



Rhetoric and Communications, Issue 13, July 2014

Investigating the Rhetorical Unconscious

Michel Lane Bruner

Abstract: In the 1980s, rhetoric scholars in the United States and Canada, including but certainly not limited to Raymie McKerrow, Maurice Charland, Michael C. McGee and Phillip Wander, began to challenge the Aristotelian paradigm that then dominated rhetorical scholarship. As is well known, Aristotle maintained that rhetoric, as an art, consisted of finding all the available means of persuasion in a given situation, arguing that rhetoric is a function of the intentions of rhetors. Under the general title of *criticalrhetoric* (83), however, a new generation of rhetoric scholars began to draw upon the insights of Continental linguists and philosophers such as Ferdinand de Saussure, Michel Foucault, Louis Althusser, Jacques Derrida, and Jacques Lacan to question this intentionalist paradigm, suggesting as well that much of persuasion, and therefore much of the rhetorical enterprise, is largely unconscious and unintentional. This essay, after discussing various ways that “rhetoric” has been conceptualized in the United States and Europe, discusses the evolution of critical rhetoric and its larger relevance for rhetorical theory and criticism, paying particular attention to the most recent developments.

Key Words: Critical Rhetoric, Ideology, Rhetorical Criticism, Rhetorical Theory, the Unconscious.

Prior to the 1960s, rhetorical studies in the United States focused almost exclusively on the effectiveness of strategic speech, which in the tradition of Aristotle means “discovering in the particular case what are the available means of persuasion” [1]. Rhetoric, that is, was broadly understood to be the equivalent of intentionally persuasive public speech. Exemplifying this intentionalist focus was Lester Thonssen and A. Craig Baird’s canonical *Speech Criticism* [2], a much-used book that followed a neo-Aristotelian approach by assuming that the primary job of rhetoric scholars was to criticize public speeches,

specifically by studying the character of the speaker, the structure and content of the speech, and the style, delivery and effectiveness of the speech.

While the intentionalist tradition still dominates much of the field of rhetorical studies, there was an important theoretical shift in the 1960s that challenged this tradition. Inaugurated in part by Edwin Black's important book *Rhetorical Criticism*, which directly challenged the limitations of the neo-Aristotelian perspective [3], Black argued that "the rhetorical" certainly included more than public speaking, and that rhetoric scholars must include visual artifacts, social movements, literature, and other symbolic phenomena in their analyses. Nevertheless, Black did not seriously critique intentionalism, maintaining that

a postulate that must be found at the foundation of any system of rhetorical criticism . . . is that there will be a correspondence among the intentions of a communicator, the characteristics of his discourse, and the reactions of his auditors to that discourse. [4]

It would not take long, however, for others to problematize Black.

Feminist critics, for example, quickly pointed out the unintentional sexism in Black's text, as well as in the neo-Aristotelian tradition more generally, asking why rhetors were always characterized as male. In addition, over the course of the 1970s the influence of European thinkers such as Sigmund Freud, Karl Marx, Friedrich Nietzsche and Ferdinand de Saussure began to exert an increasingly profound influence on rhetorical theorizing.

The importance of Freud's work in critiquing intentionalism is unquestioned, particularly his notions of the split subject (i.e., that consciousness should be divided into the ego, id, and superego) and the unconscious. Marx's work suggested that rhetors are influenced unintentionally by economic processes. Nietzsche's work suggested that language itself is tropological and that representational theories of language, therefore, are misguided [5]. Saussure showed through his work in linguistics that identity is based on difference, so any notion of a subject fully present to itself was a logical impossibility [6].

Therefore, as a result of Black's initial critique of the assumptions of neo-Aristotelianism and the growing chorus of critiques of intentionalism from those influenced by nineteenth and early twentieth century European thought, it eventually became apparent to at least some rhetorical theorists that the intentions of authors often had little to do with the effects of particular discourses, and that rhetoric scholars should also be paying attention to unconscious and unintentional forms of persuasion.

As a result of these new theoretical perspectives, the critique of intentionalism accelerated in the 1980s and 1990s with the emergence of what has come to be known as *critical* rhetoric. Here, in the work of such scholars as Raymie McKerrow [7], Michael Calvin McGee [8], Phillip Wander [9], Maurice Charland [10] and Barbara Biesecker [11], the work of European thinkers who had extended the work of Freud, Marx, Nietzsche and Saussure, such as Michel Foucault, Louis Althusser, Jacques Lacan and Jacques Derrida, also began to make their presence felt.ⁱ McKerrow, for instance, drawing primarily upon Foucault, stressed the fact that all language is impossibly caught up in largely unintentional networks of power, and that ideological criticism should be a major focus for rhetorical critics. Wander, like McKerrow, also stressed the importance of ideology, or the unquestioned presuppositions of individuals and groups, in analyzing the unintentional ways in which discourses are persuasive, while Charland focused on the ways in which discourses constitute rather than simply represent subjects.

To describe this transition away from intentionalism, one might say that with rationalism, of the variety promoted by Descartes, where the rational human mind is the center of the universe, we live analogically in the cosmology of Ptolemy, where the earth (read intentional human rationality) is the center of the universe. With Kant, Marx, Nietzsche, Freud and Saussure, however, no longer can we assume that humans are fully rational and in complete control of their language and subjectivity. Here, then, our cosmological analogy moves from Ptolemy to Copernicus, since various invisible forces (e.g., the unconscious, the economy, the tropological and structural aspects of language) “decenter” the human subject. Then, with Derrida, Foucault and Lacan, we move toward the cosmology of Einstein, where there is no “center” to subjectivity, and identity becomes relative.

The net result of these accumulating critiques of the intentionalist assumptions of neo-Aristotelianism, and the simultaneous move away from a naïve rationalism toward more sophisticated understandings of language and subjectivity, was the emergence of a counter-tradition in rhetorical studies that prompts scholars to focus not only on how we intentionally use language to persuade others, which we obviously do, but to focus as well on the unintentional and unconscious ways in which we are persuaded. Largely grounded in continental philosophy, this second tradition predominantly focuses on the material consequences of variously productive forms of alienation, sublimation and repression that

come with our entrance into language. It is, in sum, an approach to the repressed dimensions of discourses that form the conditions of possibility for intentionality itself.

