The Myth of the Rhetorical Situation
Richard E. Vatz

Do rhetorical situations have inherent meanings?

When a situation occurs “out there,” somewhere in the world that exists outside of our immediate experience, it’s important to ask how we come to understand said situation, to determine its meaning and significance. Fundamentally, these situations (termed rhetorical situations) are comprised of rhetor, receiver, message, and the purpose of the rhetoric. In Richard E. Vatz’s “The Myth of the Rhetorical Situation,” a counterintuitive controlling idea emerges: When you view rhetoric as selectively created by the rhetor and not as an objective reflection of reality, it allows for a more ethical and realistic production of rhetorical situations. Since Vatz’s piece is a refutation of one written by Lloyd Bitzer, “The Rhetorical Situation,” Bitzer’s view contains the counter idea: Objective truth is inherent in situations, and rhetoric is a response to events/reality derived from the context surrounding them, so the more context we have on a given situation, the more finely tuned our rhetoric and understanding of the situation becomes.

Since the vast majority of facts and situations are not publicly observable, we must rely on someone else’s observations and reporting of events to glean our information. Vatz notes that the first step in creating a rhetorical situation is the selection of which events to communicate to an audience. The world is made up of an infinite amount of events from which to choose, and the selection of one event from the sea of endless possibilities imbues the selected one with implied significance by the rhetor. Isolated and unselected, an event can’t be said to have any sort of significance in the Bitzerian, objective sense that a rhetorical situation can then be derived from. Rather, it becomes significant within the rhetorical situation it is placed, and to the audience to whom it is conveyed. The significance imbued in the situation through the symbiotic relationship between rhetor and audience is termed “salience” by Vatz and “presence” by Chaim Perelman. In simpler terms, someone reading a front page news story will likely think, “Oh, this must be the most pressing matter happening in the country today,” a rhetorical situation created from the story author’s situational selection and the audience member’s resulting assumption of significance. However, the publication in question could, perhaps, be the *National Enquirer* running a front page story about Kylie Jenner’s new piece of plastic surgery. Who determines if this is more important than a story about Venezuelan protestors? The author in their selection and the audience in their reading of the situation, according to Vatz’s view.
Once the situation has been selected, it is then translated into meaning using linguistic depiction. Vatz quotes Murray Edelman on this matter: “Political events can become infused with strong affect stemming from psychic tension, from perceptions of economic, military, or other threats or opportunities, and from interactions between social and psychological responses. These political 'events,' however, are largely creations of the language used to describe them” (4). It can be the default response in a given political situation to assume that it has an inherent level of importance, danger, or national relevance. Take, for instance, the assassination of JFK. According to Vatz, the assassination of one president gains its significance in the way it is reported on and the narrative then built around it. The “communication of the event was of such consensual symbolism that expectations were easily predictable and stable” (7) giving rise to terms like national tragedy or even the term assassination itself, used in reference to the killing of someone of great prominence. Vatz posits that the death of one president would be unlikely to change very much in the grand course of events, since the transfer of powers to the vice president would put someone in charge who held very similar political views; further, the death of one man, even if he sits atop the nation’s bureaucratic pyramid, will likely have little impact on the day to day life of the nation’s citizens. Why, then, was the JFK assassination seemingly one of the most significant events of the 20th century? Vatz claims it came as a result of the fear and threat perception created by the rhetoric surrounding the assassination, which then lead to more rhetoric (rotunda speeches) to mitigate the public’s fear and dismay.

Vatz fleshes out this idea with further examples: “We have ‘leaders’ or ‘bosses,’ ‘organizations’ or ‘machines,’ and ‘education’ or ‘propaganda’ not according to the situation's reality, but according to the rhetor's arbitrary choice of characterization. No theory of the relationship between situations and rhetoric can neglect to take account of the initial linguistic depiction of the situation” (4). Thus, rhetors create the meaning in any given situation; they don’t discover it.

Perhaps of greatest import concerning Vatz’s piece is its ideas on rhetoric and ethics. According to Vatz’s view, a rhetorical situation is entirely created by and dependent upon the rhetor, giving them God-like powers over the concocted narrative, its salience, and its intended impact on the audience. Since the rhetor sets the agenda and parameters of a given situation, it is up to them to decide what has salience and is worth relaying to an audience. Vatz uses a lack of speeches on hunger and the decision to focus on crimes of individuals over those committed on the corporate entity level as conscious decisions by the rhetor laced with particular reasoning. Perhaps, the logic goes, if rhetors chose to make salient the problem of
world hunger and corporate greed, these issues could be more easily tackled, as they’d be more top of mind for rhetorical audiences.

How has this method impacted me and relate to my research? JG

Coincidentally, Vatz’s piece connects quite strongly to a recent project that has occupied my mind. In this time of great political division, a seeming inability for those who disagree to discuss their beliefs has arisen. I’ve become painfully aware of the shaky ground for much of my own political/general world beliefs. Much of my thinking and research of late has been focused on how people make decisions and form their beliefs, as well as the inability for many of us to find genuine human connection or conversation in modern times.

