

Studying Rhetorical Audiences: A Call for Qualitative Reception Studies in Argumentation and Rhetoric*

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Abstract: In rhetoric and argumentation research studies of empirical audiences are rare. Most studies are speaker or text focused. However, new media and new forms of communication make it harder to distinguish between speaker and audience. The active involvement of users and audiences is more important than ever before. Therefore, this paper argues that rhetorical research should reconsider the understanding, conceptualization and examination of the rhetorical audience. From mostly understanding audiences as theoretical constructions that are examined textually and speculatively, we should give more attention to empirical explorations of actual audiences and users.

Résumé: Dans la rhétorique et la recherche de l'argumentation les études empiriques d'auditoires sont rares dans les recherches des disciplines de la rhétorique et de l'argumentation. La plupart des études sont axées sur le locuteur ou sur le texte. Cependant, les nouveaux médias et les nouvelles formes de communication rendent plus difficile la tâche de distinguer l'interlocuteur de son auditoire. La participation active des utilisateurs des médias et de leur auditoire est plus importante que jamais. Par conséquent, cet article soutient que la recherche rhétorique devrait reconsidérer la compréhension, la conceptualisation et l'examen de l'auditoire rhétorique. Nous devrions accorder plus d'attention à des explorations empiriques des auditoires et de des utilisateurs des médias au lieu d'interpréter généralement les auditoires comme des constructions théoriques qui sont examinées textuellement et spéculativement.

Keywords: argumentation, audience, reception, rhetoric, visual argumentation, focus group, noninteractive audience.

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1. Introduction

Probably no other European orator in modern times has been as extensively written about as Winston Churchill. John F. Kennedy famously said that Churchill “mobilized the English language and sent it into battle”, and it is often claimed that “it was the inspiring power of his speeches that kept up morale and ultimately led the Allies to victory” (Enright, 2001, p. 12). In one biography John Kegan praises Churchill’s Dunkirk-speech to the House of Commons on the fourth of June 1940. We all know this speech: it is the one where Churchill promised that the British “shall go on to the end”:

we shall fight in France,
we shall fight on the seas and oceans,
we shall fight with growing confidence
and growing strength in the air,
we shall defend our Island,
whatever the cost may be,

we shall fight on the beaches,
we shall fight on the landing grounds,
we shall fight in the fields
and in the streets,
we shall fight in the hills;
we shall never surrender

Kegan writes that this speech was “instantly celebrated”, and “evoked a surge of patriotic enthusiasm” (Kegan 2002, p. 125). It is said that Churchill, as he paused in the “great uproar that greeted these words”, muttered to a colleague next to him: “And we’ll fight them with the butt of broken beer bottles because that’s bloody well all we’ve got” (Enright 2001, p. 45).

Nonetheless, there is no doubt that this kind of anaphoric repetition, plain language, and direct address through short sentences creates powerful rhetoric. As Churchill himself explained some years later, when critiquing the use of passives in speeches:

What if I had said instead of “We shall fight on the beaches”,
“Hostilities will be engaged with our adversary on the costal perimeter” (Enright 2001, p. 31).

So, Churchill’s speeches are perhaps the best example we have of effective and successful rhetoric that made a difference and influenced an audience. Or is it? Research by Richard Toyé from University of Exeter says otherwise (Toyé 2013). Instead

of just doing rhetorical criticism of Churchill's speeches Toye has examined their reception. He has read the newspapers, and studied the Home Intelligence Reports in which the Ministry of information reported public opinion and reactions to specific events. Furthermore, Toye has examined diaries where ordinary British people express their feelings and attitudes about Churchill's speeches. In short: instead of conjecture and guesses, Toye examined actual response to the rhetoric he was studying. Contrary to conventional wisdom not everybody was persuaded, energized and inspired by Churchill's oratory.

Many ordinary people met his oratory with dissent and criticism. Toye's reception analyses documents that even though the speeches invigorated and excited many, others were disappointed and became depressed (Toye 2013). The incorrect—or at least insufficient—view of the power of Churchill's rhetoric is an example of the valorising of the single orator and of the outstanding rhetorical text, while neglecting other voices, and overlooking the more complex circumstances that surround the rhetoric of our time. Toye's findings could not have been produced by textual analysis of speeches; only by studying empirical responses. Even if we acknowledge that Churchill was an outstanding orator—and he was—we will not really understand the rhetoric of his war speeches if we do not take into account the diversity of responses he evoked.

The message is pretty clear: if we really want to understand rhetoric and argumentation we have to understand audiences, we have to study how people receive, interpret, and respond to instances of rhetoric.

2. Audiences in rhetorical theory

Of course no scholar of rhetoric would deny the importance of audience, because without audiences rhetoric would simply not exist. It is no coincidence that Aristotle used many words in his *Rhetoric* to account for emotions and different human characters and to define the speech genres in relation to the types of hearers (Aristoteles and Kennedy 2007). Some of the most leading researchers of the revival of rhetorical research in the second half of the 20th century have contemplated on the role of audience in rhetoric.

