

The Contested Power of Persuasion

A Rhetorical Approach to Reception Theory and Analysis

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The oldest theories of communication in European culture, including reception theory, can be found in works on rhetoric. The classical texts are Aristotle's *Art of rhetoric*, Cicero's *De oratore* and Quintilian's *Institutio oratoria*. Rhetoric is both an art and a science, both theory and practice and was an overarching element of higher education in Europe for nearly 2000 years. From about 1700 it was excluded from scientific theory and survived more or less only as a practice, in a mutilated form, reduced to its *elocutio*- or even only *ornatus*- elements, that is to say to instructions on how to decorate a speech in order to make it effective. At its worst, rhetoric became synonymous with "empty phrases or attempts to lead astray, cheat and manipulate people" (Johannesson 1990: 9). Thus rhetoric as a comprehensive theory of communication as social practice, including *ethos* (the speaker's honesty) was reduced to stylistic instructions and perverted to recipes for seduction¹.

This was specially the case in the field of communication studies. Rhetoric became here "a victim of populist advices" where it "is nearly always shrunked to an extremely dubious trivial knowledge" (Ottmers 1996: 54). Serious communication research in a rhetorical perspective was more or less completely absent, while a flood of text-books taught scholars in journalism, advertising and sales how to formulate one's "message" in the most persuasive way. It was only around 1960 that classical rhetoric was rediscovered, both in Europe and in the United States. The most influential authors were Ch. Perelman and L. Olbrechts-Tyteca (1958/1969) who initiated "the new rhetoric" in an European research tradition, and Kenneth Burke (1950/1969), G.A. Kennedy (1963, 1972, 1994), Herbert W. Si-

mons (1976, 1989) and Walter J. Ong (1982/1991) who gave strong impulses to rhetorical studies in the United States, where rhetoric had not been so consequently expelled from the higher regions of communication studies, because of the more pragmatic approach to science there.

It looks like a renewed interest for a "maximum-rhetoric" is growing in these years in Scandinavian communication studies as well. Some names and titles concerning recent works in the Scandinavian countries include: Bengt Nerman (as a precursor, with his influential book *Massmedieretorik* from 1973), Britt Hultén, Kurt Johannesson, Georg Johannesen (*Rhetorica Norvegica*), Øivind Andersen, Jostein Gripsrud (with an ongoing research project on *Rhetoric, knowledge, mediation*)², Peter Larsen, Jan Lindhardt, Jørgen Fafner, Charlotte Jørgensen, Lone Rørbech, Christian Kock. Some of these works are closely related to mass communication and are thus trying to apply this oldest communication theory to modern mass media.

Rhetoric and Reception

Research so far, however, is curiously restricted. These studies deal mostly with rhetorical analyses of mass media products³, not with the reception of these texts. The main purpose of this paper is to extend the field of research with the perspective of reception and the role of the audience.

Rhetoric is an empirical and normative science about the production and reception of utterances, seen as a whole... The fact that it both looks at production and reception implies that

it has to examine how utterances work (Kock 1997: 14).

Every text in a communication situation implies and is addressed to an audience (a person, or, mostly, persons receiving an utterance, by watching, reading or listening). Ong puts it like this:

To speak, you have to address another or others. People in their right minds do not stray through the woods just talking at random to nobody... In speaking as in writing, some recipient must be present, or there can be no text produced (Ong 1982/1991: 176f.).

In other words: people are reasonable, they are positioned, they live in society, they talk / act with purpose, they relate to an other or another.

The audience and the process of reception is an integrated part of rhetorical theory and practice. I dare say: no other communication theory does include reception so consequently as rhetoric does. Some researchers even maintain that the audience is the primary instance in the rhetorical communication model⁴. In ancient theory it is Aristotle's book on rhetoric which most explicitly deals with these aspects of communication, including descriptions of different audiences' varying dispositions, and reflections on the role of affects for the reception process⁵. Plato quotes Socrates for a similar definition of the good orator as mastering different audiences with different strategies of persuasion, knowing "when he should speak and when he should refrain, and when he should use pithy sayings, pathetic appeals, sensational affects, and all the other modes of speech which he has learned..." (Phaedrus, quoted in Merton 1946: 108). In our times Perelman's & Olbrechts-Tyteca's treatise on argumentation and other works of Perelman are most directly concerned with the role of the audience in the communication process.

Power Relations

My focus will be on power relations. Both rhetoric and communication models in traditional media studies deal, more or less explicitly, with the relation between texts and readers in terms of the text's influence upon the reader. Media history has been told as the story of changing paradigms from "almighty media" over "powerless media" to "powerful" media, thus indicating a supposed oscillation of power balance between texts and audiences. And rhetoric is known not at least because of its open declaration that the speaker wants to persuade his

audience, which can be understood as an act of power.

No doubt: rhetoric is clearly target orientated and interested in being effective. Rhetoric can in this respect be defined as a theory and practice of effective communication. Rhetorical speech as an act of power can even take the form of violence:

Argumentation is an action which always tends to modify a pre-existing state of affairs... The person who takes the initiative in a debate is comparable to an aggressor... (Perelman & Olbrechts-Tyteca 1958/1969: 55).

But this power is modified by at least three dimensions of the communication process, modifications which are often suppressed or forgotten, in an undialectical reception of the rhetorical tradition:

The first is, very obviously, that rhetoric does not ascribe power only to the one side of the communication process, that is to say to the speaker. Rhetoric is very much about the power of the audience as well. The best evidence for this is the existence of the long tradition of rhetoric itself: nobody would ever have written a single treatise on rhetoric if readers were thought of as being easy to persuade.

The concept of the audience is that of a powerful one also in other respects. The rhetorical speech act's implied audience is characterized by two fundamental qualities: she or he⁶ is a free person and is different, both from the person speaking and from other members of the audience.

No need to persuade if the object of persuasion is a slave or a prisoner; in this case the person in question could be moved quicker and more efficiently from one place to another by direct physical action (a push, for example). And if people really are identical, sharing the same values and opinions and belonging to the same gender, race and social class, there would obviously be no room or need for persuasion at all (Kittang 1996: 125, referring to Burke).