I believe Vatz’s piece strikes at these issues and artfully expresses how rhetorical situations influence many facets of our lives. When we form our opinions on particular matters, we generally come to conclusions based on second-hand information, as Vatz notes. In our digital age, the vast majority of our views are shaped by information gleaned from online/televised sources. We’re not gaining information directly about the event or situation. Instead, it’s being filtered to us through a variety of layers, whether it’s social media algorithms showing us what it thinks we want to see or CNN and Fox News tailoring their respective content to opposite sides of the political spectrum, thus reinforcing political division and raising questions of ethical rhetoric. Clearly, Bitzer’s notion of objective truths which drive rhetorical situations doesn’t apply to the media landscape of today. Vatz’s idea of the rhetor as arbiter and creator of significant events rings true, as the media and informational gatekeepers tend to set the rhetorical agenda of a nation and its citizens, or a globe and its peoples.

While I’m painfully aware of this reality, I don’t think awareness is enough to circumvent its effects. Confirmation bias seems to work on the subconscious level, meaning we tend to pay attention to or give greater credence to information that supports our preconceived notions (does Gallop’s projecting apply here?). To get at the “truth,” which seems to be becoming paradoxically more and more relative with the more information we have access to, Bitzer’s idea that the more context we have the clearer our sight becomes seems to fall flat under inspection.

The internet has democratized access to information and is making the expert and institution a thing of the past, as the average citizen may believe they can find out practically anything with a Google search or two. Why listen to “the establishment” when you can find things out yourself, the logic might go. Since
our media landscape is already creating fractured and increasingly tailored rhetorical situations, individuals are venturing further down the rabbit hole as they have greater control over which rhetorical situations they want to pay attention or return to.

In sum, I think Vatz helps bring to light how far-removed we, the average citizens, really are from objective truth. In our modern world, though it may be hard to recognize or admit at times in our interconnected and mass information age, it can be easy to slide into the hazy shrouds of varying rhetorical situations, which, sadly, might be the closest we can ever hope to get to the “truth.” Going forward with research, I think it will be beneficial to keep in mind that everything I’m reading or exposed to is heavily filtered and is a created rhetorical situation, where a deeper understanding of rhetoric and its components may help me realize how close or far I stand from the truth of the matters at hand.

How has this method impacted me and relate to my research? JB

When reading Vatz I was so pleased to find another person out there who feels rhetoric is not getting the title of supreme ruler as it should be. I always have felt in the relationship between situation and rhetoric, rhetoric doesn’t get the credit she deserves. (Yes I purposely used the pronoun she #feminism). She is the person who wears the pants in the relationship because she is the driving force behind what an audience takes in.

A great way to highlight this is by analyzing the rhetorical discourse used in politics, which Vatz does throughout the piece. Politics, especially political satire, is driven by the rhetorical discourse of the rhetor: rhetoric controls the situation and not the other way around. When Vatz states, “To say the President is speaking out on a pressing issue is redundant” (161) he is pointing out that the president makes the situation pressing not the situation itself. This cracks me up because that is what Trump's whole political platform is based on. Trump purposely comes out and over exaggerates situations to gain power by instilling fear in his audience. Even though most of the information he gives to the public is false, people listen because his rhetorical discourse engages them. This is why when he speaks he uses words that he feels will make him sound smart and powerful. This can be shown when he talks about building the wall saying “It’s gonna be huge!” Trump is also known for using physical expressions such as hand motions to convey his dominance. However, if you have ever watched Alec Baldwin portray Trump on SNL he uses almost identical words as Trump but it is clear that his rhetorical discourse is to mock the president rather than promote. It is clear when he portrays
Trump that he has done research, because this is a project he is in, and find ways to mimic what Trump is doing but make it funny rather than fearful. Therefore, when Baldwin creates his rhetorical discourse his goal is to create laughter in his audience. This is seen when Baldwin exaggerates his hand gestures, making Trump look ridiculous when asserting power. It is also clear that Baldwin has studied how other people view Trump so he can add it to his performance. One thing the public likes to mock about Trump is how much he pouts his lips and squints his eyes and Baldwin makes sure to take his interpretation over the top. He does this so that his viewers follow his rhetorical discourse that casts Trump’s actions as ridiculous rather than powerful. Contrasting how both of these men portray the same character but embody different rhetorical discourses emphasizes that Vatz is correct that the creator is in charge of the rhetorical discourse.

I have always found it fascinating how little people realize that almost everything is shaped by rhetoric. It is the rhetorical discourse of the information they have received influencing their decision. Most of the time we as humans create the situation not discover it, yet we still do not want to accept that responsibility. While I agree with what Vatz is stating, I still find myself reluctant to accept that I am the creator of my own rhetorical discourse. Moving forward, I feel I must accept that I am the creator of my happiness just as much as I am the creator of my misery. It is only once I accept that fact that I can progress further with my own projects.