The most familiar of these is undoubtedly the account of audiences in Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca's *New Rhetoric*. Here and in *The Realm of Rhetoric* (Perelman 1982) Perelman makes the aim of argumentation “to elicit or increase the adherence of the members of an audience to theses that are presented to their

consent” (Perelman 1982, p. 9). The audience is defined as “*the gathering of those whom the speaker wants to influence by his or her arguments*” (Ibid., p. 14). Who this gathering consists of is highly changeable, it can be the speaker himself, it can be a specific or particular audience, or it may be all of humanity—a universal audience. However it is difficult, *The New Rhetoric* says, to “determine by purely material criteria what constitutes a speaker’s audience” (Perelman & Olbrechts-Tyteca 1969, p. 19). Consequently, neither in *The New Rhetoric* nor in *The Realm of Rhetoric* much ink is spilled on the notion of the particular audience. Instead an audience is generally viewed as “a construction of the speaker” (Perelman & Olbrechts-Tyteca 1969, p. 19); which is exactly how the universal audience—the most discussed audience in the theory of rhetoric—is defined: a construction of the speaker.

The second most discussed audience in rhetoric is probably the one described by Lloyd F. Bitzer in his theory of the rhetorical situation. He makes it clear that per definition, rhetorical communication is communication addressed to an audience. A rhetorical audience consists of “those persons who are capable of being influenced by discourse and of being mediators of change” (Bitzer 1968, p. 7 f.). In this way Bitzer describes how certain situations and rhetorical responses transforms individuals into a historically concrete audience. However, even though he describes the audience as a “material objective existence”, Bitzer’s audience is still a theoretical construction.

In 1970 Edwin Black introduced his notion of The Second Persona. His aim was to overcome difficulties in making moral judgments of rhetorical discourse. He noted that “discourses contain tokens of their authors” (Black 2013, p. 596). Every text has an implied author, which is not the real person of the author, but the rhetorical presence of the author in the text. Black calls this the first person. However, texts and discourses also have a second persona implied, “and that persona is its implied auditor”. An implied auditor “does not focus on a relationship between a discourse and an actual auditor. It focuses instead on the discourse alone, and extracts from it the audience it implies” (Black 2013, p. 597). Black calls this implied audience “the second persona”. This second persona can be judged, because “[t]he critic can see in the auditor implied by a discourse a model of what the rhetor would have his real auditor become” (Black, 2013 p. 598). Philip Wander later described what he called “The Third Persona”, which is “the concept of audience in rhetorical theory to include audiences not present, audiences rejected or negated through the speech and/or the speaking situation” (Wander 2013, p. 614).

A similar ideological approach characterizes Maurice Charland's treatment of what he terms the *constitutive audience*. Charland sets out to "show the degree to which collective identities forming the basis of rhetorical appeals themselves depend upon rhetoric" (Charland, 1987, p. 437). In line with Althusser's theory of hailing Charland explains how rhetorical structures and appeals not only persuade people, but also create, *constitute*, people. In an analysis of the rhetoric of the independence movement of Qubec, the French-speaking province of Canada, Charland demonstrates how the rhetoric of a white paper calls the Quebecois into being, thereby constituting them as an audience and a people.

In his studies of rhetorical argumentation Tindale explores the issue of audience identity and makeup (Tindale 2015, 2013, 1999, 1992). Using Perelman's universal audience and applying the notion of "cognitive environments" (Sperber & Wilson 1986), Tindale argues that the idea of "a fixed audience is as obsolete as the idea of a fixed argument, unmoored from the dynamic situation of which it is an integral part (Tindale 2013, p. 529). Audience identity, he suggests, is especially important since questions of persuasion and evaluation of argument either depends on this, or can in some way be reduced to it (Tindale 2013, p. 516). At the same time, however, he also suggests that issues of audience identity is such a complex issue that it may offer more challenges than benefits for the study of argumentation (Tindale 2015, p. 28). Even though Tindale is concerned with the cognitive environment of audiences, with audience identity, and with the make-up of audiences in relation to their different subgroups, his account remains philosophical and theoretical.

These are some of the most cited and acknowledged accounts of audiences in contemporary rhetorical research. All these texts provide extremely valuable rhetorical insights into how we may conceptualize rhetorical audiences. At the same time, however, they also illustrate a neglect of empirical audiences in rhetoric and argumentation. None of these studies deal with actual audiences or take into consideration any kind of real reception or factual response given by an existing audience. In the same way the entry on "Audience" in James Jasinski's *Sourcebook on Rhetoric* (Jasinski 2001) deals almost exclusively with theoretical constructions of audience and only provides short passing remarks on real audiences—not explicitly mentioning the methods of "reception studies" or "audience analysis". The reference that does occur to audience analysis goes back to the 1980s, which gave a rise to two directions in communication research: an increased attention to *polysemy* and an

increased interest in empirical audience studies with publications of significant works such as David Morley's *The "Nation-wide" Audience* (Morley 1980) and Janice Radway's *Reading the romance* (Radway 1984).