The audience is quite often seen as adversaries. The typical rhetorical "act of mediating implies ... a certain degree of opposition which has to be conquered" (Foght Mikkelsen 1997: 74). Or: "the orator speaks in the face of at least implied adversaries" (Ong 1982/1991: 111). This notion of the audience as an adversary is not a negative category. On the contrary: it ascribes power to her or him, as it ascribes power to the speaker. She or he is a person the orator carefully has to take into account, even treat as an equal.

The orator has to adapt himself to the audience in order to win it (says Cicero for example; see Andersen 1995: 24). This empowers the audience in a paradoxical way:

If orators adapt themselves to their audiences, then the image of the powerful orator playing masterfully with the emotions of the helpless crowd is a myth... According to this myth, the audience falls under the spell of the hypnotic orator, who shapes its views like a potter moulding clay. However, these theories consider the power of suggestion flowing from the orator to the crowd, and they ignore the powers of the audience over the orator. It can be argued that if orators can control crowds, it is only because crowds control orators (Billig 1987/1996: 225).

Secondly: rhetoric operates with different degrees of power in relation to different genres, different audiences and different situations. Not every speech has the same target orientation and uses the same “power of address” (Leith & Myerson 1989). In relation to the classical distinction between the three speech genres one can say: target-oriented and “effective” communication relates most directly to speech in court (*genus judiciale*) and political speech, *genus deliberativum*. Fictional texts can be seen as belonging to the epideictic genre, *genus demonstrativum*, which does not have a direct purpose (in terms of setting in motion intended actions), but aims at supporting and affirming existing values, or “bringing about a consensus in the minds of the audience regarding the values that are celebrated in the speech” (Perelman 1979: 6). Audiences differ in terms of how much they agree with the speaker beforehand. A good orator will take account of this and adapt his way of argumentation to these conditions. Thus he will probably choose a more dialogical style when talking to people who are most likely to agree with him, and a more agonistic one when the audience does not share his opinions and is not easy to move. Also the situation influences the speaker’s use of power; the same topic which may cause a heavy and hostile debate among guests in a TV-talkshow may be discussed peacefully by the same persons in a bar.

Thirdly: there is no “one rhetoric”. Rhetoric or better rhetorics consist of many versions in the classical Greek and Roman era and many interpretations in the centuries after. Gorgian rhetoric and the professional debating competitions which Protagoras instituted were forthrightly agonistic, aiming at the destruction of the opponent (Billig

1987/1996: 28), whereas the Socratic methods of questioning and the Aspasian style are known as dialogical. In modern rhetoric, some stress the dialogical character (Perelman, Gadamer, Bakhtin, Fafner, Jens), some the target-oriented, more aggressive elements of rhetoric. Among the latter are feminist critics, equalling the power of rhetorical speech with typically masculine modes of discourse (Billig 1987/1996: 26ff., de Laurentis 1989).

A fourth modification of the power of the rhetorical speech could be seen in the dialectics of this kind of aggression, as Perelman notes. Continuing his last quotation, he writes that, though being aggressive, argumentation is at the same time

the triumph of persuasion over brute force... The use of argumentation implies that one has renounced resorting to force alone, that value is attached to gaining the adherence of one’s interlocutor by means of reasoned persuasion, and that one is not regarding him as an object, but appealing to his free judgment. Recourse to argumentation assumes the establishment of a community of minds, which, while it lasts, excludes the use of violence (Perelman & Olbrichts-Tyteca 1958/1969: 55).

Argumentation

The most characteristic element of rhetorical communication is, probably, argumentation. This is also a clue notion for discussing the question of power relations between the speaker and his audience.

There are three different ways of arguing: by *logos*, by *ethos* and by *pathos*, which are also different ways of appealing to rational and emotional dimensions in the minds of the audience.

More generally however, the rhetorical way of arguing is not identical with convincing with rational means. To say $2 + 2 = 4$ is not a matter of rhetoric, but of logics alone. Matters of human life cannot be treated by logical, formal proof (alone), but it is necessary to make an opinion (a certain point of view) probable, credible, “einleuchtend” (Gadamer), through reasoning. Logical puzzles and mathematical problems can be solved in a “correct” way, whereas “an unarguable rightness and wrongness cannot be established” in controversies in daily life (Billig 1987/1996, with reference to Protagoras). The rhetorical speech act is not about proving the truth, but about showing that one position is more probable than others. Rhetoric requires art to create belief. Rhetoric is an art mainly neces-

sary when things cannot be proved in an unambiguous way. Therefore rhetorical argumentation is more about persuading than about convincing. This is not necessarily negative but due to the ambiguity of most situations in human life. The authorship and the circumstances of a crime are difficult to prove, one has to find good arguments for and against different possibilities. A politician cannot prove that his party will do better in improving public health conditions, he can only try to make his suggestions as credible as possible. We are not able to prove that a film is good, we have to find good arguments for our judgment.

Rhetorical argumentation as seen in opposition to logical proof can in a first operation be described with the following oppositions – for so being explored once more in relation to internal ambivalences:

Rhetorical argumentation and logical proof

Argument	Proof
opinions	"scientific" truth
different meanings	one meaning
the reasonable	the rational
probability	(logical) necessity
open	closed
appeal for adherence	convince
modest	compelling

Zeno compared logic with the closed fist, rhetoric with an open palm. Rhetoric is carried out in a context of justification and criticism, with differing points of view, and "possesses an openness not to be found in the context of logic" (Billig 1987/1996: 125). Argumentation can, strictly spoken, not convince, arguments can only "appeal for adherence". This is a term used by Perelman. The same is due to the notion of rhetorical argumentation as "modest".

