

3 Issues in Argument

In this chapter we will examine four related controversies that frame our understanding of argument and its value in the classroom. First, we will critique the traditional practice of teaching “informal fallacies,” paying particular attention to the slippage between the formal models of fallacy and their actual application. Second, we will extend that critique to the influential “pragma-dialectical” school of argument theory and its attempt to construct a framework within which fallacies may be defined and evaluated more precisely. Third, using Richard Fulkerson’s recently updated taxonomy of composition practices, we will look at the major alternatives to the teaching of argument in writing classes and the place of argument teaching among those practices. Finally, we will consider the pros, cons and challenges of teaching about propaganda in a writing class devoted to argument.

THE FALLACY DEBATE

The treatment of informal fallacies in writing classes focused on argument is a hardy perennial. Despite the best efforts by many within the field to end the practice, and over the protests of some textbook authors who would like to have discussions of the fallacies removed from their texts altogether, the fallacies remain. There is, it appears, a sort of inherent appeal to the fallacies, something like the appeal of prescriptive grammar in other writing courses. In a field so fluid and complex, the fallacies are finite, concrete and offer practitioners the tantalizing prospect of rendering thumbs up or down judgments, of being able to pronounce arguments not merely weak or strong, but flat out wrong or right. Thus, just as the beleaguered writing teacher worried about justifying a grade to a student may welcome the opportunity to note faulty tense agreements and non-parallel constructions (“No arguing with the handbook, my friend.”), the distraught critic of a particularly leaky student argument may be equally pleased to point

out the utterly unambiguous presence of the argument *ad hominem, tu quoque* variety (“No arguing with Latin, my friend”). While helping students understand that a thesis is self-evident or vacuous or that their evidence is irrelevant to their claim can be difficult and time consuming, penalizing them for fallacies and grammar mistakes takes less time and requires less justification.

To be sure, some who use informal fallacies in the teaching of argument have higher motives. There is a long tradition in the field of teaching the fallacies going back to its very beginnings. The genesis of the fallacy approach can be traced to Aristotle, who primarily in *De Sophisticis Elenchis* (as well as *Prior Analytics* and *Rhetoric*) treats fallacies as a collection of intentionally misleading arguments dreamed up by Sophists to bewilder and outflank their opponents. Some of the thirteen fallacies he enumerates are entirely dependent on linguistic trickery while others are said to be independent of language. But the problems of murkiness that have beset fallacies down through the centuries are present here at the very beginning in this distinction. As noted by the authors of *Fundamentals of Argumentation Theory*, Aristotle’s examples of linguistic and non-linguistic fallacies are not particularly enlightening. In fact, many modern day students of fallacy are hard pressed to find any that aren’t dependent on evasive, charged or ambiguous use of language. Consider the following sophistic argument taken from Plato’s *Euthydemus* which is cited as an example of a language-independent fallacy: You have a dog; your dog is father to puppies; your dog is your father (qtd Eemeren et al. 58-59). Laid out like this, the argument would appear to be *prima facie* absurd and unlikely to deceive even the most credulous interlocutor. Even in its original dialogue format it seems painfully transparent. By Aristotle’s lights, it is a language independent fallacy resting on an “an illegitimate shift of an attribute from an accidental property of a subject . . . , to the subject itself or vice versa. . . . what Aristotle here means by ‘accidental’ is not clear” (59). Even if we could figure out precisely what Aristotle had in mind by designating an attribute “accidental,” most of us would find his explanation unnecessarily circuitous and complex. Just because a dog is a father to some puppies does not make him father to everything else under the sun, any more than designating someone a wife entails designating everyone else under the sun her husband. That’s a major category mistake of the sort people in real life just don’t make. The only grounds for terming this a “language-independent

fallacy” would seem to lie in the fact that it is so spectacularly clumsy that few people are likely to be fooled by the linguistic sleight of hand that turns “your” and “father” into universally applicable properties. Indeed many of today’s paradigmatic fallacy examples are as self-evidently wrong headed as the ancient examples. Unsurprisingly so since many of them appear to have been lifted from previous generations of textbook fallacy examples.

Still, the fallacies continue to be a staple item in writing classes devoted to argument, despite the fact, as Richard Fulkerson has pointed out, “there has never been an agreed-upon definition or a usable classification of fallacies” (*Teaching* 96) and the actual number of fallacies cited in argument textbooks varies widely with many of them bearing multiple names. In an attempt to render the study of fallacies more useful to writing teachers, Fulkerson cites work done in the informal logic movement, in particular a definition of fallacy developed by Howard Kahane. According to Fulkerson’s analysis of that definition, a fallacy is present if one cannot answer yes to the following three questions:

1. Are the premises—both explicit and implicit—acceptable?
2. Is all the relevant and important information taken into account?
3. Does the form of the argument satisfy the relevant rules of logic? (97)

Fulkerson sets aside the third question on the grounds that it speaks to the rules of formal deduction which makes it difficult to apply apart from extensive time spent teaching logic, time which could be better spent on more substantive concerns. Moreover, problems in formal logic seldom occur in real world arguments. He then goes on to cite eleven major fallacies that he terms “substantive” in the sense that they are non-formal and fall under the first two questions posed by Kahane’s definition.

Fulkerson’s discussion is useful and clear and anyone determined to teach fallacies in argument should refer to it. As Fulkerson makes clear at the outset and throughout his discussions of the fallacies, the “fallacy of fallacies” as it were, is to mistake a substantive for a formal defect. To presume, as many do, that “any argument lacking the identified fallacy is a good argument” (15) is akin to presuming that any argument without factual errors is sound. Their absence does not guarantee persuasive argument in the same way that the absence of

formal errors in deduction guarantees a sound argument. By the same token, to find a particular argument laid out in the same fashion as a fallacious argument does not ensure that the argument in question is fallacious. In the case of a “slippery slope” argument for example, if someone argues that doing A will lead to B, which will lead to C, and so forth, that argument may or may not be defective. Some slopes, after all, are indeed slippery and some causal chains, even quite lengthy ones, are airtight. Just because an argument follows a pattern often followed by arguments that turn out to be fallacious, does not render the argument in question fallacious. The error one makes in thinking so is akin to the fallacy of *post hoc ergo propter hoc* (“after this therefore because of this”). Linking events in serial order is merely a symptom of causation, and until one can actually show a causal link, one has not proven anything. So it is with supposedly fallacious arguments. In the end, one must always show, on substantive grounds just why they are fallacious. Having shown conclusively that a particular line of reasoning is fallacious, one has typically only weakened an overall argument, not overturned it.