Since then the interest in audience seems to have withered again. Sixteen years ago Leah Ceccarelli encouraged us to do more close readings of the reception of rhetoric. She had tried hard, but was unable to "find noteworthy recent cases of rhetorical criticism where immediate response has been rigorously examined to determine how original audiences interpreted a text" (Ceccarelli 1998, p. 679, n 84). In her examination of polysemy Ceccarelli quite rightly points out that "the polysemy of resistive readings and the polysemy of strategic ambiguity are most adequately demonstrated when the critic conducts a loose reading of the text *and* a close reading of the reception of that text" (Ceccarelli 1998, p. 679). This means, she says that if we as rhetorical critics are to further explore these forms of polysemy, we have to develop new methods of study, because most critics:

do not currently focus on how texts were received by their contemporary audiences, choosing instead to imagine how an audience in a particular historical situation *might* have responded to the text's invitation. When critics do gather forms of historical evidence marking audience responses (like editorials, opinion polls, and letters), they tend to be concerned exclusively with the way in which a text was judged; critics who register audience comments to show that a text was "successful" or "unsuccessful" are not making closer inquiries into how audiences actually *interpreted* the content of the message. (Ceccarelli, 1998, p. 679)

The same year Stromer-Galley & Schiappa performed a review of the literature of rhetorical criticism suggesting that conjectures about audiences "are being advanced without adequate evidence" (Stromer-Galley & Schiappa 1998, p. 30). Schiappa maintained this claim in his book *Beyond representational correctness* (2008), which gives a theoretical and argumentative rationale for audience research (Schiappa 2008, p. 31), however these rationales did not gain much traction in rhetorical studies.

Unfortunately, even today empirical, qualitative audience studies are very rare in rhetorical research. Reading the leading publications in rhetoric, the journals, books, anthologies and readers, we seldom find any qualitative study on empirical audiences. Mostly rhetorical research deals with textual analysis of instances of rhetoric, not with reception or response. This is a pity, because as we learn from Toye's study of Churchill's rhet-

oric our limited focus on the study of discrete texts or purely theoretical constructs may not only prevent us from seeing what is actually there, it may sometimes also makes us see what is actually not there. Let me illustrate this with three short examples of studies that have benefitted from paying attention to reception and audience.

3. Some insights can only be gained through empirical audience research

As scholars of rhetoric Carole Blair and Neil Michel have done many studies on the rhetoric of memorials. However, when they visited the Kennedy Space Centre in Florida in order to do a rhetorical reading of the Astronaut memorial, the so-called Space Mirror, they found themselves on unfamiliar ground. By listening to the visitors they quickly found out that other people did not share their reaction to the memorial. They were, as they write, “witnessing first hand what many rhetorical critics never attend to—a real audience” (Blair & Neil 1999, p. 46). Consider that: “what many rhetorical critics never attend to—a real audience”. From a textual point of view the memorial performs the “eulogistic operations that any commemorative monument must” (Blair & Neil 1999, p. 34). However, from observing and talking to visitors Blair and Michel found that most people were either so distracted by other features in the surroundings that they ignored the memorial altogether, or they just gave it a quick glance, wondered what it was and moved on.

We can perform elaborate readings and criticisms of memorials as rhetorical texts, but observing the actual reception—or lack thereof—certainly makes our intricate analyses seem rather disconnected to what is actually going on rhetorically. Through their observations Blair and Michel noticed something peculiar: Most people in the Kennedy Space Centre were wearing “Donald Duck shirts, Mickey Mouse ears, or Goofy hats” (Blair & Neil 1999, p. 47). It turned out that the overwhelming majority of visitors came from Walt Disney World, approximately 60 kilometres away.

A trip to Disneyland helped the researchers understand the visitors’ reaction to the memorial: Disneyland is a theme park that structures the visitors’ experience as efficient fun, safe adventure, impressive technology and happy endings. The visitors are given the role of recipients of entertainment. When moving from Disneyland to Kennedy Space Centre the visitors are generally met by a similar theme park structure. Even the signs on the parking lot look the same. So, the audience position of an

effortless spectator constructed in Disneyland continues in the Space Centre. And this position is in conflict with the audience position of pensiveness and reflection required by the Space Mirror memorial. When you are in theme-park-mode it is difficult to enter a position of commemoration of the dead. The rhetorical impact of the memorial simply could not be understood unless audience and context were taken into consideration. Rhetorically understanding the Space Mirror required observation, interviews and a visit to Disneyland 60 kilometres away. The study of the Space Mirror teaches us that sometimes, what is important to know; is not in the text itself.

