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# Interpreting Perelman's *Universal Audience*: Gross vs. Crosswhite

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**ABSTRACT:** While still subject to differing interpretations Perelman's theory of audience has potential as an evaluative tool in rhetorical criticism as demonstrated by Gross and Crosswhite. I compare their explanations of how politicians address the universal audience and the respective implications for evaluating the argumentation and then argue that although Gross provides a more immediately applicable theory, Crosswhite's interpretation recommends itself by virtue of its wider scope in regard to deliberative rhetoric.

**KEY WORDS:** argumentation, Crosswhite, Gross, Perelman, political discourse, rhetorical criticism, universal audience

Few scholarly works have been subject to such longstanding debate as *The New Rhetoric* by Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca (1969).<sup>1</sup> Referring to the underlying theory in the first part of the book, Arthos (2004, p. 31) calls the exposition "in turns compelling, baffling, logical, contradictory, expansive, elliptical, revelatory, and opaque." In particular, the theory of audience and *universal audience* has fascinated and bewildered many. The open-endedness of Perelman's theory becomes conspicuous when one compares the interpretations of the universal audience by Alan G. Gross and James Crosswhite (Gross 1999, Gross & Dearin 2003, Crosswhite 1989, 1993, 1996).<sup>2</sup> It is amazing how two scholars, while both positive, can read the same theory and reach such vastly differing views on its application as these two prominent Perelman interpreters.

My primary interest in comparing Gross' and Crosswhite's interpretations is in the different uses of the universal audience in the context of deliberative discourse.<sup>3</sup> Let me clarify that my main purpose is not to establish one of the interpretations as *the* canonized theory that Perelman himself had in mind. Both pursue aspects and ideas that are supported by words from Perelman, and each interpretation poses problems when related to statements elsewhere in Perelman's writings. This said, I find it more interesting to consider how the contributions of his critics can help us do rhetorical criticism today.

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<sup>1</sup> In the following I, for brevity's sake, mention only Perelman when referring to the coauthored work, abbreviated TNR.

<sup>2</sup> As the book incorporates Gross' earlier presentations of Perelman's audience theory I mention only his name when referring to his and Dearin's book.

<sup>3</sup> Also Tindale (2004) discusses these two accounts from a general point of view close to mine.

I shall begin with a brief outline of Perelman's own presentation before moving on to Gross' and Crosswhite's elaborations on his theory of audience. This comparison leads me to a discussion of some merits and problems of the two interpretations. I finally turn to some implications for argument analysis in rhetorical criticism.

Perelman defines The New Rhetoric as "the study of the discursive techniques allowing us to induce or increase the mind's adherence to the theses presented for its assent." (TNR, p. 4) The term *adherence* captures the span in the classical notion of *persuasio*, encompassing both *persuading* and *convincing*. An *audience* is initially defined as "the ensemble of those whom the speaker wishes to influence by his argumentation." (p. 19) Perelman now introduces the important theoretical distinction, namely that of *particular* versus *universal* audience: Argumentation addressed to a *particular* audience is paired with *persuading*, *universal* audience with *convincing*.

The *particular* audience consists of a group of addressees who share a certain feature: a 'segment', a forum of experts, members of a political party, a group of youngsters, or women etc. (pp. 22-23)

The *universal* audience refers to "argumentation that presumes to gain the adherence of every rational being." (p. 28) As Perelman also describes the universal audience, it consists of "*all of humanity, or at least all those who are competent and reasonable*." (Perelman 1982, p. 14, emphasis added)

In other words, the main difference is that in persuasive discourse the arguer only seeks the adherence of a particular audience, whereas in convincing argumentation the arguer wants to gain the adherence of an audience that represents reasonableness.

Perelman's point that the universal audience is a creation in the speaker's mind has been a constant matter in dispute.<sup>4</sup> In this connection, it must be underscored that the universal audience is *not* a subjective construction. It relates to *intersubjective* rationality, and the main point in making the universal audience a projection made by the arguer, is that what counts as reasonable depends on time and place. The concept signifies a departure from the rationalistic ideal, from the notion of rationality consisting in stable and eternal truths or norms, detached from history, culture, and situation.

