

1 Rhetoric and Persuasion

Media Ecology and the bias of communication

Because of its action in extending our central nervous system, electric technology seems to favour the inclusive and participational spoken word over the specialist written word. (McLuhan [1964] 1994: 82)

The Media Ecology approach to communication begins with the observation that communication technologies ‘affect human perception, understanding, feeling, and value . . . [Media Ecology] tries to find out what roles media force us to play, how media structure what we are seeing, why media make us feel and act as we do’ (Media Ecology Association n.d.: n.p.). Media extend the senses just as tools – and weapons (!) – extend the hands and wheels extend the feet. For McLuhan, electronic technologies extend the central nervous system. Through our various screens, we can witness global culture, exposing ourselves to new understandings and possible shocks to our senses.

Media ecologists believe that communication technologies shape both the message and the communicator’s consciousness. ‘Writing develops codes in a language different from oral codes in the same language’ (Ong [1982] 1988: 106). ‘Greek literacy changed not only the means of communication, but also the shape of the Greek consciousness’ (Havelock 1986: 17). According to this argument, literacy supports abstract analysis and categorisation that orality cannot support. Havelock’s conclusion parallels arguments made by McLuhan (1962) and Eisenstein (1980) that the moveable type printing press of the 1450s created typographic (print) consciousness.

Media have a bias because they extend some senses and diminish others. People who talk on cellphones while driving are at greater risk of accidents, because their sensory equilibrium and focus of attention have shifted. Readers in trains and buses focus their vision to enter an alternate reality. In *The Bias of Communication* (1951), Innis develops

this theme when he distinguishes between time-biased and space-biased media. Time-biased media communicate over time, because they are durable (stone monuments, earthworks, metal), while space-biased media communicate more effectively over distance (parchment, paper, smoke signals), giving them greater speed and range, but less durability. Innis argues that orality is time-biased – despite its apparent transience – because it depends on personal contact; it fosters social relationships and provides the continuity necessary for community- and nation-building. Oral histories, myths and stories are important cultural artefacts and demonstrate remarkable longevity (Havelock 1986). Bringhurst (1999) writes about Haida oral culture in the Pacific Northwest and describes the difficulty of translating oral stories into print: ‘All classical Haida literature is oral. By definition, therefore, it is something printed books cannot contain, in precisely the same sense that jazz, or the classical music of India, is music that a score cannot contain’ (14).

N. Katherine Hayles thinks we are becoming increasingly ‘posthuman’ in our ability to interact with intelligent machines even to the extent that we do not always know if we are communicating with a human or a computer. She cites Turing’s 1950s intelligence behaviour test, in which a human communicates by computer terminal with two entities in another room, one human and the other a computer. If the human sending the messages cannot tell whether the responses come from a human or a machine, it proves that machines can think. Cynthia Breazeal’s pioneering research at MIT into human–robot interaction comes close to passing Turing’s difficult test (Breazeal 2011; DeSteno 2014: 164).

Hayles believes that communication with computers continues the trend that marked the transition from orality to literacy. When communicating with computers, we depend on ‘the formal manipulation of symbols’ as a sign of intelligence and not on the presence of a human body (Hayles 1999: xi). Compare this with the equally radical discovery following writing’s invention that it no longer matters if the sender is in the receiver’s physical presence – an essential condition for primary orality. The increasing influence of writing in Greek oral culture called for studies of rhetoric and persuasion appropriate for this new medium. The transition from orality to literacy altered notions of identity and performance for classical Greek philosophers, just as communication through digital avatars will affect our own understanding of identity and performance (Turkle 1995).

In the early 1960s, McLuhan associated electronic technologies with ‘inclusive’ orality and expressed a bias against the ‘specialist written word’. Havelock tells a story to explain a surge of academic interest in orality in the early 1960s. In previous decades, scholars and

the general public were impressed by radio's power: 'We had all been listening to the radio, a voice of incessant utterance, orally communicating fact and intention and persuasion, borne on the airwaves to our ears' (1986: 30). Radio played an important role in WWII propaganda. Roosevelt, Hitler, Mussolini, Stalin and Churchill all used radio effectively to mobilise for war. Radio reconfigured orality dramatically by extending broadcast range and audience numbers, making it an international medium of persuasion. Havelock describes students and faculty at the University of Toronto listening to a radio broadcast over loudspeakers in October 1939. At the time, Canada and Britain were at war with Germany:

[Hitler] was exhorting us to call it quits and leave him in possession of what he had seized. The strident, vehement, staccato sentences clanged out and reverberated and chased each other along, series after series, flooding over us, battering us, half drowning us, and yet kept us rooted there listening to a foreign tongue which we somehow could nevertheless imagine that we understood. This oral spell had been transmitted in a twinkling of an eye, across thousands of miles, had been automatically picked up and amplified and poured over us. (1986: 32)

Havelock remarks that Hitler's oratory – while partially improvised and certainly a performance – was also scripted and distributed in print form. This was not primary orality, but a hybrid form, a 'remarriage' of the written and spoken word (33). Like McLuhan, Havelock appreciated orality's expressive power and was biased in its favour for certain communication tasks.