We find another example of the fact that some rhetorical constructions cannot be located in the text in Kathleen Hall Jamieson's study of political television advertising in the presidential campaign 1988 between Democrat Michael Dukakis and Republican George Bush Sr. (Jamieson 1992). This highly inflammatory campaign aired television spots attacking Michael Dukakis for being soft on crime. One was the infamous Willie Horton PAC-ad claiming that Michael Dukakis as Governor "allowed first-degree murderers to have weekend passes from prison", while showing the dark, muddy picture of convicted murderer Willie Horton, who fled during a furlough and then kidnapped "a young couple, stabbing the man and repeatedly raping his girlfriend". The Bush campaign followed up by releasing an ad stating that 268 people escaped during furlough, juxtaposing words and pictures in a way that invites the false inference that the escapees were first-degree murderers that went on to kidnap and rape. Finally, an ad with an interview with the couple Willie Horton had kidnapped and raped was released. The wife and her husband attacked Michael Dukakis, criticising him for his weak position on crime.

These three ads are distinct texts. We can make rhetorical analyses of each of them, but that will not really make us understand their rhetorical workings in the campaign as a whole. The ads were widely covered in both press and broadcasting, and short clips from them were often shown in news programs on television. Through focus groups and interviews Jamieson discovered that people had difficulties in discerning between the information they got from ads, news, speeches and other sources. The Bush ads invite the construction of a coherent story claiming that 268 black first-degree murderers had escaped during furlough and went on to do other crimes. This was not the case; only one convicted murderer had escaped, and that was Willie Horton.

However, Jamieson's research interviews indicated that the respondents understood it otherwise. Out of the fragments of ads, news, speeches and other information viewers pieced together their own story; they constructed their own text. A text saying that Dukakis had let 268 black Willie Hortons go free to kidnap and rape white people. These audience-constructed texts we will never find through traditional text analysis because they only exist in the mind of the audience. So, the only way we are able to access such texts are by talking to audiences.

Let me provide one last example of the value of reception-oriented studies in rhetoric. This kind of empirical approach is especially beneficial to the study of visual rhetoric and argumentation because such argumentation is fundamentally enthymematic, leaving most of the reconstruction of premises to the viewer. If we only approach visual argumentation through textual analysis, we run the risk of speculative reconstruction of arguments, because arguments are not only in the visual or multimodal text, but also in the context and in the viewer.

Already in 1975 did Wayne Brockreide remind us that arguments are "not in statements but in people", and that an "argument is not a 'thing' to be looked for but a concept people use, a perspective they take" (Brockreide 1992, p. 73). Now, more than 40 years later it seems that we have yet to take the full consequences of this fundamental insight. Somehow, we still seem to think that rhetoric and arguments are to be found in the text alone. But they are not. Of course something has to be in the text. If texts—of any kind—did not communicate anything, argumentation would be impossible; but that should not lead us to the misconception that everything is in the text.

Rhetoric and argumentation should not be viewed as product, but as process. I am not claiming that we should avoid textual analysis; of course not. This kind of rhetorical criticism is valuable because as experts, scholars have a unique ability to locate, organize and express arguments that are found in texts. However, as I have already suggested such an approach implies that rhetoric can be understood by looking at texts alone. Often it can't. We have to take into consideration the context, audience, and reception.



Figure 1. Political advertisement from the Danish political party Venstre. The ad was printed on November 15, in two weeklies during the Parliamentary election campaign in 2001. Courtesy of Venstres Landsorganisasjon

Take this political advertisement from the Danish right wing, economically liberal party *Venstre*.¹ The ad was printed in two popular weeklies during the 2001 parliamentary election campaign in Denmark. Along the lower part of the ad there is a slim, blue rectangle, with the party logo placed in right hand corner, and a picture of the party leader, Anders Fogh Rasmussen, on the far left. Rasmussen was then the leader of the opposition party, after the election he became the Prime Minister of Denmark (2001-2009), and then General secretary of NATO (2009-2014). Rasmussen's signature and printed name can be seen next to his picture. Above this, a press photo taken the year before constitutes the main part of the ad. It is a photograph and an issue well known to most Danes.

The photo shows seven people leaving a building, heading down the steps. Jackets and shirts cover their heads their faces are not visible. In the right hand part of the picture, we see a woman dressed in a black robe and a white headscarf. She seems to be holding one of the men by her right hand. Her left arm is stretched out towards someone outside the picture, while she performs an obscene gesture with her hand. These young men are second-generation immigrants from Palestine. In the spring of 2000, they were found guilty of a group rape of a 14-year-old girl. The woman is the sister of one of the men. They are leaving the courthouse in the city of Aarhus, after receiving their verdict—a verdict that was widely discussed and that the public considered much too lenient.