Either audience is primarily conceived as a construction, i.e., 'invoked' (TNR, pp. 9, 19). Perelman's whole theory has argumentation directed at real audiences as its goal in the sense that it aims to help understand and improve practical argumentation. But the theory is far from empirical in the descriptive sense of observing persuasive effects. *Real* audiences remain, so to speak, inaccessible to his theory. The persuasive effect, i.e., whether a speaker actually gains the adherence of the real audience, obviously depends on how accurately the rhetor's construction is done, but these questions are not what Perelman's theory is designed to answer. However, the relation between real audiences on the one hand and the particular as well as the universal audience on the other is a complex question, and since it divides the interpretations by Gross and Crosswhite I shall return to this point.

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<sup>4</sup> On the grounds that this makes a speaker "free to choose his or her own universal audience" the notion is dismissed by the pragma-dialecticians van Eemeren and Grootendorst (1995, p. 124), who accuse Perelman's theory of *extreme relativism*. Like Crosswhite in his answer (1995, p. 140), I regard their criticism as a misrepresentation of Perelman's views.

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Perelman's theory of audience is intertwined with his theory of values. He distinguishes, on the one hand, between *facts*, *truths* and *presumptions* and, on the other hand, *values*, *hierarchies* and *loci*. Facts, truths and presumptions belong to the category of *the real*, values to *the preferable*. They are all *beliefs* under the heading of *the premises of argumentation*. (TNR § 15 ff.) Gross exemplifies as follows:

It is a fact that the earth is a planet; it is a truth of Newtonian physics that every action has an equal and opposite reaction; it is a presumption that the quality of an act reveals the quality of the person. (Gross & Dearn 2003, p. 31)

As for values, Perelman distinguishes between *universal* or *abstract* values and *particular* or *concrete* values.<sup>5</sup> An *abstract* value is for instance 'justice' and 'truth', whereas 'France' and the 'Church' are examples of *concrete* values (TNR, p. 77).

Now comes a crucial point. Referring to universal values such as 'justice', the 'truth' or the 'beautiful,' Perelman declares that

They can be regarded as valid for a universal audience only on condition that their content not be specified; as soon as we try to go into detail, we meet only adherence of particular audiences. (TNR, p. 76)

I find this statement particularly perplexing in relation to deliberative rhetoric. It seems, more or less, to rule out the universal audience in political debate, since political argumentation evolves around values in conflict and how they affect decisions in specific situations. As Perelman himself says:

Values enter, at some stage or other, into every argument ... [I]n the fields of law, politics, and philosophy, values intervene as a basis for argument at all stages of the developments. (TNR, p. 75)

If motivational argumentation dealing with contested and competing values cannot be addressed to the universal audience, must we not conclude that the universal audience is inapplicable in political discourse? But that this should be Perelman's intention seems strange. How can he possibly exclude the universal audience—incarnating the *reasonable*—from political address on account that it deals with values? It seems improbable coming from a scholar whose life project was to generate a theory of argument that recognizes appeal to values as reasonable (see especially Perelman 1984, pp. 189-190). As Arthos characterizes Perelman's theory of argumentation

we see a dialogic model that moves beyond appeals to a *sensus communis* of common values, and places justice in the strongest tradition of oppositional democracy. Here we have a robust example of a community of minds that is not predetermined by agreement, that is in fact constituted out of the right to disagree. (Arthos 2004, p. 37)

This description corresponds with Perelman's own as a theory of argumentation that "offers solutions without excluding *different* answers." (Perelman 1984, p. 191) It thus recognizes *dissensus* while pointing to the search for common ground as essential to

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<sup>5</sup> Whereas *universal* and *abstract* values seem to be identical terms it is unclear whether *particular* and *concrete* are two terms for exactly the same category of values (TNR, pp. 76-79).

gaining adherence (cf. Graff and Winn 2006 on the importance of Perelman's conception of *communio*).