It is a logical necessity to agree with the law of gravity; proofs can be given which are so compelling that people who disagree make themselves a fool. This is not the case with the argument that the American president Bill Clinton, accused of sex affairs, is innocent or with the argument that the TV-series *X-files* has high quality. Perelman stresses on the one hand the strong goal-orientation of rhetorical speech but at the same time defines the orator's way of speaking as necessarily modest because all argumentation, all reasoning which is based on a "disagreement about values" is uncertain, the orator has no "guarantee whatever that everyone will agree with his point of view" (Perelman 1979: 13). "The philosopher has at his disposal only an argumentation that he can endeavour

to make as reasonable and systematic as possible without ever being able to make it absolutely compelling or a demonstrative proof" (Perelman 1979: 14). "Wanting to convince someone always implies a certain modesty on the part of the initiator of the argument; what he says is not "Gospel truth", he does not possess that authority which would place his words beyond question so that they would carry immediate conviction. He acknowledges that he must use persuasion, think of arguments capable of acting on his interlocutor, show some concern for him, and be interested in his state of mind" (Perelman & Olbrichts-Tyteca 1958/1969: 16). The only thing the orator can do is to appeal for the adherence of the audience: "The goal of all argumentation... is to create or increase the adherence of minds to the theses presented for their assent" (Perelman & Olbrechts-Tyteca 1958/1969: 45).

In relation to proof, argumentation is a dialogic, open, democratic and modest way of speaking. But there are different modes of argumentation, depending of the situation and the participants. Thus argumentation can also be more goal-oriented, closed, authoritarian and compelling.

The two faces of argumentation

Goal-oriented, "monologic"	dialogic
"closed"	"open"
authoritarian	democratic
compelling	modest

The rhetorical text has a fundamentally dialogical character even if the communication situation can be monologic (as typical for mass communication with its separation of orator and audience)⁷. The act of speaking in classical rhetoric is conceived of as an interaction between people with a purpose. The speaker counts on an audience, he or she is always in the orator's mind. There are two strategies of communication: either stressing one's own position or refusing the other's. The first may be more authoritarian, the latter has a more dialogical character because the orator has to presume possible other positions, has to think the other's possible thoughts. Talking means making the audience receptive and at the same time being receptive for (possible) reactions of the audience. Some have compared rhetorical communication to a game of chess:

Both the rhetorician and the chess player will prepare in advance by anticipating counter-strategies from their opponent... And just as the initial layout of the chess problem implies a

potential dialogue as well as a contest, so the rhetorician's search for his "means of persuasion" implies a counter-persuasion, long before the debate has even begun. Either way we arrive at a dialogue (Cockcroft & Cockcroft 1992: 3f.).

As to the dialectics of authoritarian and democratic, Perelman & Olbricht-Tyteca noted, as quoted before, that rhetorical argumentation is "aggressive" but that it is, at the same time, "the triumph of persuasion over brute force" (Perelman & Olbrichts-Tyteca 1958/1969: 55). Another argument in favour of the democratic character of rhetoric is its use in court which implies "that anyone, however clear the proof against him, has a right to present his case in the best light possible" and the historical fact that "oratory flourished most in the democracies and least under tyranny"⁸.

The clearly target-oriented, effect-directed and authoritarian character of the rhetorical speech is thus, paradoxically, only the other side of its dialogical, open and democratic aspects. Target-orientation is not the opposite of dialogical but a property of the agonistic form of dialogue which is typical for rhetorical speech. There is a struggle going on which, in my understanding, is both agonistic and dialogical.

One of the paradoxes which characterizes rhetorical argumentation is that even the most dialogical communication "requires negation. When speakers merely agree with one another, there is nothing left to say" (Billig 1987/1996: 28). As a goal-oriented speech act communication has a purpose, the orator tries to win the audience to his own position, tries to draw him or her in the direction he wants, tries to control both meaning and the communication process in general and behaves more or less authoritarian. As a dialogue, communication has to do with a variety of participants and opinions, the orator has to take the audience into account, has to be open for (possible) different meanings, and the audience on its side has the possibility to open up for or to dismiss the orator's propositions. The audience is both a goal and persons who are orator's equal, adversaries who may disagree or even contradict. Communication is an act of contest based on "mutual goodwill" (Perelman 1979: 11).

Dominant Concepts of Communication in Media Studies

In a simplified way I will examine two main concepts of communication which are important in me-

dia studies in relation to the rhetorical way of dealing with speech acts. I place transfer models on the one side, interactive models on the other, and the "uses and gratification" approach in between.

1. Transfer Models or the Power of the Speaker and the Text

Very much, perhaps even most, of mass communication theorizing has dealt with the question of effects. Effects have been of interest for many groups in society, those who want to reach others with their message and therefore want to get the most effective channel to the audience, and those who express fears for the negative impact of media (McQuail & Windahl 1993: 58).

The effects of political propaganda, advertising, violence and sex in media have been and still are the most debated issues, both in media research, public and popular discourse. Predominantly early media studies have employed tremendous resources for this kind of research. The efforts were very different in terms of validity and reliability and there have been, no doubt, valuable results too. This was mainly the case with early research into the social psychology of mass persuasion, performed by scholars like Lazarsfeld and Merton in the 1940s. But a very big amount of these studies was rather problematic. This was, after my opinion, at least partly due to the predominant notion of communication as the transfer of a message from a sender to receivers.

This model is still living strong, as shown by the following quotation from one of the most used books for Norwegian students of media studies, in its most recent, updated edition (Schwebs & Østbye 1995:15):

At the core of communication there is the transfer of a message from sender to receiver. A fundamental communication model looks like this:



The model is best known in the shape of the Lasswell-formula, describing the act of communication by answering the following questions: "Who says what in which channel to whom with what effect?" (Lasswell 1948).

One could argue that also rhetoric deals with the effects of communication. In some respects, the transfer model looks like a true representation of rhetoric's focus on the powerful orator who tries to transfer his opinions to his audience. The Lasswell formula resembles rhetoric even more directly: it could be a quotation from rhetorical prescriptions concerning *inventio*, where questions like who, what, where, by what help, how, when, why etc. were used as rules for argumentation. But a closer look reveals that these are similarities only on the surface. Rhetoric does not work in the same way as the transfer model supposes, neither in theory nor in practice. One of the most important differences is that rhetoric operates with the uncertainty of argumentation and with an interactive communication model where effects are not completely predictable, while the transfer model presupposes a mechanical transmission of a message to receivers.

