

The Myth of the Rhetorical Situation

Richard E. Vatz

In the opening lines of "The Rhetorical Situation," Lloyd Bitzer states, "if someone says, That is a dangerous situation, his words suggest the presence of events, persons or objects which threaten him, someone else or something of value. If someone remarks, I find myself in an embarrassing situation, again the statement implies certain situational characteristics."¹

These statements do not imply "situational characteristics" at all. The statements may ostensibly describe situations, but they actually only inform us as to the phenomenological perspective of the speaker. There can be little argument that the speakers believe they feel fear or embarrassment. Their statements do not, however, tell us about qualities within the situation. Kenneth Burke once wrote of literary critics who attributed to others the characteristic of seeking escape: "While apparently defining a trait of the person referred to, the term hardly did more than convey the attitude of the person making the reference."² The same goes for the attribution of traits to a situation. It is a fitting of a scene into a category or categories found in the head of the observer. No situation can have a nature independent of the perception of its interpreter or independent of the rhetoric with which he chooses to characterize it.

In his article Bitzer states, "Rhetorical discourse is called into existence by situation"³ and "It seems clear that rhetoric is situational."⁴ This perspective on rhetoric and "situation" requires a "realist" philosophy of meaning. This philosophy has important and, I believe, unfortunate implications for rhetoric. In this article I plan to discuss Bitzer's view and its implications and suggest a different perspective with a different philosophy of meaning from which to view the relationship between "situations" and rhetoric.

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MEANING IN BITZER'S "RHETORICAL SITUATION"

Bitzer's perspective emanates from his view of the nature of meaning. Simply stated, Bitzer takes the position that meaning resides in events. As sociologist Herbert Blumer describes this point of view, it is "to regard meaning as intrinsic to the thing that has it, as being a natural part of the objective makeup of the thing. Thus, a chair is clearly a chair in itself, a cow a cow, a rebellion a rebellion, and so forth. Being inherent in the thing that has it, meaning needs merely to be disengaged by observing the objective thing that has the meaning. The meaning emanates, so to speak, from the thing, and as such there is no process involved in its formation; all that is necessary is to recognize the meaning that is there in the thing."⁵ This is Bitzer's point of view: There is an intrinsic nature in events from which rhetoric inexorably follows, or should follow. Bitzer states, "When I ask, What is a rhetorical situation, I want to know the nature of those contexts in which speakers or writers create rhetorical discourse . . . what are their characteristics and why and how do they result in the creation of rhetoric."⁶ He later adds, "the situation *dictates* the sorts of observations to be made; it *dictates* the significant physical and verbal responses. . . ."⁷ This view is reiterated in various forms throughout the article. Situations are discrete and discernible. They have a life of their own independent in meaning of those upon whom they impinge. They may or may not "require" responses. If they do the situation "*invites*" a response, indeed a "fitting response" almost as a glaring sun requires a shading of the eyes, a clear S-R response.

Bitzer's views are all quite consistent given his Platonist *Weltanschauung*. He sees a world in which "the exigence and the complex of persons, objects, events and relations which generate rhetorical discourse are located in reality, are objective and publicly observable historic facts in the world we experience, are therefore available for scrutiny by an observer or critic who attends to them. To say the situation is objective, publicly observable, and historic means that it is real or genuine—that our critical examination will certify its existence."⁸ If the situation is as Bitzer states elsewhere "a natural *context* of persons, events, objects, and *relations* . . . ,"⁹ it is hard to see how its "existence" can be certified.

