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Paul E. Corcoran, *Political Language and Rhetoric.*
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Listening to the average politician today, we may well shudder at his standard of expression and his inability to give a clear answer to a simple question. Command of language has throughout history meant command of power. A public figure with enough ability to hold his position must obviously be purposely creating an image as a "man of the people" in harmony with the low level of oral communication to which we are nowadays accustomed. On analysis, however, we realise that rhetoric no longer has the classical sense of discourse aiming to inform and persuade by cogent argument, nor the eighteenth-century sense of the art of eloquence. Indeed, the language of the politician may be viewed rather as a technique of delivering public utterances about the social order in the form of etiolated placatory monologues aiming not to persuade but to control; not to stimulate thought but to prevent it; not to convey information but to conceal or distort it. It is in this area of language use that a real cause for concern surely lies, and it is this concern that would attract a reader to Paul Corcoran's *Political Language and Rhetoric.*

Paul Corcoran came to Australia from the USA in 1974, at the age of 30, to lecture in Politics at the University of Queensland. His writing is clear, the style pleasant and free from jargon. He summarises each step in his argument before proceeding to the next, and although his diachronic perspective seems rather lengthy, his conclusions probably justify the slow, careful approach.

After showing how literacy changed oral discourse by allowing leaders to stand back from rote-learned formulaic expression and assess both ideas and delivery, and how the invention of printing gave the hearer the same opportunity to examine content for closeness of argument, Corcoran moves on to our contemporary world to show how the linearity of books has given way to a non-linear type of communication which, first "writ on air" by radio, now depends on images broadcast by television and often recorded and repeated by video. This approach leads to a speculative conclusion regarding contemporary political language and communication techniques which suggests the emergence of a "post-literate" culture that would seem to resemble in many features the pre-literate or primitive oral culture once again. The author communicates

misgivings as to the implications for political power and even culture growth in a society which finds the written word, let alone the spoken word, to be obsolete forms of expression. This development is drawn without the emotional connotations of Orwellian prophecy, nor yet with the convolutions of a Marshall McLuhan, but rather as a methodically prepared, quietly persuasive piece of deduction.

Political rhetoric in the twentieth century is a technologically superseded form; political discourse today has been altered by the new techniques of radio and television both in form and social effect, while the relation between speaker and listener is utterly changed. These non-linear media create images perceived without the literate skills necessary to observe the rigid rules of attention, sequence and context. The speaker before a videotape camera is no longer uttering ephemeral sounds, but is conscious that his words and gestures are preserved on tape. There is no real audience to give feed-back, except for the technicians whom the speaker must endeavour not to notice. But more: his performance will be edited, cut, rearranged, interspersed with graphs or visual sequences, music or better footage from earlier takes. Rhetoric becomes *mediated oratory.* The pretence of gathering a dispersed and isolated audience in the convention of a "fireside chat," while apparently offering us a new concept of rhetoric, actually obscures the significance of the situation. Here Corcoran develops a bold concept which, while breaking with all past ideas of rhetoric, may serve to cushion us against "future shock."

Modern political parties spend ninety per cent of their budget on pre-taped, highly edited speeches with fast cuts, sound track overlay, and even cartoon figures. The sophisticated selling techniques used by government to win and retain support must be accommodated by any study of the rélationship between language, communication technology and society. In this context, rhetoric may appear an obsolescent term. Some of the most powerful techniques of communication used today dispense with words and language in the ordinary sense, or at least down-grade the speaker in importance. During a recent electoral campaign in New Zealand, one film clip deliberately and effectively used no speech at all, relying on "image equation" to "tell the story," cutting from an image of the candidate to an image of healthy children, implying a casual connection to be absorbed wordlessly, if not subliminally. Television like this does not merely convey or broadcast a speech act; it can *create* its own communication.

Therefore, a new definition of rhetoric might include the electronic media, because production (as opposed to broadcasting) gives a rhetorical performance that literally never occurred, and could not have occurred, as a speech act. The classical division of rhetoric – invention, arrangement,

delivery – are here appropriated by the electronic studio and fashioned into a new "art of rhetoric." The producer becomes the rhetorician, using the speaker as an actor playing only a minor role. Moreover, time-slotting selects the audience, reaching or avoiding housewives, for example, in that their hours of watching are known; and frequency of repetition can achieve either intensive or extensive saturation of the audience, a body of watchers who are available over a period of weeks. As ninety-seven per cent of families in the USA have television, and need not be literate to understand this form of communication, the non-linear media surpass any other in audience strength. A speaker's assembly cannot be gathered so easily; and a readership is limited by literacy and willingness. The spoken word is, in short, no match for "the rhetorical performance by electronic techniques" to gain or wield power.