Rhetoric: room for argument

A great debate about the ethics of rhetoric began soon after the introduction of writing in seventh century BCE Greece. Orality's patterns of thought evolved toward writing's greater abstraction, analysis and categorisation, allowing a systematic study of rhetoric. Plato occupies a pivotal and paradoxical position in Western thought: as a literate person steeped in oral traditions, he was sceptical about writing. In *Phaedrus* (360 BCE), he expresses reservations about the loss of memory resulting from widespread literacy, and writing's inability to engage in real-time dialogue with an audience. On the other hand, he excludes poets from his ideal republic, because their oral discourse does not allow the close analysis and reflection made possible by writing (*The Republic* 360 BCE). In recording the Socratic dialogues in written

form, Plato uses Socrates to advance a new conception of consciousness. Socrates clings to oral habits, while using words in ‘a brand new manner, no longer as an exercise in poetic memorisation, but as a prosaic instrument for breaking the spell of the poetic tradition’ (Havelock 1986: 5). Writing encouraged a different kind of thinking – more conceptual, abstract and reasoned – and was thus able to articulate the city state’s ideals.

As orality and literacy were vying for the stage in Athenian democracy, Plato and Aristotle took differing positions on rhetoric’s role. Plato was suspicious that rhetoric, with its origins in oratory, was more concerned with persuasion than with truth, especially as practiced by the Sophists, who considered rhetoric an end in itself. Plato describes Socrates as troubled by the possible abuse of rhetoric. When he challenges the rhetorician Gorgias on the matter, Gorgias replies with a classic rhetorical defence:

Socrates: . . . [T]he rhetorician need not know the truth about things; he has only to discover some way of persuading the ignorant that he has more knowledge than those who know?

Gorgias: Yes, Socrates, and is not this a great comfort? Not to have learned the other arts, but the art of rhetoric only, and yet to be in no way inferior to the professors of them? (Plato *Gorgias* 380 BCE)

For Socrates, rhetoric trades more in appearances and wit than in truth or justice. Rhetoric is like cooking, ‘producing a sort of delight and gratification’. It is ‘not an art at all, but the habit of a bold and ready wit, which knows how to manage mankind’. Rhetoric is the ‘ghost or counterfeit’ of politics; it is ‘ignoble’ because it describes appearances, not essences. We recognise Gorgias’ approach to rhetoric in the confident predictions of pundits whose accuracy is questionable (Tetlock 2005).

Aristotle took a different, more pragmatic approach. Rhetoric is both useful and necessary for political discourse – a civic art with the power to shape and sustain communities. Aristotle identifies three modes of persuasion: *logos* – reasoned discourse, including logic and dialectic (argument); *pathos* – appeals to the emotions, sympathies or imagination; and *ethos* – the speaker’s moral character, as perceived by the audience (linked to the speaker’s alignment with community ideals). Aristotle sees rhetoric as ‘the faculty of observing in any given case the available means of persuasion’ and makes no distinction between benign persuasion and deception (*Rhetoric*, Ch. 2). Its first and only requirement is that it be effective for a particular audience.

Rhetoric exploits the ambiguity and instability of language. ‘Rhetoric

is language at play – language plus. It is what persuades and cajoles, inspires and bamboozles, thrills and misdirects’ (Leith 2012: 6). Rhetoric is the language of tricksters. Hermes, the Greek god of cunning, deceit and trickery, was also the god of persuasive speech and oratory. Like Eshu, Hermes was a messenger to the gods and interpreter of human affairs. Leith notes that Corax (whose name means crow in Latin) is credited with being the first to define the art of persuasion. Corax refined his approach to rhetoric in the courts, and rhetoric is often adversarial in nature. In the justice system, opponents present their arguments and a decision is made by a judge, jury or the public. Ideally, the successful argument uses credible evidence, emotional conviction and personal character to influence the judgement. Corax ‘grasped the essential notion that in rhetoric you are dealing with likelihood rather than certainty: there is room for argument, and it is precisely in that room for argument that the art of persuasion flourishes’ (Leith 2012: 20).