¹ This part is based on Kjeldsen (2007), where the full analysis of the mentioned ad and its reception is performed.

The text written in white across the picture proclaims “Time for a change”. Is there an argument here? What could that argument be? How and where should we look for the argument? We could ask the party leader, who is after all the responsible author of the message. He claimed in news-interviews that the ad was about crime and justice policy in general; it simply said that serious crimes should be punished harder. Is this what the ad argues? Obviously, something else is going on?

We could also do what we do mostly: analyse the ad and reconstruct the argument we find. But since the main part of the ad is just a picture showing something, we risk making a speculative construction of something that is not really there. After all, the ad contains neither premises nor conclusions. It is just a picture, two names and a short caption. So what then? If we should not try to find the argument by asking the author, and cannot reliably find it in the text; then where should we find it? If there is an argument, that is.

Well, there is an argument. I found it by examining 80 newspaper articles that mentioned the ad. Thirty-seven of these articles describe and discuss the advertisement itself (Kjeldsen 2007). The key point here is that these articles implied or explicitly spelled out reconstructions of the claim and the argument presented visually in the ad. Although there were some differences in the interpretation of the ad, everybody assumed out-of-hand that the ad made an argument, and there was widespread accordance that this was the argument:

Claim: Refugees and immigrants are a problem for Denmark
 Backing: Take for instance the immigrants who performed a group-rape on a young girl, and the contempt they showed us.
 Warrant: When members of a group (of people) cause problems (such as rape and contempt), this group is a problem.

This argument cannot be explicitly found in the ad, the author, Anders Fogh-Rasmussen, denies that this is the argument he created, but it is still the argument that most people perceived, so as scholars we would be foolish to insist that there is no argument.

Instead of claiming that we cannot use visual and multimodal communication to argue, we should take into consideration that people exposed to an ad like this one, actually perceive that the ad puts forward an argument. Furthermore: they tend to argue back. This counters two prevailing myths: The myths claiming that images cannot argue, and that people don’t argue back. The analysis of the news-discourse about the ad shows

clearly images can make arguments and that we will argue back if they are used to claim something in which we disagree.

4. Benefits and limits of empirical audience analysis

These three examples illustrate how something that cannot be materially located in the text—be it a memorial, moving images or a newspaper ad—are still decisive for the impact of the rhetoric. If we do not take this into consideration we will simply not be able to understand how rhetoric actually works. Empirical studies can provide us with a more nuanced understanding of rhetoric and argumentation because it teaches us what happens in the meeting between audience and rhetorical text.

The rhetorician Michael McGee famously claimed in the late 1990s that texts in a traditional sense do not exist in our contemporary world, and that “text construction is now something done more by the consumers than by the producers of discourse” (McGee 1990, p. 288). I believe that we should still look at texts, however as my examples show, a good deal of the rhetorical texts we ought to examine are constructed in the minds of the audience, and the only way to access these texts is to observe, interview or somehow interact with the audience.

It is hard to define or locate the audience in the fields of rhetoric and argumentation research. Therefore, aspirations to examine audiences are sometimes countered with the argument that such studies are futile, because we cannot really know who the audience is. Trudy Govier, for instance, in her book *The Philosophy of Argument*, questions how much audiences “matter for the understanding and evaluation of an argument”. She introduces the concept of the “Noninteractive Audience—the audience that cannot interact with the arguer, and whose views are not known to him” (Govier 1999, p. 183).

The mass audience, which is probably the most typical audience in the media society of our days, is “the most common and pervasive example of a Noninteractive Audience”. The views of this noninteractive and heterogenous audience, Govier says, are unknown and unpredictable (Govier 1999, p. 187). This means “trying to understand an audience’s beliefs in order to tailor one’s argument accordingly is fruitless” (Tindale 2013, p. 511). Consequently, “Govier suggests, it is not useful for informal logicians to appeal to audiences to resolve issues like whether premises are acceptable and theorists should fall back on other criteria to decide such things” (ibid.).

Ralph Johnson, continues this line of reasoning, and proposes that a Noninteractive audience is not only a problem for Pragma-dialectics, as Govier suggests, but also for rhetorical approaches; because it is not possible to know this type of audience. Johnson criticises the views of Perelman and Christopher Tindale, which holds, “the goal of argumentation is to gain the acceptance of the audience” (Johnson 2013, p. 544). Advising a speaker to adapt to the audience when constructing arguments, says Johnson “is either mundane or unrealistic” (Johnson 2013, p. 544). It is unrealistic because we cannot truly grasp an audience as an objective reality. Johnson is right in saying that grasping an audience, understanding and defining its identity, is a difficult matter. However, while this issue of the audience might be a problem for the speaker, I am not sure that it should cause so much anxiety for the researcher; because when trying to understand the role of rhetoric and argumentation in society, the desire to determine the identity of should not be our main concern.