The transfer model has been heavily criticized, because of, among other reasons, "having omitted the element of feedback" or understating the activity of the receiver. Nonetheless the model is still evaluated positively by well-known current researchers: "This criticism, however, should not obscure the fact that it is even today a convenient and comprehensive way of introducing people to the study of the communication process" (McQuail & Windahl 1993: 15). It may be convenient for some, but it is utterly problematic as a way of conceptualizing communication. This makes it necessary to criticize the model once more. A rhetorical perspective of such a critique may add some new insights.

The Lasswell formula and other transfer models have been refined many times, particularly by the addition of a social context and by ascribing the audience certain selective activities. But in spite of all amplifications the model does not get rid of its implicit asocial "analogy of human communication with the technology of relais-stations" (Bruhn Jensen 1995: 8), of its mechanistic and deterministic notion of the speech act and of its deeply rooted monologic character. Ong has formulated the following criticism of the model (which he calls "the media model"):

This model obviously has something to do with human communication, but, on close inspection, very little, and it distorts the act of communication beyond recognition... To speak, I have to be somehow already in communication with the mind I am to address before I start speaking... I have to sense something in the

other's mind to which my own utterance can relate. Human communication is never one-way... Communication is intersubjective. The media model is not (Ong 1982/1991: 177).

Other arguments against the model from a rhetorical point of view could be: the over-emphasizing of the target-oriented character and the corresponding underestimation of the dialogic elements of the speech act and the implicit understanding of the orator as powerful agent and the audience as a victim, instead of people interacting with a purpose. The notion of the audience as passive receivers or even dupes has probably been the most damaging consequence of this communication model. It is not only a shortcoming in communication theory but has had and still has effects on media practice: the way journalists (are taught to) treat their readers is quite often "down-grading and cynically contempting"⁹.

This picture of the audience becomes apparent in empirical reception studies too. Effect studies and other empirical research using the transfer-model operate typically with large scale quantitative interview research. The people interviewed are called respondents, a name which degrades them from active participants with personal opinions to objects reacting to questions which others (the researchers) have formulated. Besides that, and probably more important, the audience is in this tradition treated as "taxonomic collectives" which can be calculated and which are predictable, as for example the widely used television audience ratings suggest every day (Ang 1991). In rhetoric the orator also tries to take his audience into account, but this happens with less secure and more flexible assumptions about human behaviour than today's streamlining of the audience. The orator never knows exactly how the audience will react because rhetorical communication is not about certainty but about probabilities, also in relation to the "effects" of communication itself.

Transfer models and especially effect studies use a very problematic definition of effect. It is hardly possible to assume measurable effects of speech acts. An effect is manifest and final – can communication be like that? Communication is not finished with the audience's reaction, she or he is not left behind with a manifest piece of communication. What looks like effects is often much more unstable and floating than effect studies claim to prove. In short: there is a considerable difference between rhetoric's theory and practice of presenting one's opinions effectively and effect theory's

contentions of being able to prove empirical effects of communication. Rhetoric has a more dynamic concept of communication, presuming possible effects of a speech act, contrary to effect studies' contention of certain results. This is not least because the audience is ascribed an important role in the process of argumentation, in which not only the orator influences the audience but also the audience, vice versa, influences the orator.

My last point of criticism refers to the notion of the "message" or the text produced in the speech act. The transfer model implies a notion of the text as monosemic. Consequently, the reading process is seen as the transfer of "the one" (and only) meaning of the text to the reader. Furthermore, much of effect research tried to quantify measurable effects on the audience on the basis of quantitative textual analysis – an utterly problematic method because the meaning of a text can hardly be "counted". An other widespread tendency of the transfer paradigm is neglecting the media text as important part of the analysis. This was criticised quite early for example by Merton who claims that the understanding of persuasion only is possible when we analyze both the content of the text and the responses of the audience to it (Merton 1946: 12).

Finally, some remarks on two models which do not immediately look like belonging to the transfer-paradigm. The first is critical theory or the Frankfurt school. This theory's most well known text dealing with media reception is Adorno & Horkheimers *The Culture Industry. Enlightenment as Mass Deception*. Its main thesis is that capitalistic mass culture deceives and suppresses people, thus implicitly assuming powerful texts which uncontestedly express the ideology of the ruling class and create passive, victimized mass audiences which uniformly accept these messages. This pessimistic view had strong influence on e.g. Scandinavian mass media research in the 1970s and on the widespread theory of cultural imperialism which assumed a similar damaging power of American (popular) media texts on audiences in the Third World and Europe.

The other theory using a transfer model in a rather unexpected way was developed especially in the film journal *Screen* during the 1970s. It "based on psychoanalytical theory concerned with the positioning of the subject by the text" (Morley 1992: 59). Maybe not by purpose but at least in its consequences, this is a theory of the reader's total determination by the text. The relation is conceived as ahistorical, general, abstract and essentialist. No way for the reader of acting specifically and differ-

ently. "In "Screen theory" there can be no struggle at the site of the interface between subject and text (discourse), since contradictory positions have already been predetermined at the psychoanalytic level" (Morley 1992: 61). Thus this model represents ultimately just "another version of the hyperdermic theory of effects" (Morley 1992: 59). Or, with a different metaphor: "It is a theoretical perspective which presumes a unilateral fixing of a position for the reader, imprisoning him or her in its structure, so as to produce a singular and guaranteed effect" (Morley 1989: 21).

Lewis's critical position reads like this, even more polemically:

The journal... frequently granted films, programs or other discourses more power than was dreamed of even by the most misguided member of the "effects" tradition. Audiences disappeared from the construction of meaning altogether, to be replaced by a witless creature known as the "textual subject". The textual subject, like the unfortunate mouse in the behaviorist's experiment, was manipulated and forced (by the text's structures and strategies) to adopt particular positions (Lewis 1991: 34).

2. *Uses and Gratifications or the Power of the Reader*

Uses and gratification research emerged because of the discovered inadequacy of the older tradition of campaign or effect studies. Setting out to show the effects of mass communication, the campaign studies instead mainly demonstrated the limited incidence of direct effects and adduced a range of intervening factors, such as selective exposure and selective perception, that mediated direct effects. The chief value of the campaign studies was that they demonstrated... the relative lack of short-term effects and persuasive power of the mass media...