Rhetoric from orality to print

Despite their differences, legal advocacy and public relations both inherited elements of orality’s agonistic spirit – its tendency to approach rhetoric as a contest, a battle of wits. Walter Ong (1982) finds this tendency when he compares oral, written (chirographic) and print-based (typographic) discourse to argue that the medium influences both rhetorical style and consciousness. Ong used research by Milman Parry and his student Alfred Lord on performance practices of Serbo-Croatian oral poets, which provided insights into the oral formulas in Homer’s epic poems (Lord 1960). Okpewho (1979) and Goody (1977) conducted similar research into oral performance. They found that oral performances were often staged as contests, where poets ‘stitch things together’ (from *rhapsōidein*, stitching) to demonstrate their language skills. Because oral poetry depends on memory, it uses repeated or formulaic phrases, epithets, word forms and clichés, all of which must fit into the metrical pattern of the composition. Poets working in the oral tradition stitch their poems together from component parts, never in exactly the same order. They are improvising, like jazz musicians. When Homer’s poems were written down in the seventh century BCE, they became literary texts, fixed in place, with strong residual orality.

Orality has distinctive psychodynamic characteristics. Spoken language is fleeting – it disappears as it is spoken – which profoundly impacts the communications environment for both speaker and listener. Because spoken words are propelled by breath, they are dynamic in ways written words cannot be. Sound, emerging from the body’s interior,

draws listeners into closer physical presence and binds the listening community together. Oral poets rely on ‘memorable thoughts’ (Ong [1982] 1988: 34) patterned for retention, ready for recall. They portray ‘heavy’ characters, who are bigger than life, though psychologically flat by literate standards. ‘Colourless personalities cannot survive oral mnemonics’ (70). Contemporary comic book superheroes originate in orality’s heavy characters. Formulaic phrases, such as ‘enemy of the people’, ‘weapons of mass destruction’ or ‘capitalist war-monger’, demonstrate residual orality. Orality is marked by fluency, redundancy and copiousness; a dense, analytic writing style is only possible with reflection and editing.

Orality preserves traditions when it remembers the past and brings it forward as a form of knowledge, binding communities together over time through shared words and stories. Talk radio hosts and evangelical preachers are equally concerned with community-building around shared language, beliefs and values. Orality frequently ‘situates knowledge within a context of struggle’ (Ong [1982] 1988: 44). Ong notes the prevalence of reciprocal name-calling (‘flyting’) in oral cultures, as illustrated by the African-American practice of signifying, or playing the dozens, both important influences in rap music. Bargaining in oral cultures is a series of manoeuvres, a duel of wits, a performance.

In contrast, text-formed thought shifts sensory equilibrium from the ear to the eye and gives rise to abstract categorisation, formal logic and reasoning, definitions, geometric figures, comprehensive descriptions and self-reflection (Ong [1982] 1988: 55). While orality is dynamic and body-centred, text is static and removed from physicality. ‘Writing moves words from the sound world to a world of visual space, but print locks words into position in this space. Control of position is everything in print’ (121). With this control comes ownership of words and copyright and ‘closure’ of the printed text through a process of editing, printing and distribution. The evolution of communication from primary orality to writing to print and back to the secondary orality of radio, film, television and social networking requires a parallel evolution of rhetoric. While Manovich’s *The Language of New Media* (2001) remains an important early text, there is still much research to be done on the rhetorics of computer-mediated communication.

Rhetoric in disguise: identification and mystification

Rhetoric in any medium can be disguised. Kenneth Burke observes that ‘a rhetorical motive is often present where it is not usually recognised, or thought to belong’ ([1950] 1969: xiii). For example, identification is an important persuasive manoeuvre that does not announce

itself as rhetoric, but comes disguised as something else. For Burke, persuasion

. . . ranges from the bluntest quest of advantage, as in sales promotion or propaganda, through courtship, social etiquette, education, and the sermon, to a 'pure' form that delights in the process of appeal for itself alone, without ulterior purpose. And identification ranges from the politician who, addressing an audience of farmers, says 'I was a farm boy myself', through the mysteries of social status, to the mystic's devout identification with the sources of all being. (xiv)

Burke's theory of rhetorical identification is illustrated by Tony Blair's speech to the United States Congress on 17 July 2003. Blair tells an anecdote about his son to frame a rationalisation for the war on terror:

Actually, you know, my middle son was studying 18th century history and the American War of Independence, and he said to me the other day, 'You know, Lord North, Dad, he was the British prime minister who lost us America. So just think, however many mistakes you'll make, you'll never make one that bad'.

Members of Congress, I feel a most urgent sense of mission about today's world. September 11 was not an isolated event, but a tragic prologue, Iraq another act, and many further struggles will be set upon this stage before it's over. (Blair 2003: n.p.)