But electronic technology affects the verbal content of ordinary rhetorical performance too, just as the invention of printing did. A speaker cannot react to audience response when his audience is fragmented and he is addressing a sterile microphone. If one capitalises on this remoteness to highlight the lofty inaccessibility of public office, or concedes a formal speech to be an imposition on the time and attention of busy individuals for whom television is primarily entertainment, then both are inappropriate. The formal speech, as such, is therefore shortened to the point of elimination. The speech as a rhetorical "device" is obsolete.

Campaign "ads," usually of less than thirty seconds in length, seldom present the candidate speaking except as a voice-over while the video shows him "in action." A media campaign is successful when the candidate's image is associated with the issue orientation and "takes" in the viewer's mind as a solution to a problem. It is then superfluous to project information. Newspaper advertising is a waste of money on "linear logic" that does not fit into the "image mosaic of the television campaign." The intent is not to inform or persuade, but to present a ministerial or presidential image. "Ad spots" are cheaper than formal speeches and can be used to saturate by repetition.

In short, communication in the political sphere nowadays prefers "images and symbols rather than argument, scenes rather than speech, actions rather than words, emotions rather than thoughts." When a politican does speak, he relies on slogans ("It's time" in the 1972 Australian election, or "Turn on the Lights" in 1975), and a tendency to formulaic speech of a primitive, pre-literate nature designed to create a placebo of familiarity.

Characteristic of present-day expression are grammatical forms which are resistant to the presentation of factual information or logical development – conditional and passive verb structure, impersonal

pronouns, finely drawn categorical exceptions. Broadcasting has departed from classical rhetoric by finally abandoning persuasion whether by argument or expert delivery. It is replaced by image-making and identification, against which Plato fought. The speaker associates himself with images, ideas and values which are uncontroversial and placatory, with conventional terms such as order, brotherhood, the new and the good (progress), the old and familiar (tradition) and so on. There is little need for gesture, or for logic: he has to persuade the public not that he has special knowledge or sound theories, but that he is the picture of a personality entitled to have opinions on the subject. This leads us to intense pessimism regarding contemporary politics. The lone individual has no confidence in himself and his fellows to make reasoned decisions or propose alternative solutions.

And so Corcoran brings us to his conclusion, which, although hedged about with every expression of academic caution, is clear enough. We see the fall in standards of achievement as a political issue, and the decline of language is viewed by all as a loss of moral character. But Corcoran sees ours as post-literate, not illiterate, culture, and poses the question: is literacy any longer a communication skill? In our schools, humanities are impoverished while science education improves, but even the most ardent critic of this situation never suggests a reversal of the policy. The decline in literacy must be viewed as the emergence of post-literate culture. Education (as literacy) is not a fiscal anodyne for ignorance, poverty and social division. *Declining standards are a product, not a cuase, of post-literate culture.* Cash register adding machines were not introduced because of a decline in mathematical ability. New communication techniques lead to the disuse of older ones. Technical transformation is accompanied by changes in the content of information.

He then catalogues the similarities between contemporary society and oral cultures: the orality of the "youth culture" manifested in formulaic incantations producing mass hypnosis; authority roles based on the possession of and use of special verbal data: ceremonial oral performance, including rhyme and mime, in the rock concert, with revered objects and symbols such as audio equipment. Teenagers and housewives alike (the twin targets of commercial broadcasting) are devoted to non-literate stimulation: the former are offered music, the latter melodrama and consumer fantasies.

Moreover, bureaucratic communication increases in efficiency to the extent that it decreases in literacy: information depends on retrieval systems and computer language.

Finally, plastic and representational arts constitute a direct link to pre-literate and oral society, inasmuch as they stress independence of

external information, returning to immediacy of the object rather than "meaning," the work being its own subject (or as the Cubists would say, an object in itself), without reference to representation or information. But here we strike a hopeful note. Several decades have proclaimed the death of poetry, the novel, and so on – but these proclamations appear in the form that is alleged to be deceased. Literacy will surely survive, posing a form of social élitism. Ruling élites have always made use of professions in which writing was essential. In Classical Greece and Rome, and the Middle Ages, the *literati* were close to the centre of power, and this will always be so.

Political rhetoric is at present a display of style with no meaningful content. Political language is formulaic, ritually stylised. Formal political discourse solidifies into a formulaic "residue" of language with a thinness of grammatical, informative and idiomatic content surprising only in its stark contrast with other (non-oral, non-rhetorical) techniques of communication. Political sloganeering is indistinguishable from commercial advertising with its repertoire of phrases evoking unspecifiable positive emotions having virtually no accompanying content, information or persuasive strategy. "This is Ford country" ran the slogan of the 1976 US presidential election in one area. It might have been "Marlboro country," too.

After reading Corcoran's conclusions, we can listen again to our local politician with a new and more complete awareness of his place in the evolution of society, rhetoric and language; with a new shudder, in fact.