

Media, Expression and a New Politics: Eight Theses

Ian Angus
Department of Humanities
Simon Fraser University

1. Philosophy and Rhetoric

The study of communication begins with the separation between philosophy and rhetoric, that is, between the content of a message and its persuasive effect. Prior to the separation between a truth-content and a persuasive effect, an expression is an event that both establishes a truth and provokes an effect. In such a condition there is no concept of a medium of communication but only a meaningful and effective world constructed through events. The separation between philosophy and rhetoric divides truth from politics and sets up a long history of their conflict. The convergence of philosophy and rhetoric in the 20th century signifies the event whereby this separation is being re-encountered and shifted.

2. Rhetoric, Democracy and the Commercial Impulse

In the 20th century the independence of rhetoric has come to its apogee. With the definitive subordination of communication to the commercial impulse, the persuasion to buy – ultimately the persuasion to live a certain form of life – has become a separable element of any communication. The induction into a consumer form of life occurs throughout the communication system due not only to its subordination to the commercial impulse but, more fundamentally, because the persuasive element establishes its total indifference to the question of truth. Democracy can thus appear as a matter of empty procedure rather than a form of life defined by the free interaction between political actors.

3. The Liberation of Rhetoric and the Recovery of Philosophy

This liberation of rhetoric from any constraining relation to truth through the exchange-equality substitution of persuasive effect raises the question of truth in a more radical form—not only as a truth *distinct from* persuasive effect, but as a truth inherent in a form of life. At this point it re-encounters the originating event of philosophy. The re-encounter of rhetoric and philosophy thus overturn the modern primacy of representation from opposite angles. Rhetoric, being concerned exclusively with the externality of effect, pushes this concern deeper to the figuration of discourses themselves and not only as the intended effect of an author. Philosophy, whose truth-value

of a content isolated from effect has disappeared with the universalization of the commercial impulse, becomes a critique of representation and an encounter with the event of truth.

4. What is a Medium of Communication? [1]

This 20th century re-encounter and refiguring of rhetoric and philosophy makes possible the concept of a medium of communication that presents the history of their long distinction and relation in new perspective. Both truth-content and persuasive effect overlook the material dimension of inscription that constitutes an event. Their distinction originated in an era in which the spoken word was being transformed by writing. Definition, or essence, which is the *as such* presupposed by the determination of truth-content, was clarified in the event of inscription. With writing, a distinction between media of communication – at this time only writing-orality – came into being, though the very duality of this distinction determined its latency. If writing could be traced back to orality as a mere representation of a priorly existing meaning, then the invisibility of the medium as such was maintained. The recent history of explosion of media of communication has made such a reduction increasingly incredible. Thus, the liberation of rhetoric, the untenable univocality of meaning, and the concept of a medium of communication have arisen together. Let us call the event of this co-emergence 'the era of expression.' The plurality of media of communication actualizes the multiplicity through which a specific cultural form emerges.

5. What is a Medium of Communication? [2]

A medium of communication is thus inconceivable without a plurality of media. Without a plurality one can only conceive the world as such, apparently directly. To define a medium of communication singly, abstractly, one refers to the vehicle by which meaning is carried: the sound on which orality depends, the clay tablet with stylus or paper with pencil on which writing depends, the silicon chips in computers. While the term 'materiality' grasps the turn away from both meaning and effect and toward event inherent in this shift, it must be understood as a 'living materiality' modelled on the human body, rather than the dead materiality of a physical object. The materiality of a medium of communication is embodied expression. Thus, we live in a cultural world defined through the interaction between media of communication. This interaction is more significant than any content. It is the originating expression whereby a cultural world comes into existence.

6. A Cultural Form as the Expression of an Epoch

A given complex interaction between media of communication defines a cultural form within which a way of life is lived. During many periods, this cultural form attains a stability that persists for a considerable time, but in a society given to continuous technical innovations the media complex undergoes continuous transformation. Thus, the way of life in the era of expression is instituted through a continuous reformation of identities, practices, and social relations whose only stable point of reference is the exchange-equality reference that achieved the liberation of rhetoric. Politics within this cultural form is oriented toward the reciprocal relations of such unstable identities. The re-encounter with the event through the medium of communication also makes possible another politics that is oriented to the limit of this cultural form itself. Such a politics defines the era of expression as an 'era,' an epoch whose passing can be imagined, whereas the politics of identities within the era occurs through a timeless present. Politics is stretched between this in and out, between timeless present and the passing of an era.

7. Democracy and Expression

The name for this tensional politics is democracy. Democracy 'inside' as the history of the formation of modern representative political regimes and their essential tie to the exchange-equality commercial liberation of rhetoric. Democracy 'outside' as the imagination of a new form of social participation through access to, participation in, and the ability to turn off, any and all of the media of communication that define the cultural form. A democratic politics of expression that determines a way of life not just representative institutions. Political action now cannot decide between these two alternatives. They co-exist in the tensional space of the contemporary cultural form. We await the event that would allow the second possibility to move from imagination to actuality, define the era in the moment of its passing, and allow the new democracy to emerge.

8. The Event of Truth

What might it be, what might it mean, to experience this coming event? For the future to remain future, to escape being drawn into the timeless present of reshuffling identities, it must remain without definition. Such uncertainty cannot even be demarcated, localized, since it demands the shaking of the whole era itself. Our only clue is the origin of communication in the splitting of rhetoric from philosophy. The event of passing of the era of expression would be the end of communication as such, the end of truth *versus* persuasion, the return of the event that reveals the world. Communication exists only insofar

as it speaks of the world and thus is not the world itself. The materiality of communication, the medium whereby meaning is inscribed on the world itself, overcomes the representational focus on meaning and is the locus of the shift toward the constitution of forms of life. The world to come will be without communication because it will be the event of the coming-to-be of the world itself, a re-merging of communication with the world where the medium becomes the thing itself, where humans no longer occupy the world but become the voice of the world itself.¹

¹ These remarks are based on my four texts that deal with communication. *Emergent Publics: An Essay on Social Movements and Democracy*. Winnipeg: Arbeiter Ring, 2001; *(Dis)figurations: Discourse/Critique/Ethics*. London and New York: Verso, 2000; *Primal Scenes of Communication: Communication, Consumerism, Social Movements*. Albany: State University of New York Press, 2000; *A Border Within: National Identity, Cultural Plurality and Wilderness*. Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's Press, 1997; reprinted 1998.