Blair identifies with a former British Prime Minister, Lord North, and leverages the reference about losing America to a spirited defence of the US-UK coalition in Iraq. The story about his son casts Blair in the roles of father, friend and protector, and his use of self-deprecating humour implies that he is a humble man of the people. These multiple identifications establish Blair's credentials (*etbos*) and suggest his motivation through a symbolic transformation: he elevates his status from father and friend to responsible statesman. Simultaneously, he elevates the Iraq War to a struggle for liberation and freedom that parallels the United States' struggle for freedom from Great Britain's tyranny more than 200 years earlier. The shifting identifications that establish Blair's credentials disguise his abrupt transition to a direct personal statement: 'I feel a most urgent sense of mission about today's world'. It is an impressive rhetorical performance accomplished in plain language, relying not on evidence or reason to make its point, but on identification and personal belief.

Burke uses a 'dramatistic pentad' model to investigate the performance aspects of rhetoric. His model includes five interrelated components of persuasion: the act (what happens); the scene (context for the

act); the agent (actor); the agency (means); and the purpose (motive) (Burke [1941a] 1973). In his speech to Congress, Blair acknowledges its performative context by referring to September 11 as ‘a tragic prologue, Iraq another act’. In Blair’s drama, the world is threatened by terrorists (the scene: 9/11, Iraq) and needs decisive leaders (actors) working together (the means: UK–US coalition) to safeguard freedom from tyranny (the motive). He cunningly develops an argument from sensory experience (his son’s comment), to an image (of a world in peril), to a transcendent myth (of liberty, freedom and security). Burke identified this progression from sensory experience to transcendence as a form of mystification or rhetoric in disguise. His analysis of motive in ‘The Rhetoric of Hitler’s “Battle”’ ([1941b] 2006) illustrates another example of rhetorical mystification and includes a warning to avoid ‘similar medicine in America’ (149).

Burke describes ascending or descending hierarchies of images as other ways to obscure rhetorical motives. The hierarchical movement can be oriented towards glory, glamour, charisma and celebrity or it can descend from concern and fear to tragedy and annihilation. Beginning with actions and events in a plausible world, the rhetorician builds a ladder of identification from sense impressions, to symbols, to transcendent narratives (myth, magic or mystery) motivated by belief or faith. Blair ascends from the sense impressions of his talk with his son about American history, to the symbolism of September 11, to the transcendent myth of paternal protection from tyranny – his mission. As in dramatic tragedy, pity and fear motivate audiences even more powerfully than visions of order and harmony, subjects more suitable for comedy. Thus, Blair increases the dramatic impact of his speech by warning of a possible descent toward tragedy: ‘and many further struggles will be set upon this stage before it’s over’. Blair’s performance before the US Congress exhibited a masterful use of identification and mystification to disguise the contest between rhetoric and reason – the focus of our next section on logical fallacies.

Logical fallacies: rhetoric trumps reason

Aristotle’s study of logic and reasoning (collected by his followers as the *Art of Rhetoric* in the fourth century BCE) systematises reasoning and provides a method to evaluate the validity of statements. Deductive logic makes inferences (‘If . . . then’ statements) using the syllogism structure to combine premises into a conclusion: if [the average temperature of the planet is rising], and if [the rising temperature is caused by human activity], then [we can do

something about it]. Premises are assertions that must be either true or false, and sound logic only confirms the validity – not the truth or falsity – of the conclusion. The conclusion is not a statement of truth, only a statement of possibility should the premises prove to be true.

In contrast, inductive logic – the basis of scientific inquiry – collects evidence through observation and testing to arrive at probable conclusions. Though many discoveries start out as valid deductions awaiting further proof, what science has discovered about the natural world is largely based on induction. Election exit polls predict winners; laboratories administer drugs and observe the results; and corporations plan budgets based on previous economic data. While the outcome is not guaranteed, the prediction's likelihood is thought to increase with sample size. The story of Eshu's cap reminds us that contingency – unexpected possibility or chance – always leaves a residue of uncertainty in predictions. Propagandists exploit this uncertainty to justify a fear, a doubt or a lack of action, even in the face of overwhelming evidence. Taleb (2007) makes a convincing case for the possibility of a 'highly improbable' event – a black swan in a world of white swans – coming as a complete surprise and instantly redefining what is possible. The events of 11 September 2001 offer a dramatic illustration of the black swan effect. Monbiot (2006) and Hoggan (2009) note that 'experts' sponsored by oil companies exploited perceived uncertainties in the science of climate change to delay political action for at least twenty years. The overwhelming scientific evidence was 'an inconvenient truth', according to the Guggenheim and Gore documentary (2006), and roused the climate change deniers to action.

