

MARIE LUND

AN
ARGUMENT
ON
RHETORICAL
STYLE

AARHUS UNIVERSITY
PRESS

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BY MARIE LUND

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An Argument on Rhetorical Style

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INTRODUCTION

Style is not exactly a term reserved for the few. Most textbooks on written and oral communication contain sections on style and stylistics, and often they are based directly on Classical rhetorical theories. Today, style and stylistics are still part of the basic vocabulary of the rhetorical critic, teacher, and thinker. As a rhetorical concept, style refers to a way of using language. It distinguishes itself as being formal, but also as having consequences at the level of meaning. While style and stylistics have traditionally been linked primarily to linguistic utterances and the way in which one speaks or writes, the term *style* is also used in regards to cultural and social codes for such different areas as bodily gestures, clothing combinations, patterns of consumption, and cultural habits and references. With such a broad scope of application, the analytical potential of style ought to be enormous. However, it is also a rather slippery term that has yet to be defined unambiguously. Thus, despite having spread into different academic subjects as well as everyday language, no clearly defined research field has emerged around style as a concept.

The definition and meaning of style are important themes in *An Argument on Rhetorical Style*, but the perspective of the study can be more narrowly defined as rhetorical, in that the book focuses in particular on rhetorical issues such as strategic possibilities, argumentation, topics, deliberation, audience construction, political discourse, the impact of discursive habits on culture and society, and norms for public communication.

STYLE IN MODERN AND POSTMODERN RHETORICAL CRITICISM

Modern rhetorical criticism has not been heavily invested in the development of style. The modern rehabilitation of rhetoric was largely aimed at rediscovering the theory of argumentation that had been an important part of Classical rhetoric, but had since lost its status. In the last half of the twentieth century rhetoric developed as an academic discipline, which dealt with concepts like the rhetorical situation, audience, genre, and argumentation. In this important, foundation-laying phase of the academic discipline, style did not become an object of independent interest to any great extent. As a consequence of the lack of conceptual development, style is – compared to, for instance, argumentation or genre – a more loosely defined field of study. No real common theoretical approach has emerged to redefine style in a modern critical context, and research on style is therefore influenced by many apparently arbitrary theoretical connections and aims.

Modern rhetorical theories developed in the wake of World War II place rhetoric within an Enlightenment tradition. The Belgian rhetorical theorists Chaïm Perelman and Lucie Olbrechts-Tyteca define rhetoric as argumentation based on a meeting of minds, in their work *Traité de l'argumentation. La Nouvelle Rhétorique* (1958), and in so doing create a counter-image to the reputation of rhetoric as the empty art of persuasion and external decoration. Their thoughts about the common grounds of argumentation and an abstract norm for rational argumentation – the universal audience – is in line with the societal ideals for communication later developed in German sociologist Jürgen Habermas' theories of rational public discussion. In the modern rehabilitation of the rhetorical project, in which rhetoric is founded on argumentation and is placed within an ethical normative framework, the qualities of style are not immediately essential. In this respect, because it is connected to formal linguistic aspects or to aesthetic categories like feelings and senses, style sets an agenda that is secondary to political argumentation and democratic deliberation within a modernist and rationalist horizon.