Such a desire, I propose, is similar to what Ien Ang in her book *Desperately seeking the audience* (Ang 1991, p. 2) calls the “institutional point of view”. She criticises this view for treating the “‘television audience’ as a conceptually nonproblematic category consisting of a definite, unknown but knowable set of people” (Ang 1991, p. 11, cf. p. 2-3). Television audiences, she writes, “only exists as an imaginary entity, and abstraction constructed from the vantage point of the institutions, in the interest of the institutions” (Ang 1991, p. 2). Actually, it is not only difficult to determine the audience, it is generally impossible. Even when an audience is only one person—or oneself—it is challenging to determine the identity of the audience. Tindale (2013, p. 512) points to this, when he says that not even individuals have a simple singular identity, because we each individually are “diverse diversities” (Sen, 2006: 13). As already mentioned, Tindale even suggests that issues of audience “identity present more challenges for argumentation than they offer benefits” (Tindale 2015, p. 28).

I am not suggesting that researchers should stop speculating about what an audience is. I am saying that the primary concern for scholars of rhetoric and argumentation should not be to determine the exact identity of the audience or settle whether or not an argument or another instance of rhetoric creates adherence. I think we should be more concerned with how an argument, or any rhetorical appeal, is constructed, how it is audience-oriented, and – which is the main point in this paper—how it is received, interpreted, and processed—that is: how actual audiences actually respond to rhetoric: “We need to find out

what people are doing with representations rather than being limited to making claims about what we think representations are doing to people” (Schiappa 2008, p. 26; cf. Stromer-Galley & Schippa 1998).

5. Focus group research²

One way of finding out what people are doing with representations is simply to talk to audiences. This is the best way to study how an argument may be received, interpreted, and processed. Such a method is especially important in multimodal communication, which has a dominantly visual and enthymematic character. Some may even claim that because of the visual dominance in multimodal communication we can never be sure what the argument is—or even if an argument is communicated at all.

However, if an empirical audience actually experience an argument, then surely an argument must exist and have been communicated. This is why I have done rhetorical reception studies of examples of commercial advertisements. Through focus groups I studied if respondents perceived arguments in the advertisements, and how they perceived them. For this project I used three focus groups. The three groups consisted of six pensioners in their 70s, five young women aged 18–19, and four university students who did not know each other. The groups were selected to allow for variation in life situation and breadth of knowledge.

One of the advertisements I showed the focus groups was this one for an Israeli bookstore:



Figure 2. Steimatzky book chain "Read more". Courtesy of: Shalmor Avnon Amichay/Y&R Interactive Tel Aviv

² This part is based on my previous publication "Where is visual argument" (Kjeldsen 2015).

When asking the respondents their thoughts about the ad they would say things like: “Read instead of watching TV” (MI/AN: 07:21); “You lose intelligence by watching television, because your head becomes smaller by that” (MI/AN 5:33); “it implicates that if you don’t read you will become stupid” (MA/BJ 08:32).³ Almost all respondents in some way created the argument: “Read more, because if you don’t, you will become stupid”. It is clear that the respondents actually decode and experience an argument from the ad. And it is clear that the without the visuals the argument could not be constructed.

It is also clear that in reconstructing the argument the respondents do not talk specifically about the person in the picture. Instead they use general pronouns such as “one should read more”, or “you should read more”. They move from the specifics of the picture to a general level expressing a moral claim. It is obvious that the respondents construct the term “stupid” from the visual representation of the little head. In general, it seems possible to visually evoke adjectives such as big, small, stupid, and the like.

At the same time, we would probably be inclined to say, that images have a hard time evoking the conjunctions connecting the premises in an argument and creating the necessary causal movements for an argument to be established. What do conjunctions such as “therefor”, “hence”, and “then” look like? However, in my study respondents actually used conjunctions such as “because”, “then” and “therefor” both explicitly and implicitly. They also use formulations saying that the visual elements “implicate” certain conclusions. Furthermore, the respondents explicitly mention the adversative conjunction “instead of”. Like the other conjunctions, the term “instead of”, and the way it is used to connect premises, is neither in the caption “read more”, nor represented anyway directly in the picture.

So, where does the conjunction come from? In making sense of the three central elements in the ad—the caption “read more”, the little head, and the person’s sitting-position with the remote—a connection has to be made. In light of the advertising genre the most relevant and plausible connection would be argumentative conjunctions. This kind of search for argumentative meaning is clear in the respondent’s interpretations. Take one of the pensioners, who said about the Steimatzky ad: “That you should read instead of watching television” (BR/UN 09:37). When I asked her to elaborate the woman said:

³ This code marks the focus group, the identity of respondent, and the timeslot in the tape and the transcription for the utterance, e.g. (MI/AN: 07:21).