Logical fallacies are errors in deduction and induction. They can be highly persuasive, especially when skilfully framed with rhetorical devices, ambiguous language, figures of speech and compelling emotional appeals. The Nizkor Project website, established to refute the claims of Holocaust deniers, includes a comprehensive section on logical fallacies. Lanham's *A Handlist of Rhetorical Terms* (1991) is a reliable guide to classical rhetoric, and Harris (2013) regularly updates a useful online resource, the *Handbook of Rhetorical Devices*. A few examples of logical fallacies:

- *Equivocation* uses vague and ambiguous language to obscure the truth: 'We will do everything in our power to ensure that those responsible are brought to justice'.
- The *ad populum* fallacy suggests that something is right or acceptable because the public agrees with it. 'The (British) people want us to do the right thing'. Similarly, the *bandwagon* fallacy justifies

a course of action because everyone is doing it. Technology adoption often plays the bandwagon card.

- *Appeals to emotion* bypass careful reasoning and play on biases, short cuts (heuristics) and prejudices (see Kahneman 2011).
- A *red herring* introduces an irrelevant topic to divert attention away from the main issue. Other sources of distraction include *ridicule*, which uses mockery instead of evidence, and *ad hominem attacks*, which attempt to discredit an opponent's character, instead of addressing the issues.
- Shermer ([1997] 2002) lists twenty-five fallacies, including a number that influence scientific discoveries. *Pseudoscience* uses anecdotal evidence, rumour and an insufficient number of samples (48). *Post hoc* (after the fact) reasoning, like superstition, argues that close correlation and coincidence equal causation (53–4).
- *Special pleading* – the relativist fallacy – occurs when people apply standards, principles and rules to others, while exempting themselves from those standards. Liars often use special pleading to exempt themselves from ethical standards (Bok 1978).
- *Misleading vividness* uses a small number of dramatic events to dispute significant evidence. With the *spotlight fallacy* – similar to the *availability bias* (Kahneman 2011) – the most familiar or recent case is perceived to be more significant than it is. Media attention on violent crime creates the false impression that crime rates are increasing.
- The *slippery slope* fallacy argues that consequences must inevitably follow from an action or decision, even when no causal connection can be shown: 'If we intervene in this conflict, we'll be committed to future involvement'.
- *Appeal to authority* uses the testimony of an authority to support a claim, even though the person might not be an expert on the particular issue or might be biased in some way.
- *Ipse dixit*, the *bare assertion fallacy*, translates from the Latin as 'he, himself, said it' and claims a statement is true merely because it is asserted. As transparent as this fallacy appears to be, it is the basis of arguments to authority and expert testimony: 'What he says must be true because he's an expert'. Even more profoundly, *ipse dixit* implies the argument is over: 'That's just the way it is', no further proof necessary.
- *Hasty generalisations* make universal conclusions based on too few examples. In 2014, Canadian Prime Minister Stephen Harper addressed the Israeli Knesset: '[T]his is the face of the new anti-

Semitism. It targets the Jewish people by targeting Israel and attempts to make the old bigotry acceptable to a new generation' (Goodman 2014: n.p.). Criticising Israel is anti-Semitic, according to Harper's argument, and an overgeneralisation. *Stereotypes* are hasty, often unconscious generalisations, as are the *genetic fallacy* and *guilt by association*, both of which make judgements based on where people come from or who they associate with.

- The *false dilemma* states that either X is true or Y is true, but both cannot be true: 'Every nation has to either be with us, or against us. Those who harbour terrorists, or who finance them, are going to pay a price' (US Senator Hillary Clinton, 13 September 2001). This common fallacy attempts to limit options and control how an issue is framed.

Figures of speech

Figures of speech constitute a broad class of linguistic constructions contributing additional emphasis, originality and vividness. While frequently used to clarify or enhance a message, figures of speech can be distracting by introducing ambiguity or further complexity. For example, *irony* plays on multiple meanings of a word or expression to create a message opposite to that which is expected, often for satiric purposes: 'We will use all our military might to ensure peace in the region'. Irony trades on ambiguity and double meanings.

Figures of speech are further classified into *schemes* and *tropes*, the nuts-and-bolts of rhetoric used to enhance persuasive effect, create emphasis or obscure meaning. Schemes reorganise usual word patterns for emphasis or to create new meanings, while tropes extend meaning by substitution, comparison or transformation. Common schemes summarise previous arguments in a forceful manner (*accumulation*), arrange words in order of increasing importance (*climax*) or repeat words or expressions, while adding detail for emphasis (*amplification*). Inverting usual word order (*anastrophe*), juxtaposing opposing or contrasting ideas (*antithesis*) and summarising a preceding argument with a single, wise statement (*sententia*) are only a few of the many schemes categorised in classical rhetoric.