In the remainder of this essay, I shall work to characterize this rhetorical unconscious, provide examples of how it functions, and suggest why concepts such as fields of the unspeakable, derealization, limit work, aesthetic states, and repressive regimes are useful for critics seeking to better understand this unconsciousness. In doing so, I will simultaneously seek to defend several points: (1) that a materially consequential unconsciousness is at work in all persuasion; (2) that the rhetorical unconscious is centered on fields of the unspeakable and processes of derealization, or on suppressed, repressed, or otherwise unrecognized influences on subjectivity; and (3) that fields of the unspeakable can be traced archaeologically, or synchronically, by closely analyzing dramatically rejected speech through a method I call limit work, and that the process of derealization can be traced genealogically, or diachronically, by analyzing political transformation through the lens of aesthetic responses to political transformation.

Theorizing the Rhetorical Unconscious, Fields of the Unspeakable, and Derealization

We can trace the history of various notions of the rhetorical unconscious, which focuses on how our symbolic worlds are potentially alienated from whatever might be objectively true and real, from Plato and the Neo-Platonists, to Kant and Hegel, to Marx, Saussure, Nietzsche and Freud, to Lacan, Derrida and Foucault, and today to social philosophers such as Slavoj Žižek and Jacques Rancière. As is well known, Plato, for example, believed that our perceived realities were little more than shadows on the wall of a cave [12]. As an idealist, Plato believed that ideas were the realm of truth, objects mere copies of those ideas, and words mere copies of copies. Well over two millennia later, Foucault, from the very different perspective of a materialist historian, would drown the subject supposedly in control of truth altogether in discourse [13]. Though quite different in philosophical orientation and historical position, both thinkers believed we are radically alienated from anything that might be considered objectively true through our entrance into language.

It is not only that we are alienated from the world by our entrance into language; it is also the case that we must *sublimate* this alienation, and in doing so make it productive, though we normally fail to recognize such productive sublimation.ⁱⁱ Freud, in *Civilization and Its Discontents*, famously asserted that civilization itself is based upon the repressed sublimation of actual desires: “Sublimation of instinct,” Freud maintained, “is an especially conspicuous

feature of cultural development; it is what makes it possible for higher psychological activities, scientific, artistic, or ideological, to play such an important part in civilized life” [14]. Lacan, building upon Freud’s thought, and who also maintained that we are radically alienated from objectivity through our entrance into language, would later claim that this repressed sublimation, anchored in the unconscious, is structured like a language and that, although the unconscious does indeed appear in spoken language, this “doesn’t imply its recognition” [15].

When seeking to study these repressed, sublimated, and generally unrecognized dimensions of the rhetorical unconscious, it is useful to think of the ideological as unquestioned or unquestionable statements, or things that cannot be said without penalty (i.e., fields of the unspeakable), and to find ways of gauging as clearly as possible the distance between what is normally thought and historical facts (i.e., the degree of derealization at work in any given symbolic setting). All productive discourses are framed, or disciplined, by fields of the unspeakable, and the process of derealization accelerates as fields of the unspeakable expand. Conversely, when fields of the unspeakable shrink, we discover a closer correspondence between what people believe to be true and what is historically true.

Once again, and put most simply, the term “fields of the unspeakable” refers either to that which cannot be said without penalty or that which influences subjectivity unintentionally. One obvious example is the well-known notion of “the elephant in the room,” which refers to a broadly acknowledged truth that is willfully ignored or suppressed. For instance, when family members visit for the holidays it may be tacitly forbidden to discuss, say, a recent suicide attempt by a relative, or another’s alcoholism. It simply would not be “appropriate,” since everyone has gathered “to have a pleasant time.” One might question the degree to which such discursive elisions are intentional, for oftentimes the codes of propriety remain invisible until transgressed, but such codes obviously constitute one form of fields of the unspeakable.

Fields of the unspeakable also operate in professional disciplines, particularly when people are rewarded with raises or promotions when agreeing to keep quiet about certain unpleasant realities. Less insidiously, it is also the case that only certain statements are relevant in different professional contexts, and so people are often less professionally successful when making “inappropriate” statements.ⁱⁱⁱ Unspeakable fields also operate in political environments, especially when individuals know that their party is engaging in ultimately nefarious activities but are rewarded for “sticking to the talking points,” as

discussed in George Lakoff's *Don't Think of an Elephant*, which is a book about Republican Party talking points that are used irrespective of their truth-value [16].

We can also think of fields of the unspeakable in more general terms, where factors that influence subjectivity go largely if not completely unnoticed, thus constituting yet other aspects of the rhetorical unconscious. For example, Walter Ong [17], Eric Havelock [18], Jean Baudrillard [19], and Elizabeth Eisenstein [20] explore how subjectivity is unconsciously influenced by communication technologies – from alphabets to printing presses to computers. Havelock's discussion of how the invention of written language impacted oral culture in *The Muse Learns to Write*, and Eisenstein's magisterial book *The Printing Press as An Agent of Change*, are excellent places to begin exploring such work.

Furthermore, while Freud, as we have seen, argued that civilization itself was based on the repression of certain desires, which obviously entails the suppression of articulations of those desires, Marx, as we have also seen, provided yet another way of thinking about fields of the unspeakable when arguing that subjectivity was at least partially unconscious because the economy works invisibly yet profoundly upon the symbolic, and that dominant ideas are in dialectical tension with dominant economic practices, which in turn are in tension with the given character of political states.

Suffice it to say that the notion of a rhetorical unconscious is widely acknowledged and studied, that the Aristotelian conception of intentional rhetoric has been radically complicated on a number of fronts, that fields of the unspeakable take many forms, and that derealization is the consequence of expanding fields of the unspeakable.