But as the preceding objections to the fallacy approach suggests, some useful insights can emerge from looking at an argument through a fallacy lens. Viewed as a heuristic or a symptom that raises pointed questions about a given argument, rather than an algorithm that classifies and evaluates an argument, a fallacy may lead us to a fruitful line of inquiry. At least several of the fallacies do indeed show up regularly in real world arguments in recognizable forms. For example, those fallacies cited in conjunction with causation, the venerable *post hoc, ergo propter hoc* and “slippery slope” fallacies show up commonly, particularly in conjunction with policy/proposal arguments. Unlike arguments in the sciences which because of stricter rules of evidence, more precise means of measurement, and a tradition of carefully qualified claims tend to produce fewer controversial causal claims (or at least fewer that spill out into the public domain), causal claims in the public policy arena tend to be both harder to quantify and easier to manipulate for political ends. In the case of educational testing, for example, the establishment of high stakes exams in primary and secondary schools is taken as evidence that something is being done to better the educational system and, better yet, to ensure that “no child [will be] left behind.” In that context, bumps of three or four points on the test scores are taken as validation of the “accountability movement.”

But a rise in scores that comes “after the test” guarantees neither that the higher scores are “because of the test,” nor, more importantly that the test measures actual learning or proficiency. What the test results may very well indicate is that teachers are getting better at teaching to the test and students are getting better at taking tests or that the tests are being dumbed down. When results on state tests used to measure student progress are contradicted by the results of national tests designed to measure student proficiency at grade, tests not tied to funding or school accreditation, the “progress” on the state test needs to be reexamined. As a number of critics of the testing movement in education have pointed out, testing in and of itself does nothing to improve student learning. Or as some critics have colorfully suggested, “You don’t fatten a hog by weighing it.”

One can find examples of fallacious reasoning of this sort in numerous public debates and, truth be told, they are not unknown in our professional journals. Having the fallacious patterns in mind may potentially help one recognize the symptoms of fallacious reasoning when one comes across them and organize one’s response to the arguments they underwrite. The decision about whether or not to discuss informal fallacies in a writing class has less to do with the prevalence of the problems they articulate or the usefulness of the fallacies in detecting those problems than it does with the pedagogical challenges they pose. For one well versed in the fallacies, real ones are readily distinguishable from apparent ones. To novices, on the other hand, the form is easily mistaken for the substance. Someone on the lookout for “*post hoc, ergo propter hoc*,” arguments may come across an argument that makes a properly modest claim for causal relationship based on statistical correlations that are highly persuasive and still assume the whole argument is fallacious.

There are further pedagogical problems with the fallacies approach. Philosopher Michael Scriven, an early leader in the critical thinking movement, has, according to the authors of *Fundamentals*, opposed “the use of fallacies for the purpose of argument criticism, contending that doing so requires building into the argument-identification process all the skills that are needed anyhow for analysis” (182). Why teach students the vocabulary of “fallacy talk,” Scriven wonders, when determining the actual status of the argument can be done so in the “natural language” of *claims, evidence, reason* and so forth, used in standard rhetorical analysis? Learning the Latinate language of falla-

cies is in Scriven's view an unnecessary step. The all purpose "hasty generalization" fallacy, for instance, offers nothing new in the way of a tool for assessing how well an argument has been supported. Skimpy evidence is not just a fallacy, it is a basic weakness of many arguments. One is well advised to judge the adequacy of support within the context of the understanding and degree of skepticism any given audience brings to the argument. Generally, thus, we share Scriven's skepticism about the usefulness of fallacy talk in our classes. But by the same token, we try always to offer at least brief exposure to a selected group of fallacies like those dealing with causality that do crop up in the real world and that can be rendered more recognizable by use of the fallacy vocabulary. In our experience, at least a few students find the approach helpful.

THE PRAGMA-DIALECTICAL APPROACH TO FALLACIES

The brainchild of the International Society for the Study of Argument (ISSA), based at the University of Amsterdam and consisting mostly of European and Canadian linguists, philosophers, rhetoricians and communication theorists, this approach deserves attention if for no other reason than the leading members of ISSA have published prolifically on the subject and are frequently cited by American students of argument. (The extremely useful *Fundamentals of Argumentation Theory* which we've been citing is the product of ten ISSA members, and the book's two lead authors, van Eemeren and Grootendorst, are founders of the approach.) In some sense, the pragma-dialectical (P-D) approach represents an attempt to rescue the fallacies approach from the sorts of criticism offered above and to carry on the promising work begun by the informal logic and critical thinking movements in the 1970s and 1980s.

Most American students of argument will find the name of this approach at least mildly puzzling. The pragmatic tradition of American philosophy which infuses the work of many American rhetoricians and many contemporary American philosophers supportive of rhetorical approaches to argument, goes considerably beyond what the P-D advocates seem to have in mind. For American pragmatists, an adoption of a pragmatic approach entails certain assumptions about the centrality of language to an understanding of the world and, consequently, models for constructing knowledge such as Oakeshott and

Rorty's "conversation of mankind" and Burke's "parlor." It entails a rejection of formalistic and systematic approaches to philosophy in favor of "edifying" and interactive approaches. The ends of philosophy for pragmatism lie not in increased stores of knowledge or greater certitude about The Truth, but in decisions and acts that move one incrementally closer to a vision of "the good life," a vision that pragmatists continually interrogate and modify in response to changes on the ground. The P-D movement, meanwhile, seems to identify "pragmatic" mostly with the act of taking into account unexpressed premises of arguments according to "standards for reasoned discourse" (*Fundamentals* 14). The pragmatic part of pragma-dialectical thus licenses one to consult "contextual information and background knowledge" (15) in assessing the validity of an argument and speech-act theory in determining the function of given claim. This more modest understanding of pragmatic can be traced to the point of departure for the P-D approach, the traditional deductivist approach to argument based entirely on internal rules for well formed arguments. Compared to the latter approach, the willingness of P-D analysts to consult extra-verbal, non-formal elements of the argument and to take motive and purpose into account can be seen as significant, however minimal its resemblance to more robust understandings of pragmatism by American students of argument.

By the same token, the "dialectical" portion of P-D analysis is, when compared to American uses of the term, similarly modest in scope. Burke's dialectical approach to understanding, as exemplified by his dramatic method, is for example, a major engine of understanding. Seeing one thing—say "act"—in terms of another thing—say "agent"—results in a unique understanding of the phenomenon in question. Reversal of the pair in question or substitution of different terms may result in a radically different understanding. It's a means of understanding the world that resists closure and certitude, that is above all heuristic. The P-D understanding of the term, meanwhile, rests on the assumption that "all argument goes on between two (or more) discussants who are engaged in a mutual, synchronous interaction aimed at resolving an issue." (Fulkerson 15). It's a high-minded understanding of argument—according to the authors of *Fundamentals* more an exercise in "joint problem solving"(277) than in persuasion—and, not incidentally, one seldom encountered in the real world. While P-D proponents would cheerfully grant that few arguments re-

alize their ideal—“For various reason, argumentative reality does not always resemble the ideal of a critical discussion” (295)—they would defend the model on the grounds that it provides a useful standard by which to evaluate real world arguments.