The uses and gratification approach recognizes that two kinds of influence shape the intervening variables. First, it assumes that uses of the media depend upon the sociological milieu of the audience: the structure of groups and contexts in which the audience is situated. Second, uses and gratifications research rests upon the psychological principle that human perception is not a passive registering process but an active organizing and structuring process... Various authors pointed communication research away from the campaign studies tradition by arguing

that audiences' uses of mass media had little relation to the uses expected or intended by producers...

In sum, uses and gratifications researchers shifted the impact of mass media from the effects of producers' intentions to the effects of audiences' intentions, which are understood to depend upon sociological context and active psycho-logical process (Carey & Kreiling 1974: 227).

At the same time as being an alternative to effect studies, the positive spirit of the uses and gratification paradigm represented an alternative to the pessimism of the Frankfurt school's intellectual critics. Indeed, this tradition offered new insights compared with the shortcomings of both effect research and critical theory. But the "new school" had new blind spots too. One of these was the lack of interest for the text, or what was communicated. Thus

uses and gratifications research fails to link the functions of mass media consumption with the symbolic content of mass-communicated materials... (Carey & Kreiling: 232).

An other blind spot was the individual and ahistorical psychological perspective.

Transfer based effect research (including critical theory and *Screen* theory) and the uses and gratifications approach represent unilateral models of communication. This led to a mere reversal of the power relation rather than to a re-evaluation in a more radical way:

If the "effects" approach was guilty of treating the television message as univocal and uncontested, then some members of the "uses and gratifications" school were equally culpable in giving the viewer the power to consciously accept, reject and manipulate the meaning of the message at will. In this brave new world, television could no longer influence us because it was totally under our control (Lewis 1991: 14).

3. Interactive Models

Both the notion of the text, the notion of the audience and the notion of the communication process in these models, however differentiated they might look, is contested by interactive models which shall be the issue of the following section.

Hermeneutics

Rhetoric is supposed to be a genuinely humanistic field of study, and the genuine theory and method of the humanities is hermeneutic understanding. Fafner puts it like this:

The rhetorical activities of *talking* and *writing* are corresponded by the hermeneutic activities of *listening* and *reading*... Hermeneutic is the same as interpretation (Fafner 1997: 15).

The most fundamental difference between transfer models and the humanities' notion of communication is its interest for meaning. Humanistic tradition is about the production and reception of (textual) meaning. Transferred to media reception, it is about the question of audiences making sense of media texts and technologies in the social context of their (everyday) lives.

The German philosopher Hans-Georg Gadamer defined hermeneutic as "die Kunst der Verständigung" (Gadamer 1971: 283). This is a formulation with allusion to the definition of rhetoric as *ars bene dicendi* and with reference to communication in a more general sense. The concept of *Verständigung* means both to inform, to understand, to make oneself understood, and to agree. Gadamer wrote most explicitly about communication in this perspective in an article from 1967, under the heading *Rhetorik, Hermeneutik und Ideologiekritik*.

The following quotations highlight Gadamer's most important points in the context of my discussion.

Woran sonst sollte ... die theoretische Besinnung auf das Verstehen anschliessen als an die Rhetorik, die von ältester Tradition her der einzige Anwalt eines Wahrheitsanspruches ist, der das Wahrscheinliche, das eicsz (verisimile), und das der gemeinsamen Vernunft Einleuchtende gegen den Beweis- und Gewissheitsanspruch der Wissenschaft verteidigt? Überzeugen und Einleuchten, ohne eines Beweises fähig zu sein, ist offenbar ebenso sehr das Ziel und Mass des Verstehens und Auslegens wie der Rede- und Überredungs-kunst... So durchdringen sich der rhetorische und der hermeneutische Aspekt der menschlichen Sprachlichkeit auf vollkommene Weise. Es gäbe keinen Redner und keine Redekunst, wenn nicht Verständigung und Einverständnis die menschlichen Beziehungen trüge – es gäbe keine hermeneutische Aufgabe, wenn

das Einverständnis derer, die ‘ein Gespräch sind’, nicht gestört wäre und die Verständigung nicht gesucht werden müsste (Gadamer 1967: 117-118).

The role of the audience in Gadamer’s concept of the communication process is active and participatory, with both orator and audience trying to find *Verständigung*. Gadamer’s theories had considerable influence upon humanistic research in Germany in the 1970’s. He became, among other things, a precursor for reception theory which mainly was developed by Hans Robert Jauss and Wolfgang Iser from Konstanz. Jauss discovered “the reader as an instance of literary history” (Jauss 1975) and the importance of a “horizon of expectation” for the reception process; Iser’s most important contributions to reception theory were “Die Appellstruktur der Texte” (Iser 1970)¹⁰, “the implied reader” (Iser 1972) and a notion of the communication process as an interaction between text and reader (Iser 1976). Without going into too many details, I will comment on some of these theoretical points in a rhetorical perspective.

Jauss upgraded the reader to “an instance of literary history”, in contrast to the notion of the autonomy of the text as the only producer of meaning. Literary history should not be the history of texts alone, but also the history of their readings. The meaning of a text is not unique and stable but unfolds successively in its different readings over the course of time.

Iser elaborated this social-historical macro perspective by looking closer at the text and the reading process. He does not refer to rhetorical tradition, but I see some interesting affinities, especially in relation to his notion of the appealing structure of the text and of the implied reader.

The literary text has, following Iser, an intentional and communicative character. And this is more than a stimulus, as the reading process is more than a response. One of Iser’s most important discoveries¹¹ is that the literary text is more or less open, more or less potential (or, in today’s terminology: virtual). It has “gaps” which invite the reader to “realize” the potential text and thus to contribute to the production of meaning. Older texts in literary history are, following his analysis, more directing, that is to say closed. Modern texts, like Joyce’s *Ulysses*, are open, less directing, leaving more meaning production to the reader. This can be applied to the “two faces” of rhetorical communication, with both target orientation (directing, “closed”) and dialogical structure (“open”). The

notion of ‘the implied reader’ can be seen in a rhetorical perspective as well. It is an abstract category in both concepts, as a textual structure in Iser’s theory, as suppositions in the mind of the orator in rhetoric.