I now turn to the two accounts by Gross and Crosswhite and how they extend Perelman's theory of audience. Both find a place for the universal audience in political argumentation, but their answers to how the politician might address the universal audience are rather different. I take Gross first since his version is tied up with Perelman's theory of values.

According to *Gross* the main difference is that speakers who address the universal audience "aim at transformation or reinforcements in the areas of fact, truth, and presumption," while speakers who address the particular audience "aim at transformation or reinforcement in the area of values." Thus, "speeches for the universal audience focus on the *real*; those for particular audiences focus on the *preferable*." (Gross & Dearin 2003, p. 36, cf. TNR, p. 66)

In consequence, Gross makes the following general distinction between fields of argumentative discourse:

Philosophy and science are the paradigm examples of discourses in which facts, truths and presumptions are central; these are discourses that aim at a universal audience, the imagined community of all rational beings. On the other hand, public address is the paradigm example of discourse focused primarily at values [...] aimed at an imagined community of particular beings... (Gross & Dearin 2003, pp. 30-31)

However, also according to Gross, the argumentation in discourse within the fields is usually *mixed*. In public address arguments of value tend to be primary, but arguments of fact are also evident (Gross & Dearin 2003, p. 40). Gross selects a passage from the Lincoln-Douglas Debates to illustrate how the universal and particular audiences can be applied:

In so far as Lincoln is arguing for the fact that Douglas has certain views, views that have definite ethical consequences, he is speaking to his audience at Galesburg as if they were the universal audience. Whether or not Douglas holds these views, and whether or not these views have these consequences are matters of fact and truth. But Lincoln is also discoursing about values. He is asserting slavery is wrong and that Douglas is wrong to endorse it. In arguing about values, Lincoln is addressing a particular audience [...] As wide as this audience may have been in Lincoln's time, however, as wide as it may be over time, nevertheless it does not represent every rational human being. (Gross & Dearin 2003, p. 40)

Perelman's theory of value plays a lesser role in *Crosswhite's* interpretation. His answer to my question—whether Perelman actually says that you cannot argue about values to the universal audience—is that *universality* should be understood as a flexible term, used for different theoretical purposes. Just as Perelman is adamant that *adherence* varies in intensity, Crosswhite argues that universality must be understood *in degrees* and is relative to the particular argumentative situation (Crosswhite 1993, p. 394). Thus, in the context of values the universal versus the particular audience is used to distinguish between fact and value. And in this context the term *universal* is attached to one standard of reasonableness—a high standard, namely agreement shared by *every* competent and reasonable being (Crosswhite 1989, pp. 164-166). In other contexts Perelman uses the

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concept of universal audience for smaller forums, namely those that may be considered reasonable in the specific *situation*.

The main idea in Crosswhite's interpretation comes across in the following quotation:

A merely effective argument is effective only for particular audiences. A valid argument is effective for what Perelman calls a "universal audience:" an audience that embodies our conceptions of rationality. Thus, the worth of an argument is dependent upon the merits of the audience that would assent to it. In Perelman's scheme, "universality" is itself a matter of degree, and what will count as a universal audience is determined by the particular rhetorical situation. (Crosswhite 1993, p. 388)

It is an important point for Crosswhite that the construction of the universal audience must always begin with particular audiences. Furthermore, there is not one and only one universal audience in a certain situation. The rhetor as well as the critic may construe the universal audience differently. Crosswhite lists various methods for construing universal audiences. For instance, one may exclude the particular, local features or members of the audience or one may include other similar, particular audiences (Crosswhite 1989, p. 163).