Identifying Fields of the Unspeakable and Their Function through the Analysis of Dramatically Rejected Speech

Throughout my own scholarly career, I have been interested in locating, identifying, and critiquing the unconscious dimension of the rhetorical, and in what follows I shall provide two extended examples. The first, which draws upon my book *Strategies of Remembrance*, is a synchronic analysis of a dramatically rejected speech, exemplifying how rhetorical critics can engage in close textual analysis, coupled with contextual-historical analysis, to isolate fields of the unspeakable and their unintentional persuasive function [21]. The second, in the next sub-section, and which draws upon my book *Repressive Regimes, Aesthetic States, and Arts of Resistance*, exemplifies how rhetorical critics can engage in highly contextual diachronic

analyses to determine the shifting contours of derealization through the analysis of aesthetic responses to political transformation [22].

Strategies of Remembrance, rather inaccurately titled since it suggests that the phenomena under investigation deals with intentionality, is an archaeological analysis of fields of the unspeakable. Put plainly, it analyses the construction of fantasies of national identity, or what Benedict Anderson calls “imagined communities” [23]. Specifically, the book is composed of analyses of dramatically rejected speeches by political leaders in West Germany, Canada and Russia, seeking to show how dramatically rejected speech can tell us a lot about the unconscious of national fantasies, which are indeed structured like languages. In the speeches analyzed, and perhaps strangely enough, the most offensive phrases expressed broadly accepted historical facts that were nevertheless, for one reason or another, unspeakable – suggesting that the process of derealization was at work.

In West Germany, for example, just prior to reunification, the Bundestag President, Philipp Jenninger, addressed the West German parliament on the fiftieth anniversary of the *Kristallnacht* (a euphemistic term for the dramatic escalation of physical violence perpetrated against German Jews on November 9, 1938). In that speech, Jenninger attempted to explain why the German people were drawn toward National Socialism, stressing Germany’s responsibility for crimes against the Jews and the necessity of confronting Germany’s Nazi past for the sake of potential reunification. While such a discussion might seem reasonable to those outside of Germany, given that Jenninger was dealing with almost universally known historical facts and contemporary necessities, only moments into the address members of parliament began heckling Jenninger, and eventually over fifty members had walked out and another had to be removed by force [24]. In the days that followed, the most influential newspapers in West and East Germany referred to Jenninger’s speech as “distorted history” and an attempt to “justify” Hitler. Obviously, something about Jenninger’s speech was unspeakable, but how do we, in the role of rhetorical critics, crack this sublimated code?

The answer to this question I used a method derived from Foucault’s notion of a “limit attitude” that I call “limit work,” which is basically the contextually situated analysis of transgressive speech [26].^{iv} The fundamental idea is that the limits of subjectivity are only revealed when they are transgressed, and so the analysis of dramatically rejected speech is an excellent way to map fields of the unspeakable. In order to identify which particular aspects of a speech are considered the most transgressive one must look closely at widespread popular

reactions; therefore, in the case of Jenninger, and after researching reactions to the speech in the popular German press, it turned out that the most offensive phrases were the simple and innocuous phrases “we Germans” and “our role.”

The next step in limit work is to engage in sufficient historical exploration to find out why, precisely, these specific phrases are deemed so offensive. After additional research into German history, therefore, as well as other discourses about German national remembrance, which obviously has its challenges, it eventually became clear that all of the surviving Nazi sympathizers – though a large number were living into their 70s, 80s and 90s – had been completely repressed both materially and symbolically.

Two widespread fantasies, unconsciously mobilized by the offended parliamentarians and newspaper writers, accomplished the trick. The West German fantasy was that *they* were obviously part of the democratic West; therefore, it was obvious enough that the fascists had all fled to Soviet totalitarianism. Conversely, the East Germans reminded *themselves* that the Soviets defeated fascism at a horrific cost; therefore, it was obvious enough that the fascists had become right wing oligarchic capitalists, hiding in the West under democratic cover. Therefore, when Jenninger said “*We Germans* must accept responsibility” for “*our role*,” there were, at least according to politically consequential fantasies, which were framed by fields of the unspeakable, no more fascists to address.

Here, then, is hopefully a clear enough example of an archaeological rhetorical analysis based on the notion of limit work (or a largely synchronic analysis of a particular transgressive speech in a particular moment in history, situated of course as all rhetorical criticism should be in its broader historical context) that results in the identification of specific unspeakable phrases and their function. It was Jenninger’s intention to provide a speech that would allow the German people to recognize publicly their complicity with National Socialism and therefore deserve to be reunified; however, unconsciously the Germans had decided, no doubt at least in part due to the trauma of their or their elders’ complicity in National Socialist crimes, to repress such complicity. “We Germans” and “our role” became unspeakable as a result, since no one was willing to admit that “they” were responsible, beyond anyone’s conscious intention.

Mapping Derealization through the Analysis of Aesthetic Responses to Political Transformation

A second example of how critics can analyze the persuasive functions of the rhetorical unconscious is more genealogical and diachronic, focusing on how shifting fields of the unspeakable might work in revolutions, when political regimes, rather than speeches, are dramatically rejected. Here, however, instead of focusing primarily on fields of the unspeakable, I am more interested in showing how the processes of realization and derealization relate to constitutional and political transformation.

Drawing upon Nietzsche's notion of critical history [26] and Foucault's notion of effective history [27], which are both histories of the repressed, and persuaded as well through my studies in constitutionalism that democratically inflected republicanism is the healthiest form of government [28], the focus of my book *Democracy's Debt* was on the history of failed republics and failed republican revolutions. Specifically, I looked at ancient Rome in its transition from republic to empire, at the ultimately failed republican experiments in Renaissance Italy, at the rise of parliamentary power prior to the emergence of the British Empire, and at the founding of the United States, when Jeffersonian republicanism was largely defeated by Hamiltonian Federalism. What I discovered was that history repeatedly reveals that economic realities, and the notion of economic liberty, consistently trump political ideals and practices of political liberty, and speech freedoms and meritocracy consistently suffer as political liberty collapses under the twin weights of wealth and debt. Since the democratic element was consistently repressed with the collapse of republican experiments, I next sought to understand how the rhetorical unconscious functioned in this process, leading me to the analysis of aesthetic states, repressive regimes, and arts of resistance.

