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Commentary on Hilde van Belle: “No News is Good News, or the Appeal of Controversy”

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1. INTRODUCTION

Professor Van Belle’s study begins with a general discussion of the nature of argument in relation to controversy or conflict, citing Crosswhite and Lakoff and Johnson in reference to language’s role in the construction of argument. Her central thesis is an important one to consider in arguing that, unlike its apparent treatment by the media, a controversy is not just “out there.” Recognizing the role of style in constructing argumentative positions, and creating a sense of controversy is the task of rhetorical critics; applying that task to the media’s construction of controversy is an important venture. In this commentary, I will comment first on the conception of argument as war, then on Van Belle’s treatment of antithesis, and finally, on the application she argues for in relation to the media.

2. ARGUMENT AS WAR

Van Belle reviews Lakoff and Johnson’s (1980) treatment of metaphor as well as their conception of argument as indicative of a war-like state between opponents, and cites Crosswhite’s (1996) lucid criticism of their position. Argument certainly can be treated in the context of a battleground—and the media has contributed greatly to that perception through its own use of metaphors when discussing political campaigns. The language of the kill, to invoke the terms of a hunter, is very much a part of our everyday political landscape. That it need not be this way is equally clear—though perhaps not as well-instantiated as an alternative. Is it possible to conceive of controversy in terms other than competitive? Josina Makau and Debian Marty’s (2001) text, *Cooperative Argumentation*, provides an antidote to the dominant perspective of argument, or debate, as a competitive, winner take all, sport. Engaging the other in a spirit of mutual desire to find the best possible solution to a vexing problem or issue requires a willingness to see potential merit in all sides of an issue, not just the position that you may wish to advance. That this is not an accepted norm in everyday dispute is perhaps all too well known. This does not make it any less attractive as an alternative to the “kill the enemy” attitude that drives competitive argument. Presumably, the media could assume the alternate attitude in presenting arguments pro and con (and variants in between these standard poles). This would require, on their part, a willingness to refrain from taking a position on the issue by loading its coverage in one direction or the other. That they need not explicitly come

forward favoring one argument or position or another to simultaneously impact the preferred outcome should be clear.

3. FIGURATION-ANTITHESIS

Professor Van Belle's analysis of figuration in relation to the media provides an excellent overview of Jeanne Fahnestock's (1999) treatment of antithesis. Through apt selection of specific quoted material as well as astute reconstruction of the first chapters of Fahnestock's work, Van Belle offers a fair and balanced account of the potential role of figuration in general, and antithesis in particular, in assessing the media's treatment of controversy. To take issue with Van Belle is, in this instance, to also take issue with Fahnestock. With few exceptions, in citing work beyond Fahnestock, all references are to Fahnestock's use of, for example, Aristotle or Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca or others drawn on in referencing the role of figures of speech. Although Aristotle figures prominently in this discussion, there is no explicit reference to a specific translation of the *Rhetoric*—instead, all internal references to that treatise appear to be drawn directly from Fahnestock's own treatment of the subject.

Going one step beyond this text, it is useful to call attention to Fahnestock's (2000) essay on "Aristotle and Theories of Figuration." In that piece, she underscores the earlier treatment in arguing that "Aristotle's three keys [metaphor, antithesis, *energeia*] to a smart style can be seen as prototypes, in the sense of exemplary members, for what will become the three major categories of figures of speech: metaphor of the tropes, antithesis of the figures of diction, and *energeia* of the figures of thought" (p. 167). That Aristotle pre-figures the development of later categories of figures is an argument similar to one that suggests the canons of rhetoric – as articulated in the Roman period – are traceable to their suggested role in Aristotle's own treatise.

Fahnestock's application of antithesis bears little resemblance to the sense in which that figure is used in contemporary discourse. Her reconstruction is faithful to Aristotle's conception, and thus resurrects its oppositional nature in generating scientific premises (p. 53). As she goes on to suggest, the subsequent development of antithesis loses the sharp focus Aristotle gives to oppositionality, with the result that "some of the definitions that 'antithesis' has accumulated over the centuries only serve to obscure the possibility of inventing an argument well known in dialectic through stylistic choices" (p. 58).

4. APPLICATION

The preview of Fahnestock's argument leads Van Belle to ask how we might adapt an understanding of antithesis in its generative role to our analysis of media. Van Belle's reference to the importance of the visual in persuasion brings to mind recent work in visual rhetoric. As Olson (2007) illustrates, the increasing attention to the visual has taken hold within the communication discipline writ large, with critical analyses of art, photography, as well as spatial analyses of the rhetorical implications of memorials and museums. The literature Olson reviews provides a rich resource in extending the suggestion of the use of "visual figures" in articulating ideas. Focusing attention on the role of the visual in the construction of a controversy – or its reportage within a media

COMMENTARY ON HILDE VAN BELLE

piece (either televisual or in print medium) – would be an interesting means of extending Van Belle’s point. As one advantage, it would further erode the dominance, as Van Belle and Fahnestock rightly note, of a preference for the “science” in a policy argument, as differentiated from other inventional resources outside the purely scientific.

5. CONCLUSION

In concluding this commentary, I would strongly encourage Prof. Van Belle to consider further the role of the visual in the generation and critique of controversies. Paying particular attention to the pictures and other visual artefacts presented, for example, via print media in relation to a public controversy would further our understanding of how visual style/rhetoric functions as antithesis, considered in Aristotle’s original formulation as an oppositional force driving binaries apart. From this perspective, antithesis perpetuates their existence as separate/different entities, as differentiated from the possibility of bringing opposites together.

[link to paper](#)

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