Bitzer claims there are three constituents of the rhetorical situation prior to discourse: exigence, audience, and constraints. It is the "exigence" component which interests us most. In de-

scribing "exigence" Bitzer most clearly indicates his view of the source of meaning. He states, "Any exigence is an imperfection marked by urgency; it is a defect, an obstacle, something waiting to be done, a thing that is other than it should be."¹⁰ Not only is a "waiting to be done" now existing in the event, but we also learn that it contains an ethical imperative supposedly independent of its interpreters. Bitzer adds that the situation is rhetorical only if something *can* be done, but apparently it is only rhetorical also if something *should* be done. Bitzer seems to imply that the "positive modification" needed for an exigence is clear. He seems to reflect what Richard Weaver called a "melioristic bias." We learn for example, that the obvious positive modification of pollution of our air is "reduction of pollution." One wonders what the obvious "positive modification" of the military-industrial complex is.

THE MYTH OF THE RHETORICAL SITUATION

Fortunately or unfortunately meaning is not intrinsic in events, facts, people, or "situations" nor are facts "publicly observable." Except for those situations which directly confront our own empirical reality, we learn of facts and events through someone's communicating them to us. This involves a two-part process. First, there is a choice of events to communicate. The world is not a plot of discrete events. The world is a scene of inexhaustible events which all compete to impinge on what Kenneth Burke calls our "sliver of reality."

Bitzer argues that the nature of the context determines the rhetoric. But one never runs out of context. One never runs out of facts to describe a situation. What was the "situation" during the Vietnam conflict? What was the situation of the 1972 elections? What is any historical situation? The facts or events communicated to us are *choices*, by our sources of information. As Murray Edelman points out in *Politics as Symbolic Action*, "People can use only an infinitesimal fraction of the information reaching them. The critical question, therefore, is what accounts for the choice by political spectators and participants of what to organize into a meaningful structure and what to ignore."¹¹ Any rhetor is involved in this sifting and choosing, whether it be the newspaper editor choosing front-page stories versus comic-page stories or the speaker highlighting facts about a person in a eulogy.

The very choice of what facts or events are relevant is a matter of pure arbitration. Once the choice is communicated, the event is imbued with *salience*, or what Chaim Perelman calls "presence," when describing this phenomenon from the framework of argumentation. Perelman says: "By the very fact of selecting certain elements and presenting them to the audience, their importance and pertinency to the discussion are implied. Indeed such a choice endows these elements with a *presence*. . . . It is not enough indeed that a thing should exist for a person to feel its presence."¹²

The second step in communicating "situations" is the translation of the chosen information into meaning. This is an act of creativity. It is an interpretative act. It is a rhetorical act of transcendence. As Perelman states, "interpretation can be not merely a simple choice but also a creation, an invention of significance."¹³

To the audience, events become meaningful only through their linguistic depiction. As Edelman points out, "Political events can become infused with strong affect stemming from psychic tension, from perceptions of economic, military, or other threats or opportunities, and from interactions between social and psychological responses. These political 'events,' however, are largely creations of the language used to describe them."¹⁴ Therefore, meaning is not discovered in situations, but *created* by rhetors.

As soon as one communicates an event or situation he is using evocative language. As Richard Weaver and others have pointed out, language is always value-laden. Clearly the adjectives into which a "situation" are communicated cannot be the "real situation"; they must be a translation. Surely we learn from Bentham that rhetors can arbitrarily choose eulogistic or dyslogistic coverings for the same situation: We have "leaders" or "bosses," "organizations" or "machines," and "education" or "propaganda" not according to the situation's reality, but according to the rhetor's arbitrary choice of characterization. No theory of the relationship between situations and rhetoric can neglect to take account of the initial linguistic depiction of the situation.

IMPLICATIONS FOR RHETORIC

There are critical academic and moral consequences for rhetorical study according to one's view of meaning. If you view

meaning as intrinsic to situations, rhetorical study becomes parasitic to philosophy, political science, and whatever other discipline can inform us as to what the "real" situation is. If, on the other hand, you view meaning as a consequence of rhetorical creation, your paramount concern will be how and by whom symbols create the reality to which people react. In a world of inexhaustible and ambiguous events, facts, images, and symbols, the rhetorician can best account for choices of situations, the evocative symbols, and the forms and media which transmit these translations of meaning. Thus, if anything, a rhetorical basis of meaning requires a disciplinary hierarchy with rhetoric at the top.