So what is meant by the term aesthetic state, and how does it relate to the rhetorical unconscious? First of all, aesthetic states have both *subjective* and *objective* aspects. Each individual's subjective aesthetic state is the result of their ongoing negotiation of given and chosen symbolic environments, while objective aesthetic states are the legislative, judicial, and socio-political apparatuses that are in dialectical tensions with conglomerations of subjective aesthetic states.

Subjectively, we have an aesthetic, or poetic, relationship with actuality. Nietzsche discusses this in his essay "On Truth and Lying in an Extra-Moral Sense," where he notes that there is no such thing as a "leaf" in the world (the word/sound is arbitrary and generic), only trillions of actual things out there called leaves of an exceptionally wide variety. It is for the

sake of linguistic economy that we use the word leaf, which, like all concepts, is a condensed metaphor for a large set of particulars beyond comprehension. As subjects, therefore, we have an aesthetic relationship with the real, and the real is always in dialectical tension with the aesthetic.^v However, this aesthetic relation is usually unconscious, since normally people believe that the language they use precisely represents reality.

Hegel, who also studied the rhetorical unconscious, was concerned with the type of dialectical tensions that emerged when the symbolic drifted farther and farther away from the historically actual – what here I am calling the process of derealization. He spoke, for instance, of how people “cling to their fictions” as if they were absolute truths, refusing to consider the unquestioned presuppositions forming the basis for their beliefs [29]. As a result, he said, “their unconsciousness goes amazingly far” [30].

Friedrich Schiller, taking yet another angle on the rhetorical unconscious, spoke of the need for an “aesthetic education” that would teach us to transcend our given symbolic environments and to achieve a meta-perspective on the discursive [31], as did Herbert Marcuse almost two centuries later, in his concerns about “the gruesome seriousness that passes for the real” [32]. Foucault, in his genealogies, also sought to show how attitudes and practices surrounding the symbolic construction of madness, criminality, and sexuality shift over time, as different aspects of the objective and subjective are repressed or accentuated for one reason or another.

This admittedly cursory introduction to the notion of aesthetic states, which could be far more extensive given the impressive history of the idea, ultimately suggests that we are inevitably alienated, to varying degrees, by the necessary distance between language and reality, and that, as a result, there are certain symbolic sublimations and elisions that accompany different forms of alienation, some more repressed and repressive than others.^{vi}

This, then, leads us to the notion of repressive regimes, which most simply refers to the fact that all political order requires some form of repression, though different types of repressive regimes result in different types of political states.^{vii} In highly repressive regimes, such as we find in North Korea today, we see that fields of the unspeakable expand, leading to the process of derealization, or a growing distance between the symbolic and the actual. Also, and this is very important, in highly repressive regimes the fictional dimensions of subjectivity maintained by fields of the unspeakable mirror fields of material repression. For example, the Nazis, as we have seen, were materially repressed and then symbolically erased

from consciousness, and of course Nazi Germany itself was a thoroughly repressed and repressive political regime. Finally, therefore, the term repressive regime has psychoanalytical overtones, relative to the rhetorical unconscious, since what is materially repressed is symbolically repressed (again, just think of the elephant in the room).

Finally, by the term arts of resistance I mean meta-reflective resistance against the rhetorical unconscious. To *artfully* resist first requires identifying elements of the specific unconsciousness at work in a given situation, as I sought to do in my work on national fantasies, and then identifying the most appropriate way to reveal that which has been repressed (back to the Aristotelian rhetorical tradition). Artful resistance, as a result, contributes to realization – or the bringing of the symbolic and actual closer together.

So now let us turn to some concrete historical examples of aesthetic states, repressive regimes and arts of resistance. Here, I hope to provide macro-historical evidence to support the claim that under certain political conditions, where relative meritocracy exists and the authority of arguments tend to prevail over the arguments of authorities, greater realization is the order of the day. Conversely, when political rule becomes arbitrary, and an emperor, money or some other inarguable force takes precedence over relatively well-reasoned and realistic public discussion, derealization expands.

In the darkest depths of the Second World War, Walter Benjamin, the Frankfurt School philosopher driven to suicide by Nazis, had a very clear sense of the aesthetic states that dominated during that war: they were each highly repressive, though quite different, political configurations that utilized the arts to enslave the minds of the masses. To the north, Germany was mobilizing art in support of the willed irrationality of National Socialism; to the east so-called Soviet realism, which was anything but realistic, was subservient to Stalinist ideology; and to the west, especially in the United States, the arts were promoting the commodification of everything, including people. Trapped within that context, Benjamin declared that “all efforts to render politics aesthetic culminate in one thing: war” [33].

It would be more precise, however, to say that naïve or cynical attempts to “aestheticize the political” (simultaneously expanding and then policing fields of the unspeakable, whether consciously or unconsciously) lead to conflict, while arts of resistance, or the re-politicization of what has been politically aestheticized, lead to peace. After all, history proves that not all combinations of art and politics lead to war. As only two of countless examples, what about the French Realists in mid-nineteenth century Paris? After the suppression of the Paris

revolution of 1848, and the material and symbolic repression of the workers that followed, the French Realists, who really did deal with actuality, used public art to compel the victorious aristocrats and bourgeoisie to look upon un-romanticized images of their repressed victims [34]. Or what of the Federal Arts Project in the United States between 1935 and 1943, where arts drew awareness to the suffering of everyday people and provided a sense of hope in difficult times [35]? All of us, no doubt, can think of instances where the arts have been deployed for emancipatory or other positive purposes.

Aesthetic states, therefore, are best conceptualized as the result of a never-ending struggle between those who would cynically or naively aestheticize the political, or fictionalize the political for factional purposes, and those who, usually in response to their material and symbolic repression, re-politicize those fictions for the purposes of emancipation. The result of such struggles has everything to do with the degree to which derealization has infected the political.