Another key word of reception theory I want to mention in relation to rhetorical tradition is *Erwartungshorizont* or horizon of expectation. Jauss applies it in a wider, historical context, Iser in the micro-perspective of the reading process. The concept refers thus both to the experiences and expectations of historical readers meeting the “horizon” of (historical) texts, and to the reading process in form of “protentions” and “retentions”, describing the reader’s “wandering” through the text by making assumptions about the meaning of elements and modifying them in the course of reading. Expectations play also an important role in relation to genre, the author and circumstances of the communication situation. They influence reception in terms of colouring the meaning of the text in special ways. These can be related to the way the listener’s dispositions and affects, including his confidence to the orator (or lack of it), which Aristotle describes, colour the audience’s accept or refusal of what is said.

Semiotics

Partly before, partly at the same time as Jauss and Iser, Umberto Eco developed a reception oriented text theory, from a semiotic perspective. Like Iser, Eco also operates with the categories “implied reader” (which he mostly calls “model reader”) and “open texts”¹². But he extends his analysis from high literature to trivial texts and popular culture, develops much more systematic and complex communication models and stresses more than Iser the character of both author and reader as textual strategies. When he includes trivial texts like *Superman* or Ian Fleming’s novels about James Bond, he reveals that these are typical closed texts (as also Iser would have stated) but that such a strong target-oriented structuring does not mean that the reading process is closed. On the contrary: paradoxically such standardized and stereotypical trivial myths allow quite free readings:

They seem to be structured according to an inflexible project. Unfortunately, the only one not to have been ‘inflexibly’ planned is the reader... They can give rise to the most unforeseeable interpretations, at least at the ideological level (Eco 1979/1984: 8).

And such readings are legitimate, while a free reading of a typical open text of high literature, like Kafka's *Prozess*, would make it collapse. Also Iser's notion of the reading process as a movement of protention and retention finds a more complex description and analysis in Eco's version, particularly in his model of operations performed to read a text, developed in *The Role of the Reader* (Eco 1979/1984: 14) and his application of, among other categories, "forecasts and inferential walks" to empirical readings, as he did in his Harvard lectures, published as *Six Walks in the Fictional Woods* (Eco 1994).

Cultural Studies: Media Reception as Struggle, Battles, "Living Room Wars"

The British "Birmingham School" or "Cultural Studies" developed from about 1975 a new concept of communication which integrated social science, cultural theory, semiotics, psychology and criticism of ideology in a comprehensive theory of communication as the social production of meaning. This new paradigm was presented as an alternative to the main reception theories at that time, with a very clear refusal of effect research, with polemical attacks at reader-in-the-text studies (mainly *Screen theory*), with a rejection of the Frankfurt school's implicit notion of the audience's determination by the text, and with critique and amplifications of the uses and gratification model. At the core of this new theory are three suppositions: the struggle for hegemony in modern societies, the "structured polysemy" of the text and the notion of "active audiences".

Communication in modern societies which are divided and differentiated by class, gender, ethnicity etc. is a site of struggle between competing interests. In contrast to orthodox marxist views of a power bloc dominating society and meaning in toto, the cultural theory of this school does not assume a one-way influence of this power upon "suppressed people", but suggests more complex relations. That does not mean the absence of power.

The object of analysis is, then, the specificity of communication and signifying practices, not as a wholly autonomous field, but in its complex articulations with questions of class, ideology and power, where social structures are conceived as also the social foundations of language, consciousness and meaning (Morley 1980: 20).

One of the most famous studies concerning the character of texts was Stuart Hall's paper *Encoding – Decoding*, first published in 1973. His description of three possible ways of reading, as "accepting" or "preferred reading", as "negotiation" and as "oppositional decoding" was the first systematic rejection of the picture of the reader as a victim in media science and communication studies more general. The model may look banal today, but at that time it was a breakthrough. In a rhetorical perspective it contains both the aspect of powerful target-orientation and openness: "The message is thus a structured polysemy" (Morley 1980: 10). This is a concept of communication as contest, as in rhetorical argumentation.

Some scholars, like John Fiske¹³, read the model as a manifest of the reader's liberation (from having been the suppressed victim of a dominant meaning), and a whole cultural movement, post-modernism¹⁴, started celebrating the deconstruction of (textual) meaning and its dissolution in endless, more or less arbitrary meanings.

Ingarden, Iser and in part also Eco would have objected to such interpretations; they insisted on the existence of "legitimate" and "aberrant decodings", maintaining limits of meaning¹⁵. Stuart Hall defended his model explicitly against interpretations which denied textual or ideological power: "Polysemy must not be confused with pluralism... There remains a dominant cultural order, though it is neither univocal nor uncontested" (Morley 1992: 52). "Preferred reading" means an encoding of the text which aims at decoding the message in a certain way:

The element of preferred reading is the point at which power intersects with the discourse... It's not just that they are powerful because they control the means of production; they try to get into the message itself, to give you a clue: 'Read it in this way'... It's an attempt to hegemonize the audience... (Hall 1994: 262).

This is very much in accordance with the rhetorical model of speaking with a purpose and with target-orientation. At the same time Hall denies that this orientation is synonymous with effectiveness: "It's an attempt to hegemonize the audience which is never entirely effective and usually not effective. Why? Because they cannot contain every possible reading of the text. The very text which they encode slips from their grasps. You can always read it in another way" (Hall 1994: 262). This corresponds to some degree with Perelman's notion of persua-

sion being a modest attempt of gaining adherence from the audience.

There are several other affinities between cultural studies' theory and rhetorical tradition. One of these is the fundamental preoccupation with the question of power and the concept of power relations not as absolute but as "relative hegemony", and not as unilateral but as contested. Power is not transferred to, not just forced upon helpless victims, neither in (modern) society nor in communication. Communication is contest or "struggle about meaning", as one of the keywords of the cultural studies tradition puts it. Other typical metaphorical articulations (from the same field) are: *The Battle Between Television and its Audience* (Ang 1995/1996) and *Living Room Wars* (Ang 1992/1996).