Which takes us back to where we began the discussion, the P-D attempt to rescue fallacies. What was missing from traditional approaches to fallacy they argue was a standard for distinguishing those arguments that resemble fallacious arguments from those that are truly fallacious. While their own standard is, they would concede, quite stringent, it is not unrealistic. They may be right. The major obstacle to using the approach for most American students of argument, trained in rhetoric as opposed to philosophy or linguistics, is the formidable complexity of the model. If one is to use P-D in one's class, one must be prepared to use it alone because much of one's semester will be spent elucidating the elements of the system and illustrating those elements with extremely simple examples far removed from the sorts of controversies that students actually encounter in the world. In the sense that P-D is helpful in rendering the presentation of an argument more candid, it resembles Toulmin's approach. But in that it requires the acquisition of a much more extensive vocabulary prior to translating natural language arguments into proper P-D layouts it is more like Toulmin squared. Perhaps cubed. Consider the elements of the system: there are four theoretical principles from whence are derived norms for the study of argument; there are four stages of “difference resolution”; there are ten rules for critical discussion; there are five types of speech act used at various stages to help reach resolution (thirteen possible uses of the five speech acts at the four stages are listed on page 289); and forty three possible rule violations are noted in a chart on pages 304-06. Whether or not the extraordinary lengths P-D advocates go to clarify when an argument is not just formally but substantively fallacious lead to more effective analysis of argument is open to debate. For most teachers of argument, the failure of the ends to justify the means is, it would appear, less arguable. To the extent that P-D is a tool of argument analysis, it is for now probably best restricted to professionals.

ALTERNATIVES TO FOCUSING ON ARGUMENT IN A
WRITING CLASS: CRITICAL/CULTURAL STUDIES

In a *College Composition and Communication* essay, "Composition at the Turn of the Twenty-First Century," Richard Fulkerson sets out to establish the lay of the land in composition studies, contrasting the current landscape to the landscape he found in 1990 when he attempted a similar topographical feat in "Composition in the Eighties." What Fulkerson discovers in his latest perusal of the field is that it "has become a less unified and more contentious discipline early in the twenty-first century than it had appeared to be around 1990" (654). He identifies three alternative axiologies or theories of value that give rise to three distinctive approaches to composition. (A fourth approach, the seemingly impossible-to-kill current-traditional approach, is reluctantly acknowledged but little discussed by Fulkerson.) The three axiologies include the "social-construction" view that gives rise to a "critical/cultural studies" (CCS) approach, an expressive view that gives rise to expressivism, and a "multi-faceted rhetorical" view that gives rise to what he terms "procedural rhetoric" (655). The latter approach, meanwhile, is further divided into three forms of procedural rhetoric: "composition as argumentation, genre-based composition, and composition as introduction to an academic discourse community" (671). By Fulkerson's lights, in today's "less unified and more contentious" environment, selecting any one of these approaches may well constitute a controversial act.

We agree with Fulkerson about the divided state of the discipline, a state perhaps best captured in his citation of Gary Olson's contention that composition studies is on the verge of "the new theory wars" (681). We are also sympathetic with his clear preference for procedural rhetoric in general and an argumentation emphasis in particular. We are, however, generally less critical of the alternative approaches than he appears to be and in some cases our grounds for preferring an argument focus over other approaches are different. (Part of these differences can doubtless be traced to the inevitable foreshortening of perspective Fulkerson must manage in order to construct a readable map. As he acknowledges, all of these approaches are more complex and heterogeneous than can be credited in the scope of an overview.) Moreover, it is also not clear to us that an emphasis on argument is pedagogically, as opposed to ideologically, incompatible with some of

these other approaches. (In our chapter on “Best Practices,” in fact we look at a number of different pedagogical approaches to the teaching of writing that seem perfectly compatible with an argument focus.) At any rate, in today’s environment, the decision to focus on, or in some quarters merely include, argumentation in a writing class is a politically charged choice that one had best be prepared to defend against advocates for the other approaches. In those programs where curricular decisions are largely made collectively, one may well find oneself pulled into the debates rehearsed here in very immediate, sometimes painful ways.

Certainly the major shift in emphasis in composition over the past twenty years involves the rise of CCS approaches. Championed most notably by James Berlin, this approach encompasses a number of different emphases, including feminism, service learning or community service and critical pedagogy (not to be confused with the determinedly neutral critical thinking approaches of the 1970s and 1980s). Fulkerson is critical of CCS primarily for focusing too much on issues of social justice and “‘liberation’ from dominant discourse” (660) and for its tendency to privilege student empowerment over improved writing as a course outcome. He is also suspicious of its focus on the interpretation of texts and cultural artifacts as opposed to strategies for invention and revision of student text. He sees an uncomfortable similarity between CCS courses and the “popular and durable literature-based composition courses. In both types, students read texts judged important by the teacher. They write about those texts, and their work is evaluated on how well it shows that they understand and can perform the interpretive approach” (662-63). Such courses, Fulkerson suspects, are motivated in part by what he dubs the “content envy” (663) of writing teachers.

Our own preference for argument-based writing courses over a CCS approach does not imply an outright rejection of content-rich writing courses, even when that content is compatible with the content taught in a typical CCS course. Offering students a common set of texts and/or artifacts to read and discuss does not preclude direct instruction in argument or writing. Moreover, in a collaborative or cooperative learning based environment, common texts and subjects can be extremely useful in the promotion of discussion and negotiation of meaning. That said, we do share some of Fulkerson’s reservations about what all too often *actually* happens in content-rich courses,

particularly when the content in question is a passion of the teacher. Discussion of the selected texts and artifacts may come at the expense of discussion about students' own texts and time devoted to invention and revision of their work. Few of the textbooks apparently designed for use in CCS courses offer much in the way of instruction about invention or revision and fewer still discuss rhetorical principles in any serious way. Much of what is demanded of students in such courses is argument-based writing, yet there is little explicit instruction on how to write arguments or how to think about them and the assignments, qua argument assignments, are not always clearly focused. Certainly many teachers who use this approach create their own primary source materials for the course for reasons not unrelated to their commitment to a CCS focus. But in any case, anyone using a CCS approach who wishes to ensure a balance between a content focus and a focus on student writing should be prepared to do some fairly heavy pedagogical lifting.