Tropes include *allegory* – the use of a story to illustrate a moral using symbolic characters and events; *allusions* – short references to a familiar person or event; *analogies* – comparing two things to suggest that an unfamiliar concept is similar to a familiar one; and *false analogies* – which are misleading when superficial similarities obscure important differences: for example, equating the Alberta tar sands to 'ethical oil' (Levant 2010).

G. W. Bush used the analogy of a crusade to describe the US response to the 9/11 attacks and was criticised for using inflammatory rhetoric (Bush 2001; Cockburn 2002). Ironically, Osama bin Laden used the same analogy to describe Western interference in Arab affairs (2005).

Euphemism substitutes a less offensive term for another: ‘collateral damage’ for ‘civilian deaths’, ‘downsizing’ for ‘termination’, ‘enhanced interrogation’ for ‘torture’. *Hyperbole* deliberately exaggerates for effect (‘shock and awe’), while *innuendo*, or insinuation, is an indirect reference, usually involving criticism: ‘Some people hint at corruption in the highest offices’. *Metaphor* compares two different things by referring to one in terms of the other. Unlike *simile* or analogy, metaphor is a form of identification and asserts that one thing *is* another thing. *Metonymy* substitutes an associated image to stand for something or someone: 10 Downing Street (UK Prime Minister), Fleet Street (British press), Madison Avenue (US advertising), the Pentagon (US military). *Satire* uses irony, sarcasm, ridicule and parody to criticise with humorous effect. In a classic example, Swift’s *A Modest Proposal* (1729) satirised British foreign policy by proposing that the Irish should eat their children during a famine caused by that foreign policy. During a White House Correspondents’ Dinner in 2006, comedian Stephen Colbert performed a ‘blistering’ satire in mocking tribute to George W. Bush (Goodman 2006; *Colbert Roasts Bush* 2006). In his speech, Colbert identified himself with Bush, because both made decisions from the gut, not the head. In 2005, Colbert had gained notoriety as a political satirist for coining the word ‘truthiness’ to describe an assertion made ‘from the gut’ or because it ‘feels right’, without recourse to evidence or logic (wikipedia.org/wiki/Truthiness). Ironically, recent scientific findings seem to confirm that Bush’s ‘from the gut’ decision-making process can be highly effective: we need emotion to inform reason.

Descartes’ error and the limits of reason

Logic and reasoning are tools used to assess validity, truth and falsehood, but reason is often inadequate to the task when it does not account for the complete body/brain in its social context. Noë ([2009] 2010) contends that consciousness is not like digestion, something happening within the individual body: ‘Consciousness requires the joint operation of brain, body, and world. Indeed, consciousness is an achievement of the whole animal in its environmental context’ (10). Consciousness is ‘more like dancing than it is like digestion’ (2009: xii). Standard economic theory assumes that people are consistently and reliably motivated by self-interest; they act rationally; and their tastes

are consistent (Kahneman 2011: 269). Humans are considered to be irrational, illogical, uninformed or inattentive when misled by false reasoning and manipulative rhetoric. Recent discoveries in neuroscience, behavioural economics and social psychology are challenging the tradition of dispassionate analytical reasoning espoused in Western culture, beginning with Plato's concept of ideal forms and notably addressed in Descartes' *Discourse on the Method* (1637) and Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason* (1787). Humans are 'predictably irrational' (Ariely [2008] 2010; Kahneman 2011; Silver 2012; Lehrer [2009] 2010), whether playing poker, making economic decisions or assessing the truth of arguments. Reason needs emotion for effective decision-making.

In *Descartes' Error*, neuroscientist Antonio Damasio argues for new conceptions of reason and decision-making to include the interdependence of thinking and feeling, involving not only the brain, but the rest of the body as well. His somatic marker hypothesis positions emotion 'in the loop of reason', where it 'could assist the reasoning process rather than disturb it, as was commonly assumed' (1994: xi). The body makes an early contribution to decision-making through somatic markers, bodily sensations that may be felt as a 'gut feeling' (173). Somatic markers are acquired by experience, quickly pushing us toward certain solutions and narrowing options. Zak's research (2008) into the influence of the hormone oxytocin on feelings of empathy adds substance to Damasio's hypothesis. Without somatic markers to narrow the range of choices, decision-making becomes prolonged and unwieldy. 'Somatic markers probably increase the accuracy and efficiency of the decision process' (1994: 173), concludes Damasio.