An other affinity is obvious in Morley's writings. In his first empirical study, about the reception of the television news program *Nationwide* (1980), he distances himself sharply from earlier reception theories, but mentions one work as a positive exception. This is Robert Merton's *Mass Persuasion* (1946) which has an explicit rhetorical perspective. Merton's project is a case study of an extremely successful campaign where a female radio star managed to collect huge amounts of money pleading the audience to buy war bonds. The study connects the analysis of the message with the analysis of the audience's responses and the psychosocial climate of the time, thus trying to give some explanations for the success of this persuasion. Morley describes the tasks of new empirical audience research by proposing questions which could be formulated in a rhetorically oriented analysis as well: "What are the means which the encoder uses to try to "win the assent of the audience" to his/her preferred reading of the message?" and he characterizes identification as a method of "gain(ing) the audience's complicity" by "suggesting" the preferred readings to the audience" (Morley 1980: 11). In later works, e.g. in an article written in collaboration with Roger Silverstone, he also mentions the importance of exploring the significance of metaphor and other rhetorical devices (Morley 1992: 208ff). The article suggests, with "the amendment of the notion of reading by one of rhetoric" a model

of the 'structured freedoms' of an audience's involvement with television... The dimensions of media, the modalities of viewing, and the mechanisms of rhetorical engagement offer a more adequate account of that relationship,

above all in their capacity to come to terms with the dynamics of the consumption and production of meaning at the heart of television's work in contemporary culture (Morley 1992: 209f.)

Empirical research in the tradition of this theory of communication as interaction are qualitative reception studies, with media ethnography as a special direction. Relatively few people are interviewed (in depth and mostly in natural settings), and observation can be used in order to find out about the (social) context of reception. This approach focuses on the question of how (different) people make (different) sense of media in conditions which are as realistic as possible. The reader is called informant in this tradition, that is to say he or she does not just respond to the researcher's questions, but is invited to "tell stories", in her or his own words. This is a quite different, open and exploratory research process, compared with the transfer-model's ambitions to test and control "effects" of media texts. Audience is seen as a subject and an implicit instance of the communication process here, not as an object or a target and not at all as a victim.

A clear disadvantage of this paradigm is identical with its most interesting property: its holistic approach. It is extremely demanding to pay attention to all the dimensions of the communication process, both in a micro- and a macro-perspective, to analyze all elements in their complex interrelations, to connect the individual and specific to the social and more general, and to conclude with results which handle the multifarious data-material without reductionism and avoid determinist explanations. Research of this kind demands team work, preferably collaboration between scholars from the social sciences and the humanities. Such conditions are, as far as I can see, not given in today's media research.

Maybe as a consequence of this, research in this tradition has often a bias towards either audience sociology (neglecting the text) or humanistic close studies of the text and its individual readings (neglecting the social and power relations). Another weakness, which shows up particularly in media-ethnography, is the tendency to overstate the circumstances or the context of reception in such a way that the text of communication "disappears". Also the focus on media technology can have such consequences.

It is absolutely necessary to focus on the text, in order to get a grip on the communication process as a whole. In my opinion, the rhetorical tradition is particularly well suited for such a turn, being a

theory and practice which fundamentally relates to speech (text).

For a Rhetorical Turn of Reception Theory and Empirical Reception Studies

I will conclude by sketching some ideas which are meant as bricks towards a rhetorically oriented reception analysis and theory. At the core of these suggestions is both an amplification and a reduction of the cultural studies' approach.

The reduction consists of a preliminary narrowing down of the research process to its more strictly textual dimensions. This is meant not as a principal restriction of theory but as a pragmatic step of operationalization. I am, at least in the first place, not interested in audience sociology. Later research, or others, may supply such explicit social and political dimensions. This does not mean that the research I suggest does not have social implications. It has, in so far as it is about communication as the social production of meaning and includes the aspect of power.

The extension means a considerably stronger stress on the textual dimensions of the communications process. This concerns not only the media text received (with both verbal and visual strategies of persuasion) but also the texts produced by audiences, as a response to the first one. My aim is thus to enrich the cultural studies' approach with the rhetorical model of communication, both by analysing media texts and responses as rhetorical devices and by looking at media reception as a contest, a struggle about meaning.

Cultural studies have also to be extended by an exploration of the new conditions in which the struggle about meaning has begun to take place and will take place in future. New media's sharpened efforts to conquer parts of an ever segmented audience and new (probably even more) "active audiences" have to be examined critically. How much do new choices and roles mean "the ultimate realization of audience freedom", how much will this new "active audience" represent a state of being *condemned* to freedom of choice", living

within an increasingly media-saturated culture, in which they *have* to be active (as choosers and readers, pleasure seekers or interpreters) in order to produce any meaning at all out of the overdose of images thrown before us (Ang 1996: 12-13).

In detail, a text-oriented reception study could take the following steps:

1. A reader-oriented or more precisely: a rhetorical analysis of the communicated text, for example a television program about nature. The text should be conceived as argumentation, with a "structured polysemy", that is to say both closed (having a project) and open (not being able to transfer the preferred reading with any guarantee whatever). The rhetorical analysis of media texts is a promising approach as part of reception studies, allowing focus on the communicative, reader-oriented characteristics of these texts, as the most appropriate point of departure for analysing audience responses. Research of audiovisual texts in this direction is only in its beginnings. But there are a few models. One of these is Merton's early study of persuasion mentioned before. The strength of this book is partly due to a thorough analysis of the examined campaign text and its structure. This analysis includes a study of its temporal pattern, a thematic analysis of its ideological and emotional appeals, and an investigation of the image of the speaker, analogue to the ethos argumentation. Merton's example is from radio, which deals with spoken words, orality. We have to apply rhetorical analysis to modern mass media's multifarious expressions, both written and oral, both verbal and visual, to music as well as to the peculiar oral literacy of an interactive medium like the internet.