In some cases, CCS courses built around a single theme may feature texts and artifacts that echo a common point of view and point in a single direction, discouraging reasoned dissent from and critical reflection on the works in question. Even courses putatively designed to inculcate critical consciousness may hinder the development of that capacity to the extent that they ignore Burke's methodological imperative—"any terminology is suspect to the extent that it does not allow for the progressive criticism of itself." In debunking and critiquing the vocabularies of others, it's important that we remain aware of our own vocabulary's limits, limits that will be cited and protested by many students whose political outlooks may be decidedly different from those of the typical CCS advocate's.

To repeat, we do not think that CCS courses *necessarily* fall prey to the above faults, any more than we believe that argument-based courses necessarily fall into empty formalism or Panglossian notions of pluralism. Certainly, as we made clear in the first chapter where we discussed critical literacy in a more generic sense, we share many of the liberatory goals enunciated by CCS advocates. We believe that students can be empowered by writing courses and that they can become more conscious of the ways in which dominant discourses and ideologies short circuit critical thought. We believe they can do this even as they become better writers. But, we would argue, one may achieve such goals without focusing exclusively or even significantly on the

materials commonly featured in CCS courses. Indeed, in some cases, students may be more likely to achieve the ambitious goals set by CCS advocates in an environment that places greater stress on students' own processes of reading, thinking, writing, talking, and listening than on the primary and secondary materials typically assigned in the course.

Any course that hopes to combine successfully a focus on CCS materials and better student writing must make clear the close working connection between students' interpretation of texts and artifacts and students' construction of their own texts about such material. Here again, our perspective differs from Fulkerson's. While he tends to treat interpretation as a separate activity that detracts from the development of students' writing abilities, we tend to see the two activities as complementary, and hold with Ann Berthoff's reversible dictum that "How we construe is how we construct." In the context of a writing course, interpretation can become an invention activity, a means of generating original text. But it can only work that way if it is clear to students that there is not One Right Way to read the material and if multiple ways of reading text are modeled for them by the teacher, by their peers and by the materials they interpret. If we are tempted to scant students' development as independent thinkers in the name of right-minded conclusions we may wish to nudge or even prod them toward, we would do well to remind ourselves once again of Michael Berube's concept of "reversibility" and of our inability to foresee the ends to which our students may put the intellectual means we place in their possession.

EXPRESSIVIST PEDAGOGY

Fulkerson's critique of expressivist approaches, which "despite numerous poundings by the canons of postmodernism and resulting eulogies, is, in fact, quietly expanding its region of command" (655), suggests that they comprise "a consciousness-raising and coming-to-voice class" (666) that in the name of psychological health commit many of the same sins against composition instruction committed by CCS advocates in the name of political liberation. The fact that Fulkerson devotes less than half the space to critiquing expressivism that he devotes to critiquing CCS or procedural rhetoric appears to reflect his somewhat dismissive view of expressivist approaches. In the one extended example he offers of a scholar defending an expressivist

curriculum, he rejects, justifiably it would appear, the author's basic premise that the curriculum is in fact expressivist on the grounds that "[t]he inclusion of a single autobiographical narrative in the first course is a perfectly standard practice and doesn't warrant labeling the course 'expressive.'" (668).

Our own view of expressivism is again more positive than Fulker's. In fact we see a particularly compelling case to be made for asking students to compose personal narratives in writing classes focused on argument and for teaching students how to read personal narratives as a form of argument. While we view argument-based courses as better designed to meet the ends of rhetoric and, in the long run, to serve both the developmental and cognitive goals of students, we accept the importance of engaging the personal in writing courses and we acknowledge the contributions of latter day feminist and expressivist scholars in helping us achieve that engagement in ways that help further all our ends. While Fulker's critique of expressivism is well taken, he ignores some interesting work being done by "second generation" expressivist scholars and relegates one of the most powerful and egalitarian instruments of persuasion to secondary status. To be sure, a good deal of work needs to be done developing means of evaluating, interpreting and responding to personal narrative to realize its full potential in argument classes. But some contemporary expressivist scholars have already started down that road and in what follows we offer some of our own observations designed to identify some of the pitfalls of persuasive personal narratives and some ways of addressing those pitfalls.

In this regard, we cite Candace Spigelman's "Argument and Evidence in the Case of the Personal" as an exemplary instance of situating the expressive in rhetorical tradition (specifically, an Aristotelian tradition) and contemporary theory and of making a case for the personal in the context of persuasive writing. Spigelman uses personal writing "to refer to the ways in which writers make sense of their lives by organizing their experience into first-person stories" (65). Regardless of their length, these stories "serve ends beyond pure expression of opinion or cathartic confession" (66). One of the most important ends these personal narratives serve is evidentiary. What counts as evidence, Spigelman points out, is whatever an audience is willing to grant as evidence. In traditional disciplines, this means that only those forms of evidence recognized by experts in the field will count. Which means

in turn that outsiders to those traditional disciplines—often women—whose personal experiences gainsay the conclusions of the experts will have a difficult time being acknowledged by those experts. Personal narrative thus “stands as ‘a significant and subversive act,’ giving voice and authority to women’s claims to knowledge by naming their experiences as relevant and admissible data.” (66)

While narrative surely still fulfills an important role in lending authority to outsiders’ knowledge claims, it may no longer seem so subversive. In the wake of such developments as “thick description” in anthropology and new historicism in literature and history, not to mention the work of numerous theorists from Paul Feyerabend to Michel de Certeau, narrative today serves an evidentiary function for many insiders as well as outsiders. (To be sure, as Spigelman points out, some “post-modernists question [personal narrative’s] representation of subjects as individuals”(69), but such complaints are more commonly directed to the manner in which the representation is constructed than to the legitimacy of personal narrative as such.) Certainly many of our students will encounter personal narrative and various forms of ethnographic research in the university and should be prepared to respond to it critically and to reproduce it intelligently. As Fulkerson notes, our own field has embraced “a vaguely interactionist constructivism” (662) over the past twenty years, and in the process legitimated, even privileged, first person narrative evidence in our research. Predictably, Fulkerson is not sanguine about this development. After we briefly consider his concerns about expressivist scholarship, and our own significantly amended version of those concerns, we will return to Spigelman’s defense of personal narrative both as a scholarly tool and as a persuasive tool and consider ways in which that defense might be expanded upon to make personal narrative more readily usable in writing classes focused on argument.