Let us now travel far back in time to ancient Rome to see this largely unconscious rhetorical struggle in action, and to see how Rome went from a relatively realistic political environment in the republican period to one of almost complete derealization under the empire.

The early republican period in ancient Rome, centuries before the rise of the empire, was characterized by a patrician and religious political system, based on an oligarchy of established families, and the aestheticization of the political consisted of communal and ritual affairs, such as elaborate funerals, religious rites and military triumphs [36]. There were no permanent theaters, and acting was considered a disgraceful profession (to act was to give up one's status as a citizen). The primary reason: publicly acting as someone other than one's true self – one's actually established character over time – dangerously blurred the distinction between the fictional and the real, and this at a time when the well-being of the state depended upon the leadership of those with publicly earned character [37].

Over the course of time, however, the plebeians, or the poorer and politically disenfranchised members of the community, gained enhanced constitutional power through a series of general strikes, leading to a more democratically inflected republican form of government. As a result, relative meritocracy grew, and opportunities for competitive public deliberation expanded. At the same time, however, and along with Rome's increasing power and wealth, temporary theaters emerged, along with non-communal public spectacles such as

gladiatorial displays and circuses [38]. In other words, there was a move from active participation in ritual to passive spectatorship in spectacle. In addition, along with the growth of wealth and power that came from a more democratically-infllected republic, larger and more professional armies were assembled, and the first permanent theater, seating 40,000 spectators, was completed in 48 B.C.E. by the general Pompey [39], who eventually would lead his own large army against the republic, yet at a time when he could still be publicly mocked from the temporary stages by tragicomic actors without consequence [40]. Acting nevertheless remained a suspect profession, even as theatrical displays and elaborate secular spectacle grew in importance, and even as coliseums began to be constructed throughout the nascent empire.

This process toward increased theatricalization, and a slow move toward derealization (i.e., the increased blurring of the fictional and the actual), accelerated in the last days of the republic, as inadequate constitutional protections against the growing arbitrary influences of wealth and raw military force began to take their toll on public reason. Then, under the early emperors, and with the almost complete demise of meritocratic public deliberation and its replacement with raw power, derealization began in earnest. The Roman historian Richard Beacham tells us, for example, that after Julius Caesar's assassination – who himself engaged in many politically motivated public spectacles that blurred the fictional and the real – Mark Antony, at the climax of his funeral oration, tore the bloodied robe from Caesar's corpse, lifting it up on a spear, as an actor appeared beside him playing Caesar's ghost and naming the senators who had murdered him. As all of this was happening, a painted wax statue of Caesar rose and revolved slowly above his dead body, displaying his various stab wounds, as a warmed metal rod inserted into the wax caused red paint to drip from them [41].

Not long after, Octavian, the future Augustus Caesar and Antony's rival, appeared at a public banquet dressed as Apollo, and when civil war broke out between the two men's armies Antony took the field dressed as Dionysus. After Octavian's victory, Apollo then took center stage in the imagery of the new regime [42].

It was under Caligula and Nero, however, and at the very heights of despotism, that derealization in the state reached unprecedented heights. Nero himself scandalously took to the stage, first as a musician and then as a tragedian, and he then forced horrified members of the aristocracy to do the same. Nero would also roam the streets of Rome dressed as different gods, behaving as he thought they would, regardless of law. He also would sometimes wear a

mask of the wife he killed, and sometimes even a mask of himself when appearing on stage [43]. The historian Macrobius reported that actors at this time would shoot real arrows at audiences from the stage, where actual murders and maimings would take place if called for by the script [44]. In the complete absence of forums for honest and meritocratic public discussion, anyone daring to critique the emperor either directly or obliquely through art could be burned alive, tortured to death, or compelled to commit suicide.

This example of a shifting aesthetic state, along with its variously repressive regimes, suggests that in the early patrician and oligarchic republic the aesthetic state was largely naïve, communal and serious. The aesthetic state displayed the following features: there was a clearly marked line between the real and the fictional, there was a firm belief in true versus false character, public arts were tied to rituals of communal belonging (and participation trumped mere spectatorship), and the theatrical was viewed with great suspicion. In sum, relative realization was the order of the day. As the republic became more elaborate in form, incorporating the democratic element, and as the power of money and military might grew, the aesthetic state took on new features: theatrical displays and strategic public spectacles became more prominent, and the line between truth and fiction began to blur, taking on both cynical and critical forms. With the emergence of political tyranny, however, the aesthetic state shifted once again: the line between fiction and reality became almost totally blurred, with cynical forms overwhelming critical forms. Also, fields of the unspeakable expanded dramatically, and public arts of resistance became almost unthinkable.

A second example of historical shifts in aesthetic states and arts of resistance, and how those shifts impacted the process of derealization, deals with the transition from late feudalism to early capitalism in Paris: a city that witnessed a veritable parade of failed republican revolutions over the course of the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. My primary focus here will be on normative transgressions in state-sponsored theater presaging political revolution in the streets.

State sanctioned theater in the early 1600s, both comic and tragic, was tightly controlled by the Court, and plays had to follow very strict rules. Tragedies had to have heroes representing the nobility, whose faults were matters of fate. Comedies represented the poor, whose faults were all their own. One can easily see how such representations served the ideological needs of those in power, though largely unconsciously. Such plays were analogous to religious events, with audiences as worshippers, since the elite audience was

there at the pleasure of the nobility (the poor were hardly in a position to attend) [45]. The playwright Corneille attempted to disrupt these codes by creating a tragicomedy, but he was viciously attacked by political elites and temporarily ostracized from Paris for doing so [46]. One might say, therefore, that officially sanctioned theater reflected the rhetorical unconscious of the state, and anyone who dared to transgress the rules suffered accordingly.

There would be many other “wars” over controversial theatrical events in Paris over the next three hundred years, and those theater wars were battles between those who sought to control theatrical conventions for usually unconscious ideological purposes related to political power, and those who sought to resist those conventions to either gain enhanced political power for themselves or for broader emancipatory purposes.