Well, if it is an advertisement for a bookstore, then they obviously want to give a message saying that he needs to read more, right? And then, where is the message in that picture? That's got to mean that his head is so small, that he needs to fill up. (BR/UN, 09:37)

It is clear from this that she is not only searching to make sense of the ad by connecting verbal, visual, and contextual elements. She is also presupposing that the message has a persuasive character. Because of the imperative mood in the caption she immediately assumes that “read more” is the claim, and she naturally proceeds by looking for the *reason* (datum). Her short elaboration illustrates two things. Firstly, it illustrates that audiences are active in an exploring kind of mental labour, while looking for the meaning and the assumed argument in the multimodal ad.

This mental exploring is not incidental, I suggest, but is generally performed in accordance with pragmatic rules of speech acts (Austin 1975, Searle 1969), relevance (Sperber & Wilson 1986), and implicature (Grice 1989); theories which we know have been successfully applied to the study of argumentation in Pragma-dialectics (e.g. Eemeren & Grootendorst 1983, Henkemans 2014). People obviously make implications and are consciously aware that the ads are trying to convey messages—even arguments. And they clearly try to reconstruct these arguments.

Secondly, the example illustrates that much more is going on in the reception of this kind of visual argumentation, than can be expressed by stating only the premises and conclusion of the argument. The picture, so to speak, holds much more than the content of these short assertions. It is an important characteristic of predominantly visual argumentation that it allows for a symbolic condensation that prompts emotions and reasoning in the beholder. In the focus group of students, for instance, a young woman commented on the ad in this way:

if you do not read you will become a narrow-minded, couch-potato—non-thoughtful. He is not exactly sitting in a position, which is considered very flattering, intellectual, positive. The whole position is connected with a sick person. (MA/SI 11:34)

The basic argument: “Read more, because if you do not read you will become stupid” is clearly present in this comment, but the interpretation involves much more. It contains the emotional experience of being a couch-potato and the moral judgment that follows. Let me illustrate the significance of this visual surplus-

meaning with another ad: namely this Norwegian ad for the tram-system in Oslo:



Figure 3. Ad for the tram in Oslo: "Unngå pinlige øyeblikk" ("Avoid embarrassing moments").

Most respondents summed up the argument from this ad something like this: "Buy ticket, and you will avoid an unpleasant situation" (MV/MA 48:43). It should be clear that this ad indeed contains an argument. We could state the argument more formally like this: "You should buy tickets, because it will make you avoid an unpleasant situation." However, if we reduce visual arguments to only these kind of context-less, thin premises, we limit ourselves to putting forward only the skeleton of the rhetorical utterance instead of the full body. We recreate, in a sense, a lifeless argument.

In contrast to this, it quickly became obvious, when I interviewed people about the ads that much more was going on. We see that the stating of the premises and the reconstruction of the argument is embedded in a much thicker understanding of the depicted situation, and of similar situations and emotions evoked by the ad. We discover that one of the benefits of visual or multimodal argumentation is that it provides what I call thick representations, a full sense of the situation, making an integrated, simultaneous appeal to both the emotional and the rational. One respondent said:

Well, they are obviously playing on the embarrassment of getting caught when not having a ticket. The way you shrink yourself when the inspector comes. (MV/BJ 48:43)

He later continued, saying:

You try to hide a little, you want to sink into the ground; because it is so embarrassing to get caught, you make yourself as little as possible. (MV/BJ 48:43)

Another respondent elaborated even more on what she felt the ad represented:

I am thinking that the person, the little man, has sneaked in. And when there is a ticket inspection, you always end up with those embarrassing situations, those looks, and you become embarrassed. Because it says, the text, “Avoid embarrassing moments. Buy tickets”. And then you would avoid being tense and get caught. And there are a lot of other people around that might think “Oh well, he got caught now”; and then you begin to think strange thoughts about the person that got caught. (MI/AN 31:15)

The image clearly evokes imagined or previous experiences of embarrassment connected with sneaking on public transport. One person told that she herself had witnessed a “grown man” seemingly well enough off to pay the fare, but he still got caught without a ticket (MA/SI 48:43). Another vividly told about his fear and shame when he himself almost got caught without a ticket. All these descriptions and evoked emotions are, in fact, relevant parts of the argument. The more you feel the embarrassment, the more persuasive the argument will be. This, however, does not mean that the contribution of the image—or the ad as such—is just psychological and irrational persuasion.

It is true in this case that the argument is more or less fully expressed by words in the text in the upper left corner, which says “Avoid embarrassing moments. Buy a ticket”. However, the premises created by these words alone, lack the full sense of situation and embarrassment experienced by the respondents, and expressed when they talk about the ad. So, if we limit ourselves to reconstructions of the argument with short premise-conclusion assertions we only get part of the argument expressed multimodally in the ad. Because the more I feel the embarrassment the more forceful the argument is. And—I would say—the more correct the argument actually is; because the feeling of embarrassment is an important part of the argument. If you do not really feel the embarrassment, then you have not

really understood the argument, since the good reason offered to buy a ticket is the possibility to avoid an unpleasant feeling. Of course one could attempt to express this in writing by saying something like: “You should buy a ticket, because it will make you avoid a very unpleasant situation”.