Citing research performed by CCS scholars, Fulkerson notes that “The pedagogical claims, although sometimes based on ethnographic case studies, are never said to be generalizable but always local. Their epistemic status is that of sophisticated lore. ‘I saw this happen,’ or ‘I did this and it helped my students’” (662). Fulkerson’s complaint here strikes us as a bit backwards. The primary flaw of ethnographic research, he argues, is that it can’t be generalized. But of course, it *can* be generalized, if not by the author, by the audience. In fact such research often *is* generalized either by those who conduct it or by those who cite

it. Our concerns about the use of case studies center on the fact that it is not clear just how far or in what direction the generalizations derived from them may take one, since explicit limits are seldom acknowledged or articulated within the studies themselves.¹ In this regard, ethnographic researchers are no different than many other purveyors of personal narrative who either intentionally or unintentionally leave unclear just what function their narrative serves or what rules or generalizations might be legitimated by the evidence they present. Indeed, audiences for literary narratives would consider such commentary intrusive, unnecessary and even downright insulting. By way of clarifying the function and truth status of narrative cases in research, we return to Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca and their discussion of the confusion over the three different functions “particular cases” (350) might serve: as *examples*, *illustrations* and *models*. The particular case they cite is that staple of American magazines, the celebrity profile in which magazines

describe the career of this or that big businessman, politician, or movie star without explicitly drawing a lesson from it. Are the facts retailed just a contribution to history or a sidelight on it? Are they examples suggesting a spontaneous generalization? Are they illustrations of well-known recipes for social success? Or are the central figures in these narratives put forward as remarkable models to be emulated by the public? It is impossible to be sure. Probably a story of this kind is meant to—and often does indeed effectively—fulfill all these roles for different classes of readers. (351)

Given the differences in scope of the generalizations legitimated by the different types of particular cases, the mischief that follows from recounting a case and then studiously avoiding “drawing a lesson from it” may be significant. Is the case in question primarily an *example* that hints at a larger pattern even as it helps establish the existence of such a pattern? Or is it a *model*, an unquestioned ideal that audiences should aspire to? Or perhaps it is an *illustration* of a settled pattern that is accepted as such? To leave this question in doubt is to leave one room to offer up an ostensibly unique event for an audience’s entertainment that eventually morphs into a rule imposed on one’s audience.

While we acknowledge some of the dangers of employing particular cases and personal narratives in research, we believe that those dangers are outweighed by the value of personal narratives. Personal narratives are a useful research tool and a powerful persuasive tool—indeed, it is the power of personal narrative that makes its abuse so dangerous. Instead of turning students away from personal narrative, thus, we argue that they ought to be taught how to construct and critique them. We need to share with them the very sorts of concerns that were articulated above. That said, we return now to Spigelman's essay and to some of the concerns she shares about the dangers of narrative and some useful metrics she develops for evaluating personal narrative in the context of persuasive writing. We will then attempt to build on what she began sketching out here.

Spigelman is particularly concerned with “the problematic of validity testing in experiential research” (79) and cites a question that Richard Flores raises about his own work: “How are my evaluative peers to assess my scholarly work that is fastened to my experience of growing up in south Texas beneath the watchful eye of those whose views of Chicanos were blatantly racist? Could my peers write in their reviews that my account is incorrect and that I must reconsider my experience?” (79). To answer the question Flores raises, Spigelman turns to two personal narratives about writing, one by a community college writing instructor, the other by short story writer Raymond Carver. The contradictory conclusions reached by the two writers illustrate the “problematic of validity testing” at least for those who read the narratives hoping to glean insights into their own teaching as opposed to those who read for pure entertainment. In the case of the community college instructor, the major generalization or claim that emerges from the story points to the futility of commenting on student writing. The claim is based on a discussion the writing teacher has with her husband about a high school essay for which he received a grade of ninety-five with no comment. In the case of Carver, meanwhile, the major generalization or claim that emerges from the story concerns the value of strenuous feedback and evaluation based on classes he took with novelist John Gardner. How is one to evaluate these two apparently contradictory conclusions drawn from personal experience?

Spigelman turns to James Raymond's approach derived from Aristotle's discussion of example and enthymeme. He directs students' attention to the assumptions underlying the narrative and to the ques-

tion “What would a reader have to believe in order to find the arguments persuasive?” (80). Spigelman then extends Raymond’s analysis by turning to Walter Fisher’s narrative paradigm and his assertion that “All narratives may be evaluated and critiqued for the validity or ‘rationality’ by applying principles of ‘*narrative probability*, what constitutes a coherent story,’ and ‘*narrative fidelity*, whether the stories they [audiences] experience ring true with stories they know to be true in their lives” (80). In assessing narrative probability, one is advised to pay particular attention to the appropriateness of characters’ words and actions insofar as that standard of appropriateness is derived from characters’ earlier words and actions and the values they imply. Narrative fidelity, meanwhile, demands that we examine the assumptions underlying a writer’s claims about the significance and meaning of their story and test those assumptions against our own assumptions and those we share with others. When she applies this metric to the two stories, Spigelman finds that the community college instructor’s story ignores many possible variables that, based on her own experiences as a teacher/researcher, might better account for her lawyer-husband’s eventual writing fluency than the “95” with no comments that he got on his sophomore English paper. Carver’s essay, meanwhile, seems more consistent with the assumptions about the teaching of writing that she shares with many in her field and is hence said to possess greater narrative fidelity. Spigelman’s ability to evaluate the two essays on non-impressionistic grounds underscores her point that one can teach others how to approach the task. Furthermore, as she further stresses, “uninterrogated and unevaluated personal narrative is seductive, and consequently dangerous,” (83) and we cannot afford *not* to teach rhetorically informed personal writing in our classes.

We find Spigelman’s essay suggestive and, as far as it goes, persuasive. But, as she readily concedes, considerable work remains to be done in the area of assessing claims derived from personal experience. While we will always be able to assess claims (almost always explicit) in expository essays with greater certainty than we can assess claims (usually tacit) arising from personal essays, we can surely attain a greater degree of confidence in our assessments than the current state of the art allows. Perhaps the best way to begin setting out the work that remains to be done in this area is to note some of the limitations in Spigelman’s evaluative criteria. First, consider her primary reason for faulting the teacher’s personal narrative—its lapse in narrative fi-

delity. The teacher draws conclusions from her experience about the unimportance of feedback that do not square with Spigelman's values and beliefs or those of her community. The teacher appears "to ignore twenty-some years of composition research in favor of the quick grade" (80). But Spigelman does not cite any of the "twenty-some years of composition research" that substantiates the consensus about the importance of comments on student essays and that lapse is significant. To be sure, there is a loose consensus about the importance of revision and feedback, and there is scholarship supportive of the consensus; but a) the scholarship in question is less unanimous than Spigelman suggests both on the question of where teachers ought to direct their comments and the optimum amount of feedback to offer, and b) little if any of that research is very recent.