In the early 1800s, for instance, just as capitalism began to take root in Paris, the Romantics emerged, eventually led by Victor Hugo. Generally speaking, the Romantics used transgressive literature, including plays, as a means to gain enhanced political power [47]. As the relatively disempowered offspring of the rising bourgeoisie or the declining aristocracy, many of them hoped for political conditions already established in England by the Great Revolution of 1688, which enshrined parliamentary power and increased opportunity for the expanding middle class, as opposed to the more repressive conditions under the King and the Church in France. One of Hugo’s banned plays, in fact, was entitled *Cromwell*.

Such wars over the content and form of state-sanctioned theater reflected larger political wars between the upper classes, their fields of the unspeakable, and the slowly emerging upper-middle and middle classes, often presaging revolution in the streets. Beaumarchais’s *The Marriage of Figaro*, as yet another example, which contains a soliloquy where a worker attacks the laziness and haughtiness of the aristocrats, was both highly controversial and a huge hit in the years leading up to the French Revolution [48]. Hugo’s *Hernani*, which also critiqued the nobility, presaged the 1830 revolution, just as Diaghilev’s *Rites of Spring*, where irrational death leads to primitive communal life, presaged World War I.^{viii}

Unfortunately, the revolutions that rocked France in 1789, 1830, 1848, and 1870 all failed to create more democratically inflected republican forms of government, for the rhetorical unconscious during the French Revolution would not allow for a responsible constitutional balance between the rich, the middle class, and the poor, or again in later republican revolutions to allow for the rising bourgeoisie to recognize, let alone grant sufficient political protection to, the working poor.^{ix} The French Revolution, that is, was so strongly anti-

aristocratic that new aesthetic tyrannies were established, such as public dinners where one had to be careful not to bring too plain a dish, thus showing lack of zeal for the cause, or too fancy a dish, thus suggesting aristocratic pretensions [49]. The later revolutions ended with the almost complete repression of the working classes, as well as of the students and artisans critical of the increasingly solidifying bourgeois regime.

Over the course of the second half of the nineteenth and early twentieth century, as capitalist relations intensified, public Parisian arts eventually became completely depoliticized, detached almost entirely from direct criticisms of current political affairs. In the mid-nineteenth century, for example, norms of light comic opera and flirtatious ballet emerged for those in charge of the new bourgeois regime, and serious political sentiments were greeted with derision by elites (such as when Richard Wagner attempted to stage one of his mythic operas at a location where the rich came to play) [50]. Simultaneously, however, critical and meta-reflective forms of comic realism emerged, though in a necessarily oblique form, best exemplified by the satiric operettas of Jacques Offenbach, which poked fun at those in power through classical and mythic analogies [51]. As capitalism gained in strength, however, such disguised realistic critique was initially accompanied by the self-dissolution of the Bohemians, such as Baudelaire, which eventually culminated in the mostly depoliticized abstractions of Dada, Surrealism, and modern formalist art.^x

In sum, as capitalism gained strength, and processes of reification – where people are fictionally turned into things and things into people – accelerated, arts of resistance went through a simultaneous process of derealization, moving from the very direct critiques of the French Realists, to the allegorical operettas of Offenbach and the myths of Wagner, to the increasingly abstract work of the Bohemians, the Surrealists and Dada, and then the pure formalism of modern art.

Tentative Conclusions

The rhetorical tradition, strongly influenced by Aristotle, Cicero, Quintilian, and other Classical sources, has tended to focus on the intentional dimensions of persuasion. This of course makes good sense, since persuasive individuals indeed must carefully analyze their audiences and their historical situations, and then invent and arrange their arguments in stylistically appropriate ways. So much has been obvious to those who have studied the persuasive arts for millennia.

As we have also seen, however, in the second half of the twentieth century and the early part of the twenty-first century, largely under the influence of continental philosophy, a second rhetorical tradition has begun to emerge: the equally important analysis of the ways in which we are persuaded unintentionally and unconsciously. We are persuaded unconsciously, for example, because we inherit languages and their concepts at birth, and those languages and their concepts are situated in histories that situate us as subjects in advance. As a result, individuals are “thrown” into gender roles, economic roles, and other roles that precede them. True, people can, to varying degrees, choose from among the roles that are available within their given language, culture, and history, but it is also true that their choices are limited – though people rarely grasp that fact, taking their local languages, cultures, and histories as truth. In addition, however, and as I have endeavored to show, the rhetorical unconscious manifests itself in a wide range of ways that have only begun to be seriously explored by communication scholars.

In this essay, I have briefly introduced at least two ways in which critics can concretely investigate the rhetorical unconscious: through the identification of fields of the unspeakable and through the analysis of derealization effects. If Lacan is correct, and the unconscious is indeed structured like a language, and if the rhetorical unconscious reveals itself through largely unrecognized symbolic processes, then it is a direct challenge to communication scholars to find ways of tracing the effects and functions of that unconscious. In attempting to address that challenge, I have introduced basic analytical mechanisms for isolating specific unspeakable phrases via limit work and for tracing how the types of public art that prevail in a given political milieu reflect the degree to which derealization is at work.

When individuals and groups for one reason or another repress certain historical facts, it is important for us to identify precisely what is being repressed in order to understand the function of that repression. Limit work and the analysis of arts of resistance are two ways of accomplishing that task. Because repression occurs on a number of levels, however, from the sorts of repression one finds in dysfunctional interpersonal relationships to the sorts one finds in fantasies of national belonging, no doubt many other, as yet undeveloped, methods for analyzing and critiquing the rhetorical unconscious are called for.

Here, in this essay, I have only sought to begin a broader conversation about the rhetorical unconscious. I have attempted to show that when certain political conditions prevail, especially when there are widespread opportunities for honest public speaking, and when the

authority of arguments prevails over the arguments of authorities, realization and large-scale political health also prevails. Conversely, when any form of arbitrary rule confounds honest speech and relative meritocracy fields of the unspeakable expand, as does derealization, leading to large-scale political psychosis.