In *Thinking, Fast and Slow* (2011), Kahneman qualifies Damasio's conclusions. He identifies two 'systems' of thinking: System 1 (fast, based on biases and heuristics, often unconscious); and System 2 (slow and more effortful, requiring analysis and computation). Emotion – acting through neurotransmitters like epinephrine (adrenaline) and dopamine – is necessary for initiating action quickly, but reason adds deliberation and reflection, so humans can act both quickly and intelligently. Both System 1 and System 2 thinking can lead us astray when applied inappropriately. At times, heuristic short cuts (rules of thumb) lead us in the wrong direction, as when we mistakenly assume an expert is providing objective advice. Sometimes over-analysing a situation confuses us into ignoring our gut instincts. 'At their best, feelings point us in the proper direction, take us to the appropriate place in a decision-making space, where we may put the instruments of logic to good use' (Damasio 1994: xvii). Contemporary conceptions of reasoning and decision-making no longer rely on Descartes' error – 'I think,

therefore I am' – to characterise what actually happens in the body-brain-environment.

Cognitive dissonance and backfire

Facts are not always the enemy of deception. Festinger (1957) identified cognitive dissonance as the mental stress people experience when they must simultaneously hold contradictory beliefs, ideas or values. You discover, for example, that the person or nation you love has betrayed your trust. People experiencing cognitive dissonance will actively try to reduce the discomfort or avoid situations likely to increase it. Journalist Joe Keohane reports on research by Nyhan and Reifler (2010), which discovered that 'when misinformed people, particularly political partisans, were exposed to corrected facts in news stories, they rarely changed their minds. In fact, they often became even more strongly set in their beliefs' (Keohane 2010: n.p.). Nyhan calls this phenomenon 'backfire': 'a natural defence mechanism against cognitive dissonance' (qtd in Keohane). People use 'motivated reasoning' or belief to decide which facts to accept and are unwilling to change their beliefs, even when confronted with contradictory evidence.

Communications glut – where gossip, misinformation and rumour have as much currency as verifiable fact – compounds backfire. Denials and accusations are lost in the free market information whirlpool of 'communicative capitalism' (Dean 2008: 102). The more people care about a subject – its salience – the more firmly they retain their beliefs in the face of conflicting evidence. In Nyhan and Reifler's research, people who self-identified as conservatives believed even more strongly that weapons of mass destruction were found in Iraq after their misconceptions were challenged by (lack of) evidence. Keohane connects their research to the findings of Taber and Lodge (2006) that

politically sophisticated thinkers were even less open to new information than less sophisticated types. These people may be factually right about 90 per cent of things, but their confidence makes it nearly impossible to correct the 10 per cent on which they're totally wrong. (Keohane 2010: n.p.)

Despite common perceptions, conspiracy theories are not generally the result of 'backwardness or ignorance'. Instead, '[c]onspiracy theories originate and are largely circulated among the educated and middle class ... It has typically been professors, the university students, the managers, the journalists, and the civil servants who have

concocted and disseminated the conspiracies' (Aaronovitch [2009] 2010: 338). Ellul observes that educated people are often more susceptible to propaganda, because they are accustomed to being right about the facts and confident they can distinguish truth from lies. Besides, he argues, the 'aim of modern propaganda is no longer . . . to change an opinion, but to arouse an active and mythical belief' ([1965] 1973: 25). A mythical belief is not an idea or opinion susceptible to reason; rather, it is an embodied state expressed as action in the world.

Boyd (2009) says that religious stories 'prove hard to dislodge despite their detachment from fact' (202). The confirmatory bias – where we readily accept confirmation of our beliefs, but reject contradictory evidence – and the conformist bias – which encourages us to think like others – add to this resistance. While religious beliefs contribute to social cohesion, lack of belief may be seen as a 'challenge to group unity and as tantamount to treason' (206). Osama bin Laden accused the political leaders of Saudi Arabia of treachery against the *ummah* (global nation of Islamic peoples) for cooperating and trading with the 'crusader' American empire. As a consequence, he was stripped of citizenship and his assets were frozen by the Saudi Government in 1994 (bin Laden 2005).

The triumph of narrative

Religious beliefs are memes – memorable cultural artefacts that spread like viruses from host to host. As with 'selfish' genes, memes 'act only for themselves; their only interest is their own replication; all they want is to be passed on to the next generation' (Blackmore [1999] 2000: 5). A meme is a self-replicating unit of culture – an idea, song, story, image, viral video or trend – that appears to have taken on a life of its own (though humans are the carriers of memes, just as they are of genes). The test for memes is simple yet decisive: 'successful memes are the ones that get copied and spread, while unsuccessful ones do not' (7). Myths and well-known stories are persistent memes contributing to cultural cohesion, and they are defended vigorously by the tribe.