2. A rhetorical analysis of secondary texts, for example an article in the Norwegian *Programbladet* about this nature program. Such a text can be important for the audience's "horizon of expectation". As a kind of advertising these texts often stress the more spectacular emotional appeals of the text. In relation to the internet these "secondary texts" could be both scientific reviews on this medium and public and popular opinions about it.

3. A rhetorical analysis of the interview-texts. One of the biggest problems of qualitative reception studies is the analysis of what the informants tell the researcher. A rhetorical approach certainly does not resolve all problems of such an analysis. But there are some aspects which make a rhetorical analysis particularly promising. One of these is the oral character of interview texts which they have in common with traditional rhetorical speech. Another is the use of metaphors, as a way of the readers' navigating in the information flow, by giving concreteness to abstract thoughts and limiting complexity to smaller, comprehensible units (Lakoff & Johnson 1980)¹⁶. Qualitative interview texts are typically discourses, narratives, storytelling; thus "any attempt at systematic analysis must... involve forms of narrative analysis" (Lewis 1991: 93, refer-

ring to Mishler). While reception oriented text analysis is beginning to be taken serious as a field of study, there still do not exist, as far as I know, corresponding text-oriented reception studies.

4. A concluding examination of the audience's comments in relation to the orator's utterances. How do empirical viewers relate to the different strategies of the rhetorical text? How do they judge the orator, in relation to his competence, reliability and honesty? Do they get persuaded by the arguments? Are they moved (by *pathos*), do they feel enlightened (*logos*), entertained (*ethos*)? How does the text's total audiovisual argumentation affect the audience? Such questions are, surprisingly, absent at least in the empirical qualitative reception studies I am aware of.

As a whole, what has to be examined is the relations between orator's text, the rhetorical strategies of secondary texts and of the texts produced by audiences, in considering the character of the medium, the social context of the speech act and the dominant socio-cultural order.

On a micro level, the speech act itself is characterized by both (authoritarian, closed) target orientation and (open, democratic) dialogue, of both contest and *Verständigung*. On a macro level, the production and reception of (media)culture unfolds in a field, characterized of social and political power structures. Rhetoric integrates both levels, at least when understood as "maximum-rhetoric". But as said before, I suggest a preliminary narrowing down of the research process to its more strictly textual dimensions.

Notes

1. The Norwegian poet and professor in rhetoric, Georg Johannesen, puts it as a change from "maximum-rhetoric" to "minimum-rhetoric". He was one of the first in Scandinavia to fight for a re-evaluation of rhetoric as "a topological way of thinking, practical philosophy, pragmatism, sophism, moral philosophy, marxism, structuralism, humanities" (Johannesen 1987: 8).
2. I am participating with a rhetorical text analysis and an empirical reception study of television programs about nature.
3. And mostly with verbal texts alone: the application of rhetoric to visual texts or music for example, which are important elements of utterance in modern mass communication, is still in its beginnings.
4. "Wer in rhetorischen Kategorien denkt, denkt primär vom Hörer – Leser her... Im rhetorischen Kommunikationsmodell hat der Empfänger der Nachricht den Primat" (Plett 1991: 4).
5. It is particularly in book II, 2-17 of *The Art of Rhetoric* that Aristotle deals with the aspect of reception. The chapters contain a presentation of the audience as segmented in terms of different sociographic conditions and as under influence of different affections. Book II, 1 contains interesting remarks on "the corruption of the hearer" which I will comment on in an other article.
6. Translated to our days. Classical rhetoric did not include women, neither as speakers nor as listeners. Orators were male, with only one obvious exception, Aspasia. She was, according to Cicero, the true discoverer of rhetoric as dialogue (Billig 1987/1966): 28).
7. Of course, there are differences between interpersonal communication, direct communication to several people or a bigger group, and mediated mass communication concerning the "dialogic" and "democratic" character of the speech act. My models have to be amplified mainly by the distinction between interpersonal and mediated communication (see Hjarvard 1997) and by the integration of "interactivity" as a typical form of interaction between the audience and new electronic media (see Jensen 1997).
8. Kennedy 1963: 23. This is also stressed by others, like Jens (1987) who separates rhetoric and propaganda by saying that propaganda does not seek truth, while rhetoric presupposes liberalism and therefore only is possible in democracies.
9. Hultén 1989: 26. The author recommends instead to "write for readers who are one's equals", in good rhetorical spirit.
10. With the subtitle *Unbestimmtheit als Wirkungsfaktor literarischer Prosa*. The title as a whole was translated, not quite exactly, with *Indeterminacy and the Reader's Response* (1971). In a rhetorical perspective, it is the "appealing structure" of the text which is the most interesting aspect of this lecture / article.
11. With background in theories of Roman Ingarden who introduced the notion of textual "gaps" (or "indeterminacy") and of the reader's "concretization" in studies as *The Literary Work of Art* which first appeared in 1931.
12. He does this long before Iser, in *Opera aperta* from 1962 which very interestingly uses *indeterminazione* as one of the most important properties of modern texts, as Ingarden did before and Iser after.
13. Fiske ascribes the reader more or less unlimited power in the reading process. He held considerable influence, at least for a period. His stress on the polysemy of the text and the audience's abilities to "making their own

resistant meanings” of cultural signs and “evading social discipline, evading ideological control and positioning” (Fiske 1989: 2) result in a rather idealized concept of communication as “semiotic democracy” (Fiske 1989/1991: 67ff.).

14. Postmodern theories imply an even stronger underestimation of the power of the text (production) and a corresponding overestimation of the power of its reading (consumption), by deconstructing the text, making textual meanings arbitrary and thus transforming readers to autonomous, sovereign producers of such meanings. These are, in my opinion, “deviations” or “aberrant decodings” of interactive and participatory theories of communication, which imply power and purpose on both sides of the process.
15. Eco talks both of “aberrant decodings” and “the unlimited semiosis” of cultural signs.
16. My own research on (Danish) people watching foreign channels on cable television revealed for example a very pronounced use of travel-metaphors. The cable universe was obviously experienced and understood as a room in which the viewers moved from place to place. This notion of space and feeling of mobility was evidently an important part of their meaning production (Gentikow 1993).

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