Perhaps the most frequently reprinted and cited essay on responding to student writing, Rich Haswell's 1983 *College English* essay, "Minimal Marking," while it does not encourage zero response, does argue for an economical response to student writing. More to the point, the values and assumptions in Haswell's piece are a far cry from those that motivate Carver's ten revisions of one short story and Gardner's careful responses to each (79). Haswell's essay appears to assume that few teachers of undergraduate writing would have the time to offer all their students the level of attention that Gardner lavishes on Carver and that even fewer students would have the savvy and commitment to take advantage of that advice in the way that Carver does. (In fairness to students, few of them would possess the sort of technical vocabulary required by Carver to process Gardner's meticulous responses to his work.) In short, Carver's story would seem to function more as a fascinating example of an apprenticeship relationship between two supremely talented writers than as an exemplar of a student-teacher relationship replicable in undergraduate writing classes.

Moreover most of the research on revision and feedback is twenty or more years old in no small part because of the earlier alluded to "personal turn" in composition research. Whatever its flaws—and we recognize many—empirical research did provide members of the composition community a basis for consensus on basic matters of pedagogy such as revision and feedback and today many of us, including those among us scornful of empirical research, continue to rely on it as the basis for an informed consensus as opposed to "sophisticated lore." Perhaps the one piece of scholarship that most clearly articulates that

consensus, George Hillocks's essay "What Works in Teaching Composition: A Meta-analysis of Experimental Treatment Studies," is over twenty years old. It could not be replicated today precisely because there wouldn't be enough empirical studies of what does and does not work in composition to reach any meaningful conclusions.

Just as the personal essay by the teacher ignores certain important variables that might better account for the husband's development as a writer, Spigelman's comparative analysis of the two narratives also ignores certain features that could play a significant role in her final evaluation. First, in discussing narrative fidelity she treats the standard of judgment—"the stories [we] know to be true in [our] lives" (80) and the values and beliefs shared by our community—as relatively unproblematic. She spends little time justifying that standard and focuses her evaluation on the failure of the values implicit in the teacher's story to match up with the standard she brings to bear. But as Fulkerson's essay makes clear, our own community is considerably less homogeneous than it has been and today few of us would feel confident that our own practices, values and beliefs resonated with a majority of those in the field. In lieu of such a consensus, critics of a personal narrative must rely more heavily on the stories they know to be true in their own lives as the basis for judgment. To counter objectionable claims implicit in a narrative, they are probably well advised to situate their counterclaims in narratives based on their experiences, something Spigelman does not do, and perhaps wisely. While not necessarily a bad thing, the practice of answering narratives with narratives means that our claims will be endowed with less certainty and our evidence with less authority than if we could invoke a consensus view.

A second unremarked feature of Spigelman's analysis concerns the disproportion between the authoritativeness of her two sources. One cannot help but wonder about the role that ethos plays in her evaluation of the two accounts and our own response to her judgment. The personal account of a community college writing teacher about her husband is contrasted to the personal account of one of the leading lights of late twentieth century American literature and his equally illustrious mentor. In some sense, Carver and Gardner are the sort of people—"models," in Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca's vocabulary—whose actions are self-authorizing insofar as they define ideals that mere mortals strive to meet. If a community college teacher violates a putative community norm, we are less likely to question our norm

than we are the person; but if a major figure violates the same norm, we may well be moved to question or ignore that norm. The ethos we ascribe to writers of stature like Carver and Gardner is a function of more than their *bona fides*.

The ethos of these writers, like the ethos of every writer, depends greatly on the quality of their writing exhibited in the particular text being assessed. The quality of Carver's prose is very fine indeed, featuring deceptively complex stories told in a straightforward almost offhanded manner. While we tend to agree with Spigelman and others that the quality of Carver's prose owes more to conscious labor and attention to craft (witness his ten revisions) than to mysterious gifts, we also note that few writers, for whatever reasons, produce work of comparable quality. Many do try to write personal narratives with models like Carver in mind. In fact, many more people feel called to write personal narratives than feel compelled to read them. The gap between authorship and readership has to do with the deceptive promise that personal narrative holds out to people weary of laboring over impersonal, expository prose on subjects not of their own choosing, written in languages not of their own making, following scripts not of their own devising—which is to say much of the writing that is done in the world each day. Turning to personal narrative promises people an opportunity to say what matters to them about subjects of their own choosing, in their native tongue, following scripts so thoroughly imbibed over the years that they don't feel like scripts. But, as the gap between readership and authorship for personal narrative suggests, the promise often proves illusory. While personal narratives are relatively easy to write, readable personal narratives are difficult to write and engaging personal narratives are devilishly difficult to write. Cautionary examples of flawed personal narratives are all around us in our scholarship, in our classrooms, and even on bestseller lists. They are, to be sure, flawed in different ways. The worst of our students' personal narratives tend to be not-quite-coherent, not-quite-plausible re-enactments of popular myth, 750-word scripts for a MasterCard ad. The worst of our colleagues's personal narratives, meanwhile, tend to read like religious homilies, earnest, plodding and predictable tales ending in an admirable, if obvious, moral. Reading these works, one is reminded that the freedom of personal narrative is purchased at a significant price, and a big part of that price is the obligation, in Henry James's famous dictum, "to above all be interesting." Lest we grow

discouraged from reading our colleagues' and students' worst efforts, reading the best of our colleagues' and students' works—not to mention those of people like Raymond Carver—will remind us why it is so important to keep trying.

These are but a couple of the many perplexities we confront with setting out to assess claims arising from personal narratives. With Spigelman's help, we have only begun to sort out the challenges. Whatever standard may eventually be developed to help us render sound judgments, we are convinced that a reasonable standard can be developed. Develop it we must. There are some truths that can only be discovered or properly justified through personal narrative. Those are the sorts of truth too important to be filtered out of writing classes in argument in the name of avoiding a turn from writing instruction to therapy.

PROCEDURAL RHETORIC

As is so often the case when three possibilities are explored by a composition scholar, the third one, whether because of a devotion to Nestorian order or because of racial memories of Goldilocks getting things “just right” on the third try, is the privileged position. Clearly Fulkerson is most comfortable discussing and elaborating his own *tertium quid*, “procedural rhetorical approaches.” Hence he begins discussion of the approach by citing a document from the Council of Writing Program Administrators (WPA), a document “officially approved by the organization of people who actually direct programs” (670). The WPA “Outcomes” statement, he points out, for the most part excludes the goals of CCS and expressive approaches from its desired outcomes and emphasizes traditional rhetorical goals. He goes on to maintain that the inattention to procedural rhetoric in our leading journals has more to do with its settled nature as the status quo approach than it does any inherent flaws in the approach. As he suggests, argumentation would appear to be one of the dominant approaches actually taught in the classroom. In addition to argumentation, he cites two other rhetorical emphases under this general heading: “genre-based composition, and composition as introduction to an academic discourse community” (671).