The ethical implications for this rhetorical perspective of meaning are crucial. If one accepts Bitzer's position that "the presence of rhetorical discourse obviously indicates the presence of a rhetorical situation,"¹⁵ then we ascribe little responsibility to the rhetor with respect to what he has chosen to give salience. On the other hand if we view the communication of an event as a choice, interpretation, and translation, the rhetor's responsibility is of supreme concern. Thus, when there are few speeches on hunger, and when the individual crime and not the corporate crime is the dominant topic of speakers and newspaper and magazine writers, we will not assume it is due to the relative, intrinsic importance of the two or even to a reading or misreading of the "exigences." Instead the choices will be seen as purposeful acts for discernible reasons. They are *decisions* to make salient or not to make salient these situations.

To view rhetoric as a creation of reality or salience rather than a reflector of reality clearly increases the rhetor's moral responsibility. We do not just have the academic exercise of determining whether the rhetor understood the "situation" correctly. Instead, he must assume responsibility for the salience he has *created*. The potential culpability of John F. Kennedy in the "missile crisis" is thus much greater. The journalists who choose not to investigate corruption in government or the health needs of the elderly are also potentially more culpable. In short, the rhetor is responsible for what he chooses to make salient.

ESSENCE: RHETORIC AND SITUATIONS

The essential question to be addressed is: What is the relationship between rhetoric and situations? It will not be surprising

that I take the converse position of each of Bitzer's major statements regarding this relationship. For example: I would not say "rhetoric is situational,"¹⁶ but situations are rhetorical; not "... exigence strongly invites utterance,"¹⁷ but utterance strongly invites exigence; not "the situation controls the rhetorical response . . ."¹⁸ but the rhetoric controls the situational response; not "... rhetorical discourse . . . does obtain its character-as-rhetorical from the situation which generates it,"¹⁹ but situations obtain their character from the rhetoric which surrounds them or creates them.

When George Aiken suggested several years ago that the United States should declare that she had won the war in Vietnam and get out, it was a declaration of rhetorical determination of meaning. No one understands or understood the "situation" in Vietnam, because there never was a discrete situation. The meaning of the war (war?, civil war?) came from the rhetoric surrounding it. To give salience to a situation in an area roughly the size of one of our middle-size states and to translate its exigencies into patriotism-provoking language and symbolism was a rhetorical choice. There was no "reality" of the situation's being in or not being in our national interest. At least George Aiken saw that the situation was primarily rhetorical, not military or political. And since it was produced rhetorically it could be exterminated rhetorically! As Edelman states "... political beliefs, perceptions and expectations are overwhelmingly not based upon observation or empirical evidence available to participants, but rather upon cuings among groups of people who jointly *create* the meanings they will read into current and anticipated events. . . . The particular meanings that are consensually accepted *need not therefore be cued by the objective situation*; they are rather established by a process of mutual agreement upon significant symbols."²⁰

Political crises, contrary to Bitzer's analysis of Churchill, are rarely "found," they are usually created.²¹ There was a "Cuban Missile Crisis" in 1962, not because of an event or group of events, but mainly because acts of rhetorical creation took place which created a political crisis as well.²² A President dramatically announced on nationwide television and radio that there was a grave crisis threatening the country. This was accompanied by symbolic crisis activity including troop and missile deployment, executive formation of *ad hoc* crisis committees, unavailability of high government officials, summoning of Congressional leaders, etc. Once the situation was made salient and depicted as a

crisis, the situation took new form. In 1970, however, in a similar situation the prospects of a Russian nuclear submarine base off Cienfuegos was *not* a "crisis" because President Nixon *chose* not to employ rhetoric to create one.²³