In the brief examples provided, we saw that fields of the unspeakable expanded both with the solidification of the arbitrary rule of the emperors in ancient Rome and the relative loss of competitive meritocracy under the democratically-inflected late Roman republic, and the rhetorical unconscious underwent an analogous process of derealization with the gradual spread and solidification of bourgeois capitalist relations. While these were two very different forms of arbitrary rule (i.e., the arbitrary rule of the emperors backed by violence and the arbitrary rule of money), neither contributed to the processes of realization, neither helped to shrink relevant fields of the unspeakable, and neither contributed to large-scale political health, at least if political health is thought to be characterized at least in part by realism.

Hopefully my opening characterizations of the “two traditions” in rhetorical studies (i.e., the Aristotelian/neo-Aristotelian, or intentionalist tradition, and the non-intentionalist tradition that has emerged primarily as a result of continental philosophy’s influence on rhetorical studies in the United States), coupled with examples from my own work on the rhetorical unconscious, can at least provide room for debate over the proper range of rhetorical criticism in the twenty-first century. If the arguments presented here at least succeed in fostering ongoing conversations about the tensions between intentional and unintentional forms of persuasion, then perhaps something of value will have been accomplished in the attempt.

References

[1] Aristotle (1932). *The Rhetoric of Aristotle*. Trans. L. Cooper. Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey, p. 7.

[2] Thonssen, L., A.C. Baird. (1948). *Speech Criticism: The Development of Standards for Rhetorical Appraisal*. New York: The Ronald Press Company.

[3] Black, E. (1965). *Rhetorical Criticism: A Study in Method*. Madison WI: The University of Wisconsin Press.

[4] Black, p. 16.

- [5] Nietzsche, F. (1989). "On Truth and Lie in an Extra-Moral Sense." In *Friedrich Nietzsche on Rhetoric and Language*. Eds. S. Gilman, C. Blair and D. Parent. New York, NY: Oxford University Press.
- [6] Saussure, F. (1959). *Course in General Linguistics*. Eds. C. Bally and A. Sechehaye. Trans. W. Baskin. New York, NY: Philosophical Library.
- [7] McKerrow, R. (1989). "Critical Rhetoric: Theory and Praxis." *Communication Monographs* 56 (June), pp. 91-111.
- [8] McGee, M. C. (1990). "Text, Context, and the Fragmentation of Contemporary Culture." *Western Journal of Communication* 54 (Summer), pp. 274-89
- [9] Wander, P. (1983). "The Ideological Turn in Modern Criticism." *Central States Speech Journal* 34, no. 1, pp. 1-18
- [10] Charland, M. (1987). "Constitutive Rhetoric: The Case of the *Peuple Québécois*." *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 73, no. 2, pp. 133-50.
- [11] Biesecker, B. (1989). "Rethinking the Rhetorical Situation from Within the Thematic of Difference." *Philosophy and Rhetoric* 22, no. 2, pp. 110-29
- [12] Plato (1961). "Republic." In *Plato: Collected Dialogues*. Eds. E. Hamilton and H. Cairns. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, pp. 747-51.
- [13] Foucault, M. (1984). "What Is an Author?" In *The Foucault Reader*. Ed. P. Rabinow. New York, NY: Pantheon Books, pp. 101-20.
- [14] Freud, S. (1961). *Civilization and Its Discontents*. Trans. J. Strachey. New York, NY: W.W. Norton & Company, p. 44.
- [15] Lacan, J. (1981). *The Psychoses 1955-1956: The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book III*. Trans. R. Griggs. Ed. J. Miller. New York, NY: W.W. Norton & Company, p. 11.
- [16] Lakoff, G. (2004). *Don't Think of an Elephant: Know Your Values and Frame the Debate*. White River Junction, VT: Chelsea Green Publishing.
- [17] Ong, W. (2012). *Orality and Literacy*. New York, NY: Routledge.
- [18] Havelock, E. (1988). *The Muse Learns to Write: Reflections on Orality and Literacy from Antiquity to the Present*. New Haven CT: Yale University Press.
- [19] Baudrillard, J., and S. F. Glaser (1995). *Simulacra and Simulation*. Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press.
- [20] Eisenstein, E. (1982). *The Printing Press as an Agent of Change*, 2 Volumes. New York, NY: Cambridge University Press.

[21] Bruner, M. L. (2002). *Strategies of Remembrance: The Rhetorical Dimensions of National Identity Construction*. Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press.

[22] Bruner, M. L. (2012). *Repressive Regimes, Aesthetic States and Arts of Resistance*. New York, NY: Peter Lang.

[23] Anderson, B. (2006). *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*. New York, NY: Verso.

[24] Girnth, H. (1993). "Einstellung und Einstellungsbekundung in der politischen Rede: Eine sprachwissenschaftliche Untersuchung der Rede Philipp Jenningers vom 10 November 1988," in *Europäische Hochschulschriften*. Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, p. 4.

[25] Bruner, M. L. (2002). "Rhetorical Criticism as Limit Work." *Western Journal of Communication* 66 (Summer), pp. 25-39.

[26] Nietzsche, F. (1980). *On the Advantage and Disadvantage of History for Life*. Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Publishing Company.

[27] Foucault, M. (1984). "Nietzsche, Genealogy, History," in *The Foucault Reader*. Ed. P. Rabinow. New York, NY: Pantheon Books, pp. 77-100.

[28] Bruner, M. L. (2009). *Democracy's Debt: The Historical Tensions between Political and Economic Liberty*. New York, NY: Prometheus Press.

[29] Hegel, G. W. F. (1959). *Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. Trans. G. Mueller. New York, NY: Philosophical Library, pp. 196-7.

[30] Kaufmann, W. (1978). *Hegel: An Interpretation*. Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, pp 185-6.

[31] Schiller, F. (1967). *On the Aesthetic Education of Man*. Ed. E. Wilkerson and L. Willoughby. Oxford, UK: The Clarendon Press.