Contemporary genre-based approaches to composition do indeed receive a fair amount of scholarly play. Not to be confused with older

genre approaches or their near relatives the dreaded “modes” (narration, description, process, and so forth), the genre approach is considerably more fluid and theoretically sophisticated. Derived in part from Bakhtin (*Speech Genres and Other Late Essays*) and anthropologists such as Clifford Geertz (“Blurred Genres”), the approach has been adapted to work in composition by a number of communication and composition theorists. In particular, Carolyn Miller’s 1984 essay, “Genre as Social Action” is frequently cited by scholars in our own field, along with subsequent work by Carol Berkenkotter and Thomas Huckin, Aviva Freedman and Peter Medway. Miller’s definition of genre, developed to describe oral genres specifically, is “contextual/situational . . . in contrast to the older idea of a genre as a form/formula” (164). The relationship among members of a given generic class is conceived to be familial rather than homogenous. The genre approach assumes that most writing occurs in recurrent situations. The similarities in these situations concerning such matters as purpose and audience gives rise to roughly similar discourses, adapted to the specifics of the situation.

In all this, we are a long way indeed from the modes, which are first and foremost structural forms. One has little sense what might motivate a description paper or a process paper or who one’s audience might be for such discourse; mostly what one knows is what goes where. While genre-based approaches don’t necessarily exclude formal considerations, they reverse the order of traditional modal-based approaches. Instead of starting from the assumption that form motivates writing, they start by looking for those recurrent situations out of which writing arises and consider the formal choices—along with numerous other choices—writers make in such situations to determine what “family” of formal choices might be appropriate. Because their focus is on recurrent situations, the “typical” audience for a given genre will have certain expectations about appropriate response and writers must work with those expectations, satisfying them or artfully disappointing them for maximum effect.

Like CCS approaches, genre approaches stress the importance of close reading textual models of the genres students are asked to produce. Like CCS, they “presume that texts are socially constructed and intertextual” (165). To understand one instance of a genre requires not merely formal information about the genre, but substantive understanding of the important or paradigmatic models that writers and

audiences can be expected to have in mind when the construct and construe any particular instance of the genre. While genre approaches face some of the same dangers that CCS courses face when it comes to balancing attention to texts and attention to student processes, the rhetorical focus of the approach assures that the interpretive activities carried on in the class should translate more directly into the students' construction of text.

As it turns out, the genre-based approach is perhaps the easiest of the alternative approaches to meld with a focus on argument. A genre-based understanding of argument is built in to virtually every major approach to argument and every major argument textbook. Stasis theory is in effect a genre theory as that theory is understood by most contemporary theorists. The major stases are inductively derived from recurrent sorts situation and recurrent aims of rhetors in those situations. The value of stasis, like any genre-based approach, is not that it dictates a particular structure, but that it allows us to anticipate audience responses and points of emphasis in the construction of an argument. It's not so much a pre-fab form that arises out of our awareness of the stasis at issue—though depending on the context of the argument, a given form might be strongly called for—as it is a series of moves, adapted to the particulars of the situation.

Teaching an argument-based writing course using a stasis approach, also allows one to adapt most readily to the final alternative approach to writing, the introduction to academic discourse communities. In this regard, Fulkerson cites Gerald Graff's position in *Clueless in Academia* "that all academic discourse is argument characterized by certain preferred intellectual 'moves' that should be shared explicitly with students" (672). A student who understands argument as a similar series of moves made in response to a stasis calling for an evaluative or a causal claim should have little difficulty adapting to an approach that stresses the particular manner in which a sociologist understands evaluation or a chemist understands causation.

That said, the introduction to academic discourse communities approach is problematic for a number of reasons. As Fulkerson notes, the approach has been criticized for valorizing certain values and standards that favor middle-class white students and indeed have been under increasing attack within disciplines in recent years. Moreover, the practical difficulties of introducing students to generic academic discourse poses some challenges for the teacher. Undoubtedly the best place to

learn academic discourse is within a community that uses a specific variant of that discourse. Why spend time worrying about what skills and capacities might transfer to another discipline? Let those in the disciplines teach students how to write in the appropriate manner. To learn how psychologists, physicists or political scientists write, we would need to learn the vocabulary, methodology and rules of evidence acknowledged by members of each community, an impossible task in a single class. In fact, to the extent that one sees the primary function of first year composition to be the introduction of students to academic discourse, requiring a first year composition course appears to make little sense. Members of the so-called “abolition” movement, a movement calling for the abolition of first year writing requirements and in some cases first-year writing classes, consistently cite the absence of disciplinary norms and conventions in such classes as a reason for abandoning them.

While we do not have the time or space here to present a full case for the teaching of argument in writing classes as an antidote to the various maladies cited by the abolitionists, we would note that the underlying argument of abolitionists encounters the same difficulties that Kenneth Burke foresees befalling all debunking arguments, as exemplified by flaws he finds in Thurman W. Arnold’s *The Folklore of Capitalism*: “In order to knock the underpinnings from beneath the arguments of his opponents, he perfects a mode of argument that would, if carried out consistently, also knock the underpinnings from beneath his own argument” (*Philosophy* 171). So it is, that if one rejects the relevance of first year writing to writing done in all other college courses, one would, on the same grounds, be compelled to reject the relevance of rhetoric to arguments in all other disciplines. Indeed, what is most striking about the revival of rhetoric in recent years is the extent to which its study has caused people in other fields, notably biology and economics, to reassess their own argument practices. By the same token, the importation of rhetoric to other disciplines through WAC programs caused many teachers in other disciplines to reassess their approach to the teaching of writing. While obviously writing and rhetoric are always to some extent parasitic activities, best understood as writing *about* something or as the rhetoric *of* something, that truism does not gainsay the trans-disciplinary nature of writing and rhetoric, the existence of powerful resemblances and overlaps among their varied applications, and the capacity of rhetoric and writing to alter that

to which they attach themselves. Moreover, even if abolitionists were correct in their views about the irrelevance of basic writing to writing done elsewhere in the academy, there remains a powerful rationale for the teaching of writing as “civic discourse,” a capacity that will prepare them to discharge their duties as citizens as opposed to preparing them to write elsewhere in college.

TO TEACH OR NOT TO TEACH . . . PROPAGANDA

For many years, writing teachers have been understandably reluctant to invoke the term “propaganda” in the classroom, let alone to teach students what the term might mean. In ordinary usage it is purely a pejorative rather than a descriptive term. Virtually the only time one hears the term invoked is in the context of a partisan dismissal of an opponent’s case: “They” use propaganda while “We” offer up reasonable arguments. The term seems too alarmist for everyday analysis of persuasion. The current climate is not entirely healthful when it comes to dealing with loaded issues like propaganda in the classroom. In our own state of Arizona, for example, a bill currently before the state legislature would forbid high school and college instructors from uttering partisan political sentiments in the classroom. While it remains unclear just what a “partisan” comment might entail, students would be encouraged to report what they perceived to be offenses to authorities who would then sort out the matter with the accused. The bill is apparently patterned after similar bills put forward in various other state legislatures in the wake of protests by people like David Horowitz, Dinesh D’Sousa and Ann Coulter claiming that liberal “brainwashing” is commonplace in America’s public schools. Little wonder that in such an environment people might be reluctant to examine particular acts of political speech as being possibly propagandistic.

