emancipation. The purpose of the humanist view is not a theoretical formulation of universal laws, valid everywhere and anytime, but to find detailed rules for the interpretation of acts and cultural artefact.

We assert the promotion of the interpretative standards, the philosophical presuppositions and the rhetorical critic's role in the academic life. People's understanding, values clarifications and the reform society are the marks that should guide professional life. From the philosophical point of view the critical rhetoric has to make visible his presuppositions. Thus, from the ontological point of view there is no objective reality but it is simply a symbolic creation. The reality as a symbolic creation of the rhetorical critic and of his receptors constitutes the rhetorical field. From the epistemological point of view a critic does not know an act or an artefact objectively and impartially, but only by means of his personal interpretation. The critic's personal voice, subjectivity, identity and his own interpretation are fundamental in a critical rhetorical analysis. Therefore as Edwin Black (2009, 33) asserts the rhetorical critic is the method of rhetorical criticism: "The only instrument of good criticism is the critic. It is not any external perspective or procedure or ideology, but only the convictions, values, and learning of the critic, only the observational and interpretive powers of the critic. That is why criticism, notwithstanding its obligation to be objective at crucial moments, is yet deeply subjective. The method of rhetorical criticism is the critic."

In the academic life, in the educational environment we strongly believe that the rhetorical critic or the teacher, who teaches subjects such as rhetoric or communication, has the moral duty to offer his students the methodological and philosophical marks. Generally in the European Union space and in the Academic environment in Romania, in our case, at the Politehnica University Timisoara the objective theories and the quantitative research methods are entirely present. For this reason, for the representatives of the rhetorical criticism, to which we belong, it is vital to propose our own humanist rhetorical tradition.

In order to avoid the hegemony, the promotion of a single dominant ideology we had to be active advocate for a methodological pluralism as a principal objective. In his own spiritual beliefs, a rhetorical critic always has either the mission or the "ironic duty" to propose alternatives, not to be fully satisfied with the results and to search for new angles of approach to help the other participant in the process of the communication, to clarify the values and to expose the dominant ideologies, as well as to provide discursive means for changing the society. We have to avoid considering the rhetorical critic as outsider (King, 2000). The rhetorical critic's mission is represented by the exploiting of his own subjectivity and the reform society.

For all practical reasons we strongly consider as our duty and mission is to promote rhetorical criticism. Both in the cultural European and national space, the providing of paradigmatic marks, of practical procedures, dictionaries of specific terms, concepts, currents and methods of rhetorical criticism and the translation of the fundamental theoretical texts are the main steps to help the students in the exploration of their rhetorical themes of interest. By this means we agree with the assertion that the rhetorical criticism is the intersection of theory, practice, and pedagogy (Benson, 2001). The present paper is a part of this project of the promotion of rhetorical criticism.

6. Conclusions

The current field of the communication sciences is a trans-disciplinary one and a zone of intersection where we can find several traditions such as the rhetorical tradition, the critical tradition, the phenomenological tradition, cybernetic tradition, the socio-psychological, the socio-cultural tradition and the semiotic tradition. We assert that the rhetorical tradition, which defines the communication as an art of the public discourse through the works of the representatives of Greco-Roman ancient rhetoric, was, historically the first and the most influential in terms of education in the Western world. In the early twentieth century in the United States of America, starting from the classical aristotelian rhetoric, the researchers have developed a distinct current i.e. the rhetorical criticism. Opposed to the scientific theories, which favour the objectivity and impartiality, the interpretative or humanistic theories of the rhetorical criticism are based on ontological and epistemological philosophical presuppositions which pretend that the reality is a symbolic creation, and the literary critic can know an artifact only by means of a personal

interpretation of it. In contrast to the qualitative research methods, the rhetorical criticism is a quantitative research method that is designed for the systematic investigation of artefacts for the purpose of understanding of the communication processes.

I have argued that in the European Union space, where the rhetorical criticism is less known and used than in the United States of America, the familiarization with the theoretical and methodological framework is necessary. We consider that in the academic environment the rhetorical critic's role is that to internalize the philosophical presuppositions and to propose a humanist alternative used as resistance in front dominant objective quantitative paradigm in the field of communication. Rhetorical critic's role is to come up with his own discursive voice, communicational build works as a reaction to the contemporary, cultural, social and political challenges.

We contend that the European rhetorical critic's mission is the theoretical, practical promotion of his personal voice, of his subjectivity and of his particular values that define his intellectual personality. Finally we sustain a methodological theoretical and practical pluralism, for the recognition and respect in the field of the communication sciences by both the scientific and humanist representatives.

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