Bitzer refers to the controlling situation of President Kennedy's assassination. The creation of salience for certain types of events such as Presidential assassinations may be so ritualized that it is uninteresting to analyze it rhetorically. This does not mean, however, that the situation "controlled" the response. It means that the communication of the event was of such consensual symbolism that expectations were easily predictable and stable. Even Bitzer describes the reaction to the assassination as resulting from "reports" of the assassination. Again, one cannot maintain that reports of anything are indistinguishable from the thing itself. Surely Bitzer cannot believe that there was an intrinsic urgency which compelled the rotunda speeches following the killing of President Kennedy (note, that the killing of important people is communicated with the evocative term "assassination"). In fact, the killing of a president of this country at this time is not a real threat to the people in any measurable way. How smooth in fact is the transference of power. How similar the country is before and after the event. (How similar are the President and Vice-President?) *But* since rhetoric *created* fears and threat perception, the rotunda speeches were needed to communicate reassurances.

CONCLUSION

As Edelman states, "language does not mirror an objective 'reality' but rather creates it by organizing meaningful perceptions abstracted from a complex, bewildering world."²⁴ Thus rhetoric is a *cause* not an *effect* of meaning. It is antecedent, not subsequent, to a situation's impact.

Rhetors choose or do not choose to make salient situations, facts, events, etc. This may be the *sine qua non* of rhetoric: the art of linguistically or symbolically creating salience. After salience is created, the situation must be translated into meaning. When political commentators talk about issues they are talking about situations made salient, not something that became important because of its intrinsic predominance. Thus in 1960 Kennedy and Nixon discussed Quemoy and Matsu. A prominent or high-ethos rhetor may create his own salient situations by virtue

of speaking out on them. To say the President is speaking out on a pressing issue is redundant.

It is only when the meaning is seen as the result of a creative act and not a discovery, that rhetoric will be perceived as the supreme discipline it deserves to be.

NOTES

¹ Lloyd Bitzer, "The Rhetorical Situation," *Philosophy and Rhetoric*, 1 (January, 1968) 1.

² Kenneth Burke, *Permanence and Change* (New York: New Republic Inc., 1936) p. 16.

³ Bitzer, p. 9.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 3.

⁵ Herbert Blumer, *Symbolic Interactionism, Perspective and Method* (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1969) pp. 3-4.

⁶ Bitzer, p. 1.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 5, emphasis my own.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 11.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 5, emphasis my own.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 6.

¹¹ Murray Edelman, *Politics as Symbolic Action* (Chicago: Markham Publishing Company, 1971) p. 33.

¹² C. Perelman and L. Olbrechts-Tyteca, *The New Rhetoric*, translated by John Wilkinson and Purcell Weaver (London: University of Notre Dame Press, 1969), pp. 116-117.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 121.

¹⁴ Edelman, p. 65.

¹⁵ Bitzer, p. 2.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 3.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 5.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 6.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 3.

²⁰ Edelman, pp. 32-33.

²¹ For a similar view regarding presidential rhetorical "crisis creation" see Theodore Otto Windt, Jr. "Genres of Presidential Public Address: Repeating the Rhetorical Past," delivered at December, 1972 meeting of the Speech Communication Association of America.

²² Quiet diplomacy was ruled out as were Adlai Stevenson's recommendations of a "trade" of our obsolete missiles in Turkey for Russia's in Cuba. Many of our allies who had lived in the shadow of Russia's nuclear capability could not understand why the United States would find such a situation so intolerable. Moreover, Secretary of Defense MacNamara did not feel that the missiles in Cuba would present an unendurable military situation for the United States. See Elie Abel, *The Missile Crisis* (New York: J.B. Lippincott, 1966) and Theodore Sorensen, *Kennedy* (New York: Harper and Row, 1965) pp. 667-718.

²³ Benjamin Welles, "Soviet's Removal of Vessel in Cuba is Awaited by U.S.," in *The New York Times*, November 15, 1970, p. 1 col. 8.

²⁴ Edelman, p. 66.

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