In other words, the universal audience serves as a *model* or *paragon* audience to secure *good*, i.e., *reasonable* argumentation (Crosswhite 1996, p. 151). Or rather, it functions as a normative tool to expose *deceptive* or *weak* argumentation and block arguments that are only persuasive to a particular audience: If they are only acceptable to the particular audience that the rhetor wants to persuade here and now, the argumentation is *unreasonable* and hence *bad*. But if the argument could also gain the adherence of a universal audience, it is *reasonable*. And the more *convincing* the arguments would be to other *relevant competent* and *reasonable* audiences, the more we can evaluate the discourse as *good* argumentation. Note that the critic now evaluates by degrees.

As stated at the beginning, I am not inclined to declare either Gross' or Crosswhite's interpretations as THE version of Perelman's universal audience. I regard them as developments extending Perelman's theory, following different possible paths inherent in Perelman's writings due to the open-endedness of his theory. To better assess their contributions I here discuss some of the merits and problems of their respective interpretations in relation to Perelman's own presentation.

In Gross' exposition, I wish to draw attention to an instance that collides profoundly with my reading of Perelman. I am referring to the unfortunate passage in TNR that has been misunderstood by many of his critics, and that he later regretted having written in a misleading way. It is the passage that includes the sentence:

Arguments addressed to a universal audience must convince the reader that the reasons adduced are of a compelling character, that they are self-evident, and possess an absolute and timeless validity, independent of local or historical contingencies. (TNR, p. 32)

In retrospect, Perelman (1984, p. 190) states that this sentence, taken out of context, expresses "the point of view, *to which I am opposed*" and cites the whole passage in the hope that "in the future, ideas will no longer be ascribed to me which I have never stopped fighting against." I have always understood this as Perelman's confirmation that the sentence referred to how others mistakenly conceive rational *universality*, the notion

that he replaces with his *universal audience*. In this reading, the literal sense of the sentence is *not at all* what he meant by the universal audience. Gross, however, maintains that *after all* the sentence expresses Perelman's true meaning, only in a slightly different way from what it literally says. He reaches this conclusion through a subtle line of reasoning (too subtle, it seems to me): The sentence is true "not because such timeless validity exists" according to Perelman, but "because speakers arguing for the real in a particular case must assume its existence in the general case." Gross continues that arguments addressed to the universal audience "are subject to the paradox that speakers must presuppose a concept of timeless validity, a concept clearly subject to contingency." (Gross 1999, p. 207) This explanation seems to me to sidestep Perelman's insistent denial—ascribing once more the very point of view to Perelman that he finally hoped to have put out of the way.

Tindale's comments on the issue correspond with my position (2004, p. 138). Like him, I do, however, find that Gross has a good point when he emphasizes that Perelman's foremost concern is the field of philosophical discourse. From this perspective, it is natural that many of the things that Perelman says about the universal audience fit more easily in with philosophical argumentation than with argumentation in other fields. This raises the question whether the universal audience must in all contexts be "all of humanity" or "every rational being"? A strong source in favour of a positive answer is the following words coming from Perelman's own mouth:

What characterizes philosophical discourse, as opposed to theological discourse (which is addressed only to believers, who at the outset admit certain dogmas or sacred texts), and as opposed to *political discourse* (which is aimed *only* at a *particular* community with its own values and aspiration) is that *the former* is aimed at *all reasonable* men ... (Perelman 1968, p. 22, emphasis added)

On this ground, it is hard to deny that Perelman intended the universal audience as primarily, perhaps even exclusively, typical of philosophical discourse.

I find Gross' division concerning *fact* and *value* problematic. It seems to ignore that Perelman connects universal values to the universal audience, and that presumptions include questions of value. Perelman expressly declares that his theory offers an enlarged conception of reason that accepts appeal to the emotions and

universal values (truth, justice, morality, beauty, love of humanity). It is in the name of these universal values, profoundly experienced, that the philosopher can be opposed to the passions peculiar to such-and-such a particular group. Without the appeal to such values, it would be impossible to elaborate a practical philosophy, an ethic, or a natural or rational law. (Perelman 1984, p. 194)

The important distinction, I suggest, is not fact vs. value. Philosophers, for sure, discuss the preferable and seek adherence to particular values, as do others. But they, more than others, tend to ground their argumentation in value norms that can be regarded as acceptable to *every* rational and competent human being. In contrast, rhetors who argue exclusively to particular audiences, use values that are acceptable to them alone, but irrational to other relevant audiences.