However, adding modal modifiers to the premises does not truly capture the sense of embarrassment offered by the visual parts of the ad, and it is not likely to evoke the same kind of memories and vivid descriptions that the image clearly evoked in the respondents. My focus group study shows that audiences are actively involved in reconstructing arguments from pictures, creating premises and adding conjunctions. They move from the specific content in a picture to more general assertions, and their reconstruction is embedded in a condensed thick understanding of situations, experiences and emotions, that influence the character and the force of the argument.

6. Finding rhetorical argumentation in the multi-mediated society

As my examples have illustrated, it is not only the audience that is hard to find and describe, so is the rhetorical text. In our time neither audience nor rhetorical utterances are discrete and clearly demarcated. This is one of the biggest challenges for contemporary rhetorical criticism and for the study of argument in society: because it has become increasingly difficult to determine what an audience has actually heard, seen, read, or in anyway experienced, of a specific rhetorical utterance. We may examine the arguments in a speech by President Obama, but no ordinary person will experience these arguments in the same way.

What most people get is a short excerpt in the news, the odd soundbite, a clip on YouTube, the retelling and explicit comments and evaluations of the speech by reporters, bloggers, friends, or colleagues. Most people never experience the text we examine as scholars. That puts us in a tight spot: There is no single, discrete text, and we don't know who the audience is. However, as I have already suggested, we should not try to find the audience, as if there is only one. None of the studies I have mentioned attempted to find the one and only audience. Instead these studies looked at responses from an audience—or from several—in order to see what their specific acts of reception told us about rhetoric and argumentation. In all these examples, we learned something we otherwise wouldn't have learned.

So what we should do in this fragmented, multi-media situation is not to look for the text, or to capture the identity of

the audience. It is not only important to study what the rhetorical discourse is like and who the audience might be, but also—especially I would say—how rhetorical communication *works*. This is why approaches such as ethnographic participation, reception-analysis and focus group studies, are particularly relevant in the multi-mediated society of today; because these kind of approaches offer a way to understand the role of audience-participation in argumentation and rhetoric.

7. Conclusion

In this paper I have limited myself to talk about one research approach: audience analysis and the reception of rhetoric. But what I have said is part of a bigger picture. The lack of audience studies is just an example of the general lack of methodological variation in studies of rhetoric and argumentation. I have myself been trained as a humanistic scholar and I truly believe in the benefits of the humanistic, hermeneutic approach, and the close reading of texts.

Such research raises important questions and answers them in ways that increases our understanding of what rhetoric and argumentation is—of what a human being is. General and abstract notions such as the universal audience, the public, the constitutive audience, the non-interactive audience are all helpful constructions when studying rhetorical communication. However, we should not forget that underlying such general concepts is an implicit understanding of individuals making up this general construct. As pointed out by McGee (1990) the people, the public—or the universal audience, for that matter—does not exist as a discrete entity. We can never point to it, and say “there it is, let’s look closer at it”. However, we can look closer at individuals and groups responding to rhetorical utterances. So, if the abstract, general concepts are to be more than speculation, if we seek to make them reliable and substantial concepts, then we should know more about the actual individuals that potentially constitute them.

I am not saying the studies of individuals and groups are the same as studying the public or the universal or constitutive audience, but I am saying that if we do not know in more detail how people actually respond to rhetorical communication, then our thoughts on the workings of the general concepts and rhetoric in general will be conjectures without sufficient support (cf. Schiappa 2008, Stomer-Gallay & Schiappa, 1998). As researchers we have at our disposal a plethora of methods and ways of studying rhetoric: textual analysis, ethnographic observation,

focus groups, interviews, surveys, and many more. So when attempting to ask and answer questions of rhetoric, we should think more about which methods provides the best and most informing answers to us. When addressing our research questions we do well to bear in mind Condit's reminder that critical rhetorical analysis should "tied to the particularity of occasions; specific audiences, with specific codes or knowledges, addressed by specific programs and episodes" (Condit 2013 [1989], p 654).

We should use different approaches and we should combine them. The experimental research concerning the pragma-dialectical rules performed at the University of Amsterdam is one example of theoretical work being examined empirically. Frans van Eemeren and his colleagues go beyond theorizing about fallacies to an examination of how ordinary arguers actually view fallacious argumentative moves (Eemeren et al 2009). This is just one example of methods available. Other could be provided.

Argumentation and rhetoric concerns everybody, so we have an obligation to also move beyond theoretical speculations and find out how argumentation and rhetoric actually works in real life. Qualitative audience and reception studies are just one way of doing this, however they are approaches we use far too seldom. So, we should more often go out and find the arguments in the audience.

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