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Comment on Kristine Warrenburg's "The Invisible Argument: Recognizing race through visceral reasoning"

MOIRA GUTTERIDGE KLOSTER

*Department of Philosophy and Politics
University of the Fraser Valley,
Abbotsford, B.C. V2S 7M8
Canada
Maira.Kloster@ucfv.ca*

This paper is timely. In spite of the increase in disembodied communication through text messaging and e-mail, the fields of logic and rhetoric increasingly recognize how much we lose in comprehension if we ignore the significance of who spoke the words, with what emotion, and in what physical setting.

In 1968, at the time of Robert Kennedy's speech in Indianapolis, the prevailing theory would have been that the words must be judged independent of the speaker. If Kennedy argued that the assassination of Martin Luther King must not be met with further violence but with love, wisdom, compassion and the desire for justice, then his conclusion would be justified only if his words alone were enough to support it. Today we are much more ready to understand that we may lose a crucial part of the significance of those words unless, in Warrenburg's words, we "foreground" the impact of them being spoken by a white male political candidate on an improvised stage to a primarily black audience. Warrenburg's research investigates the actual impact of the speech on people who were in the audience, showing how the physical experience was crucial to their interpretation.

This "visceral" component of the reasoning is present equally in both speaker and listeners. The body which "holds one there in the action, moment, and/or experience" (p. 2) is in Kennedy's case white, male, privileged, and yet vulnerable, facing the listeners whose bodies are black, not privileged, but less vulnerable by being the majority. The word "visceral" invites us not just to recognize the physical elements of a speech but to embrace a dual perspective: both how the outside of the arguer's body appears to others, and how the inside of one's own body reacts to the giving or receiving of argument.

We may be ready to accept that non-verbal elements of an argument should be factored into the impact of an argument, but the question is how? As Warrenburg notes, there is an immediate problem in being sure we have correctly interpreted the experiential elements: "Body arguments are open to multiple readings" (p. 8). It is much easier to judge whether these elements *do* in fact succeed in persuading the audience than to judge whether they *should* succeed. Kennedy's audience did not riot—but should they have? Were they properly persuaded just because he was there in person?

The challenge lies in deciding how to weigh visceral elements appropriately as supporting or undermining the conclusion of an argument. I will suggest two ways we

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might deal with the visceral components of an argument. Both may be useful in deciding whether the argument should be accepted. One approach treats the visceral elements as part of the argument. The other approach treats the visceral elements as indicative of the relationship between arguer and audience. This relationship is not part of the argument but is a precondition for what kind of interaction the argument can be, and therefore whether the argument could succeed. Both approaches are compatible with Warrenburg's interpretation: will either one take the theory forward?

To set up the two approaches, consider one key statement in Kennedy's speech: "a white man killed my brother." It is a key premise in Kennedy's argument: although he is white and cannot directly experience how black people feel when one of their own is killed by a white man, he can at the most visceral level understand what it is to have a brother assassinated because he was a political leader. If Warrenburg is right, it is crucial that he speak these words in person. We can test the hypothesis that his presence ought to make a difference to his argument by imaging the impact of the same premise presented in other ways. For example, suppose Kennedy appears not live but televised. Delivered on screen instead of in person, his words become much weaker because his screen presence says, "I was not willing to face you in person." To restore the argument to its intended strength, he would need to add words that excuse his absence. For example, he could send a black spokesperson to deliver his apology, and then say, "Kennedy asked me to remind you that a white man killed his brother." The credibility of the argument is increased relative to the televised appearance. The black spokesperson's willingness to act on Kennedy's behalf tells the black community that at least one of their number finds Kennedy credible. At the opposite extreme, suppose the words are spoken by a white man, perhaps someone like 1960s Chicago mayor Richard Daley—anyone who might plausibly enforce his preferences on a resistant public. The physical presence of such a white man in front of a black audience actually undermines the argument—if the speaker could enforce "no violence," that coercive element outweighs all the spoken reasoning and makes it at best a polite façade.

Yet the soundness of the premise is identical in all three cases. It is true that Robert Kennedy's brother Jack was killed by a white man, and implicitly this does further establish that Robert Kennedy understands at least part of how black people might feel about the death of Dr. Martin Luther King. But this truth does and should have significantly different impact as a premise in the argument depending on whether it is presented in person, on screen, by a black spokesperson, or by a "Mayor Daley." How do we effectively measure the impact of these physical and contextual changes?

The first way we could handle the impact is to weigh the visceral components themselves as additional evidence. There is precedent for this in the move towards weighing emotion in reasoning. For example, Jean Nienkamp (2005) argues that "data with a high emotional content" is warranted in certain situations, and gives as one key example the law's use of victim impact testimony in the 1997 trial of Timothy McVeigh for the Oklahoma City bombing. To weigh emotion effectively, Nienkamp suggests Peter Goldie's criteria: "intelligibility, appropriateness, and proportionality of emotions" (Nienkamp 2005, p. 346) Along the same lines, my colleague Anastasia Anderson drew on her work with Aristotle and the emotions to develop the following criteria for critical thinking in general. Emotions are supporting elements in argument when: (i) emotions signal an unconscious recognition of important aspects of a person or situation, (ii)

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emotions legitimately tip the balance in favour of a particular course of action because all other factors are even, or (iii) the desired outcome of the argument is to be in a particular emotional state. Conversely, emotions fail to support, or undermine a conclusion, when (i) we cannot pinpoint the true cause of the emotion, (ii) our emotions are affected by our physiological state, or (iii) emotions blind us to certain aspects of a situation or problem. (Kloster & Anderson 2006, Ch. 7, 9) By these criteria, the visceral components of Kennedy's argument will indeed provide the support Warrenburg expects. Kennedy's physical presence triggers recognition by the crowd of what he has done by coming in person, and the desired impact is to cool the potential anger of the crowd—to change their emotional state.

The second way we could handle the impact of visceral elements is to step back from the reasoning into the power relationship(s) of the participants. Power relationships are often ignored in reasoning. One enduring myth of the logical approach to argument is that the truth has equal power no matter who speaks it. The truth—and only the truth—is what must be accepted. However, part of the appeal of the “visceral” model is that it acknowledges that Kennedy's vulnerability when facing a black crowd—his relative lack of power—is precisely what gives his argument the positive force it ought to have. His speech in Indianapolis is a nice example of why our presumption of “equal entitlement to speak” can be misguided. And we may need to fight for the right: here may be times when we are not heard even though we should be. However, more importantly, there are also times that we should not speak because it is not our voice which needs to be heard. Warrenburg is, in my opinion, right to stress that Kennedy's vulnerability is crucial to the success of his argument. A black spokesperson for Kennedy is a little less vulnerable and embodies a different component of the tension around racial identity. The relationship of speaker to crowd is different, and so the success of the argument will not necessarily match Kennedy's delivery of the same words. Could it, or should it, work equally well? We can't know until we know the details of the spokesperson's identity and power. Conversely, a “Mayor Daley” has much greater power over the audience, but power so unrelated to the peaceable words that the words become effectively irrelevant. The cogency of the argument is—and should be—completely undermined because the speaker has too much power relative to the audience.

Looking at power relationships directly takes us in quite a different direction from treating visceral elements like other non-verbal elements such as pictures and emotions. I suggest that the question for rhetoricians and logicians is whether this direction will work better or worse than treating visceral information as premises of the argument.

[Link to paper](#)

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