Storytelling is perhaps humanity's most widespread and persuasive medium for circulating cultural values. Narratives command attention, explain conflict, reveal character, engage emotions and transmit morals, beliefs and memes. Gottschall (2012) observes the importance of conflict in storytelling: 'Fiction . . . is about trouble' (52). Fulford (1999) identifies the origins of narrative in gossip and stories about other people, but we also need to include myths and origin tales as early stories. All cultures have stories about the mysteries of existence,

and archaeologists find evidence of early cultural narratives in rock paintings, petroglyphs, monuments and earthworks.

Aristotle (*Poetics* 350 BCE) defines narrative as the imitation of an action, a fabrication involving something familiar. Mimesis, or imitation, acts as an anchor to engage audience interest. To introduce dramatic tension and engage emotions, narrative advances with a series of plot complications moving toward a reversal of fortune. Characters discover the consequences of their actions in a recognition scene – an emotionally powerful moment designed to engage empathy. Characters must be memorable, either more noble or more corrupt than usual. Their tragic flaw is a failure of self-reflection and is more consequential because of their heroic attributes. Larger-than-life ('heavy') characters are typical of myth, religion and oral poetry: '[S]tories with unseen agents who can monitor our behaviour and administer punishment or reward – the stories we call religion – permeate and persist partly because they offer such powerful ways of motivating and apparently monitoring cooperative behaviour' (Boyd 2009: 64).

'Stories', Fulford writes, 'are how we explain, how we teach, how we entertain ourselves, and how we often do all three at once. They are the juncture where facts and feelings meet' (1999: 9). Experts in rhetoric and persuasion must be expert storytellers.

Stories create belief

In her analysis of narrative in cyberspace, Janet Murray reviews the basic components of narrative, beginning with the Romantic poet Coleridge's idea that the work of imagination requires a 'willing suspension of disbelief'. Murray finds this approach too passive, even for oral and print media: 'We do not suspend disbelief so much as we actively *create belief*' (1997: 110). Creating belief is immersive. The imagination works actively to enter into the story's enveloping world:

[W]e construct alternate narratives as we go along, we cast actors or people we know into the roles of the characters, we perform the voices of the characters in our heads, we adjust the emphasis of the story to suit our interests, and we assemble the story into cognitive schemata that make up our own systems of knowledge and belief. (1997: 110)

Stories are cognitively engaging and immersive, especially when they embed a moral, myth or belief salient to audiences.

If spectacle is added to this active immersion, audiences can be moved to 'another order of perception' (Murray 1997: 112), where

they are highly receptive to collective suggestion. From the Greek dramas, Indian Kathakali, medieval morality plays and Elizabethan theatre, to the films, television, computer games, sporting events, religious ceremonies, music concerts and political gatherings of our time, spectacles elevate us with their integration of narrative, sensual stimulation, heightened emotion and sheer scale into a matrix of community and belief. The theatre of Dionysus in Athens strategically positioned the audience to witness the performance, to see others respond and to be seen. Its amphitheatre design creates a 'seeing place' (*theatron*), the prototype of Rome's Coliseum, and sports arenas, stadiums and places of worship of our time. Spectacle of this sort builds community, offers instruction, creates belief.

Collective participation can be contagious and motivating, and a powerful opportunity for orchestrators of spectacle and persuasion. In the next chapter, we explore visual spectacle and its ambiguous, even contradictory, position in communication studies. While societies need spectacle for cultural cohesion and renewal, spectacle's abuse for social engineering and control remains a deeply rooted anxiety. Just as we discovered rhetorical conventions in orality, literacy and narrative, we will find equally powerful conventions in visual imagery and spectacle.

Exercise questions

1. Either in writing or on video, retell a story in your own words that has particular significance in your culture.
2. Describe any preferences or biases in your use of media. For example, do you prefer to send an email or use the telephone, read a newspaper or find your news online? What accounts for these preferences?
3. In *Metaphors We Live By* (1980), Lakoff and Johnson argue that metaphors frequently influence our thinking and behaviour outside our conscious awareness. Identify a metaphor that you live by and describe what purpose it serves in your life.
4. Select ten logical fallacies and illustrate them with examples from recent publications or media broadcasts.
5. Illustrate ten figures of speech (schemes and tropes) from writing or speeches produced since 2012.
6. Describe a widespread belief in your culture that needs to be challenged.
7. Analyse a speech by a public official or celebrity where you focus on the speaker's rhetoric. What rhetorical strategies are used, and how do they influence the speech's substance and credibility?



Figure 3 'Mass media'. Photo: M. Soules, Athens, 1995.