[32] Marcuse, H. (1978). *The Aesthetic Dimension*. Boston, MA: Beacon Press.

[33] Benjamin, W. (1968). "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," in *Illuminations*. Trans. H. Zohn. New York, NY: Schocken Books, pp. 217-51.

[34] Nochlin, L. (1971). *Realism*. New York, NY: Penguin Books.

[35] Carter, E. (2008). *Posters for the People: The Art of the WPA*. Philadelphia, PA: Quirk Books.

[36] Montagu, E. (1759). *Reflections on the Rise and Fall of the Ancient Republics, Adapted to the Present State of Great Britain*. Philadelphia, PA: C. P. Wayne.

[37] Beacham, R. (1999). *Spectacle Entertainments of Early Imperial Rome*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.

[38] Barton, C. (1993). *The Sorrows of Ancient Romans: The Gladiator and the Monster*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

[39] Beacham, pp. 61-74.

[40] Beacham, p. 52.

[41] Beacham, pp. 88-91.

[42] Beacham, pp. 102-5.

[43] Suetonius (2007). *The Twelve Caesars*. New York, NY: Penguin Books, pp. 223-238.

[44] Barton, p. 61.

[45] Brockett, O. (1979). *The Theatre: An Introduction*. New York, NY: Holt Reinhart and Winston, pp. 123-38.

[46] Ranum, O. (2011). "Imposing Discordant Harmony on the Quarrel over *Le Cid*." [Http://www.ranumspanat.com/concordia_discors.html](http://www.ranumspanat.com/concordia_discors.html), pp. 1-19.

[47] Schamber, E. (1984). *The Artist as Politician: The Relationship between the Arts and the Politics of the French Romantics*. Lanham, MD: University Press of America.

[48] Hemmings, F. (1987). *Culture and Society in France: 1789-1848*. Leicester, England: Leicester University Press, pp. 15-9.

[49]. Loomis, S. (1964). *Paris in the Terror: June 1793 – July 1794*. New York, NY: J. B. Lippincott Company, pp. 338-9.

[50]. House, E. (1891). "Wagner and *Tannhäuser* in Paris, 1861." *New England Magazine* 4, no. 4, pp. 411-27.

[51] Kracauer, S. (2002). *Jacques Offenbach and the Paris of His Time*. New York, NY: Zone Books.

Notes

ⁱ As evidence of the growing influence of these critical rhetoricians in the United States, Raymie McKerrow has served, and Barbara Biesecker now serves, as editor of the flagship rhetoric journal of the National Communication Association: the *Quarterly Journal of Speech*.

ⁱⁱ Foucault (1984) provides a helpful discussion of how repression proliferates discourse in "The Repressive Hypothesis." In *The Foucault Reader*. Ed. P. Rabinow. New York, NY: Pantheon, pp. 301-29.

ⁱⁱⁱ Foucault discusses how to map such statements in *The Archaeology of Knowledge*. Though rarely utilized by rhetorical critics, no doubt in part because of its complexity, it is

nevertheless the most elaborate method available for isolating “effective statements” in “discursive formations.” See Foucault, M. (1982). *The Archaeology of Knowledge and the Discourse on Language*. New York, NY: Pantheon Books.

^{iv} On Foucault’s (1984) notion of a “limit attitude” as a “critical ontology of ourselves,” see his essay “What is Enlightenment.” In *The Foucault Reader*. Ed. P. Rabinow. New York, NY: Pantheon, p. 50.

^v This does not mean, however, that all poetic relations are equal. The very concepts of realization and derealization suggest that there are varying distances between what we believe to be true, historically speaking, and what is actually true, historically speaking. Certain political arrangements, I maintain and work to prove here, tend toward greater realization, while others tend toward greater derealization.

^{vi} For far richer reviews of the history of the idea of aesthetic states, see Chytry, J. (1989). *The Aesthetic State: A Quest in Modern German Thought*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press; and M. Lane Bruner, *Repressive Regimes, Aesthetic States, and Arts of Resistance*, pp 17-52.

^{vii} Walter Benjamin (1978) discusses the violence that it takes to establish and enforce the law in his “Critique of Violence.” In *Reflections*. Ed. P. Demetz. New York, NY: Schocken Books, pp. 277-300.

^{viii} The “battle of *Hernani*,” which was a theater war that broke out upon the opening of Hugo’s *Hernani* on February 25, 1830, was followed on July 17 of the same year by the revolution that ousted Charles X and resulted in the bourgeois reign of Louis-Philippe. For an account of the same, see Starkie, E. (1954). *Petrus Borel the Lycanthrope*. Norfolk, CT: New Directions, pp. 44-9. On the controversy surrounding *The Rites of Spring*, see Eksteins, M. (1989). *Rites of Spring: The Great War and the Birth of the Modern Age*. New York, NY: Anchor Books, pp. 25-52. For a far more detailed account of theater wars between 1600 and 1920, see Bruner, M., *Repressive Regimes, Aesthetic States, and Arts of Resistance*, pp. 77-150.

^{ix} We see the same unfortunate unconscious processes working in the United States today. For a defense of this claim, see Bruner, M. (2014). “Democracy without Class: Examining the Political Unconscious of the United States.” In *Living with Class: Philosophical Reflections on Identity and Material Culture*. Eds. R. Scapp and B. Seitz. New York, NY: Palgrave, pp. 133-52.

^x While much of this art was motivated by political discontent, Dada, Surrealism, and modern formalist art hardly addressed political issues in the sort of direct way that could be understood, say, by most of those comprising the working class. For two excellent books on the rise of the avant-garde and the dissolution of subjectivity, see Seigel, J. (1986). *Bohemian Paris: Culture, Politics, and the Boundaries of Bourgeois Life, 1830-1930*. Baltimore, MD: The Johns Hopkins University Press; and Shattuck, R. (1968). *The Banquet Years: The Origins of the Avant-Garde in France 1885 to World War I*. New York, NY: Vintage Books.