This brings me back to the question about the relation of the particular and universal audiences to real audiences. Gross is emphatic that all Perelman's rhetorical audiences, universal as well as particular, are constructions and that his theory does not

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take real audiences into account (Gross 1999, pp. 203-4). In contrast, Crosswhite emphasizes the fact that the universal audience is construed from particular audiences, as noted above. Tindale pursues this issue, the connection between the universal audience and real audiences in situated reality being his paramount reason to prefer Perelman's theory to other models of ideal audiences. I side with Tindale when he opposes the implication that Perelman's theory should have no interest in real audiences (Tindale 2004, p. 137). I regard Perelman's words about audiences as constructions as primarily a demarcation for *methodological* reasons: He offers a theory of a speculative nature, as opposed to experimental studies in persuasive effect on real audiences. But, as the particular audience is a term for the group or subgroups in the audience that the speaker wishes to influence, it does relate directly to the real audience. Furthermore, since Perelman (1984, p. 192) states it as properly understood that one of the roles of the universal audience is "to transform the particularities of an audience into universal dimensions", the universal audience also relates to real audiences, albeit indirectly through particular audiences. On the other hand, Gross is right to emphasize Perelman's preoccupation with audience construction. This is one of the assets of his theory, not least in the perspective of rhetorical criticism, where the rhetor's construction of audience *in the text* often is almost all we have to go on.

For critical purposes, I see the main differences between the two interpretations and their uses as follows:

In *Gross'* interpretation the political rhetor *shifts* between the universal and the particular audiences, addressing the universal audience when stating facts or arguing about reality, and the particular when advocating value claims. In criticism, the function of the universal audience is primarily *descriptive*: When analyzing a political speech the critic may apply the theory of audience in order to sort out which parts of the speech are merely informative or discuss questions of fact, which parts involve values, and how the argumentation oscillates between *substantive* and *motivational* arguments through the speech.<sup>6</sup> The universal audience can also function as a *normative* tool according to this interpretation, but only in connection with the arguments pertaining to the real. However, as long as we keep to this aspect of the argumentation, the critic may apply the universal audience in order to evaluate the quality of argument. The rhetor may for instance state something as a fact although it is not, because the particular audience is ready to swallow this fabrication. In that case the critic is entitled to argue that the rhetor is manipulative since all rational and competent beings regard it as false.

In *Crosswhite's* interpretation, the rhetor does not shift between the universal and the particular audience. The rhetor addresses them *simultaneously*, i.e., the universal audience *indirectly* through the particular. The universal audience now functions as a *normative* tool *throughout* the argumentation, including the parts involving values and motivational appeals. It serves as a forum, representing norms and the reasonable, that the critic can use to *test* the argumentation addressed to a particular audience.<sup>7</sup> In this respect, his is a more comprehensive theory for normative rhetorical criticism of public address. It

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<sup>6</sup> The term *substantive* relates to arguments with *designative* (factual) claims, *motivational* to *evaluative* and *advocative* claims, see for instance Brockriede and Ehninger (1960).

<sup>7</sup> For examples and analyses that demonstrate applications of the universal audience, see for instance Crosswhite (1989, p. 164), Jørgensen (2003), Levi (1995), and Tindale (1999, chapters 4 and 5).

does not, however, make criticism an easy task. It raises several intricate questions, first and foremost: How does the critic determine the universal audience that counts in the rhetorical situation? In comparison, Gross' interpretation provides a more stable and directly operational theory, much easier to apply when criticizing rhetorical artefacts.

All in all, I find Crosswhite's interpretation in better keeping with Perelman's general theory of argumentation. It recommends itself in virtue of its wider scope and applicability to deliberative rhetoric, and it provides a theoretic framework for evaluating the quality of practical political arguments.

[link to commentary](#)

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