But that said, propaganda describes a very real set of persuasive practices, practices that are to some degree present in many apparently non-propagandistic arguments. As we saw earlier in our continuum of argument practices, there is no such thing as pure persuasion in the real world, and some element of the worst persuasive practices can be found, however faintly, in the best. Our ability to detect those practices at work in any argument, and to confront them in the worst of those arguments is increasingly critical. There is little doubt that we are at present ill-prepared to deal with propaganda in any thoughtful way,

largely because the dynamic of propagandistic persuasion is not widely understood—worse yet, that dynamic is widely *misunderstood*—and receives little attention in the classroom. More to the point, the use of such practices has arguably increased in recent years as media have taken on new forms optimally suited to the dynamic of propaganda, the temptation to use it has been intensified in an increasingly “winner take all” society, and resistance to it has been weakened by a public education system ever less committed to teaching critical literacy and ever more committed to teaching to various standardized tests.

Before we begin examining just what propaganda is, we will take a moment to say what it is *not*. We do so in the belief that the popular misconceptions about propaganda we alluded to earlier remain one of the major barriers to a contemporary understanding of the phenomenon. One of the most persistent of these misconceptions is the belief that propaganda is for the most part a tool of a totalitarian state. Nazi Germany, Communist China, North Korea, the former Soviet Union, Iraq under Saddam Hussein—in the popular mind, these are the models of propaganda use. In the name of controlling its population, state-run media monopolies feed a constant stream of “official truths,” uplifting music and personal messages from “dear leaders” to its people. “Documentaries” featuring various triumphs of the state are artfully constructed so as to merge the political leaders with their myths. Omnipresent billboards and posters feature images of leadership and patriotic quotes from past heroes. Citizens are required to attend state “celebrations” built around displays of military might. Those unresponsive to the propagandistic messages are sent off to state run facilities to be “rehabilitated.” The borders are hermetically sealed to prevent citizens from seeking their own truths abroad and to prevent “outside agitators” from telling alternative stories. While this model may be historically accurate, and in a few cases—(e.g., North Korea)—may still be in play, it is today simply too expensive to maintain even for the most determined dictators. Moreover, with the advent of the Internet, it is all but impossible to police. Today propaganda is simultaneously more widespread and less obvious than in days past.

WHAT IS PROPAGANDA? BURKE AND ELLUL

At the end of this section we will lay out in abbreviated form some of the major features of propaganda in order to help people recognize it

and better understand its negative impacts. But at this point we will step back and take a broader view of propaganda, using as our guides two thinkers who in our view offer the most thoughtful rhetorical analyses of the phenomenon: Kenneth Burke, particularly his 1941 essay “Rhetoric and Hitler’s ‘Battle,’” and French social philosopher Jacques Ellul. Perhaps the most useful starting point for this analysis is Burke’s distinction between realist rhetoric and magical rhetoric touched on in the first chapter. In making that distinction, it will be recalled, Burke emphasizes the *realistic* capacity of rhetoric to “induce cooperation” among people as opposed to the *magical* power of language to “induce motion in things” (*Grammar* 42). Burke rejects this magical view of language on the realistic grounds that the extraverbal realm, while it depends on language for its comprehension and understanding, is independent of language insofar as it retains the power to thwart our linguistic designs on it. Mere saying, for Burke, does not make it so.

Propaganda can be understood in this context as an attempt to reduce audiences to the state of thinghood and to “induce motion” in them that suits the needs of the propagandist. To that end, the propagandist enterprise is a highly reductive one: reduce the audience to the lowest common denominator and appeal to the basest elements of the human character; infantilize the audience by stressing the godlike omniscience of the propagandist and the audience’s dependence on him for security; limit the audience’s access to disconfirming information and counter-arguments by excluding them from propagandistic persuasion, by mischaracterizing them, and by limiting opponents’ access to audiences. The result of all this, according to social philosopher Jacques Ellul, is what he calls “orthoproxy.” Like its etymological cousin, orthodoxy, orthoproxy refers to a more or less unreflective set of beliefs, but insofar as orthoproxy names a largely unconscious motor response to stimuli that “short circuit all thought and decision” (27) it goes well beyond orthodoxy. Ideally, orthoproxy is best achieved by making “the individual live in a separate world; he must not have outside points of reference. He must not be allowed a moment of meditation or reflection in which to see himself. . . .” (17). As we’ve already suggested, the traditional means of achieving this end, given the massive amounts of money and manpower required to effect it, are no longer seen as viable by most governments. But these days, as we shall

see, less draconian versions of it can be achieved relatively easily with much smaller investments of resources.

While at this point in our study Burke requires no introduction, Jacques Ellul most probably does. His major work, *Propaganda: The Formation of Men's Attitudes*, was written more than four decades ago in 1962, but it remains arguably the most thorough and thoughtful treatment of the subject available to students of rhetoric, particularly for its explanation of how modern social forces interact to render us more vulnerable to propagandistic appeals. Indeed, a number of the trends that he cites in that study as responsible for the rise of propaganda up to the mid-twentieth century, seem if anything even more pronounced today. In particular, he suggests that an education system that teaches people how to read, but not how to think critically is a prerequisite for the spread of propaganda. In part this is so simply because a literate—but not critical—population is required for the formation of a mass media that serves as the most efficient transmission of propaganda. In this regard, Ellul's critique of education anticipates Paolo Friere's 1970s critique that helped lay the groundwork for the critical literacy movement. One of the major differences between the two, and the point at which we find ourselves parting ways with Ellul, concerns the latter's skepticism about "mass education" and its ability to reform itself. In general, Ellul's attitudes toward "the masses," mark him very much as a man of his time and his place.

So just what is propaganda? Ellul offers the following, not overly helpful by our lights, definition:

Propaganda is a set of methods employed by an organized group that wants to bring about the active or passive participation in its actions of a mass of individuals, psychologically unified through psychological manipulations and incorporated in an organization. (61)

While we will not linger over this definition, we would offer one observation about it. Ellul's definition, it seems apparent, could be extended to include such matters as the indoctrination of consumers by advertisers and marketers. But his study focuses on political propaganda and our discussion of him follows suit. We do so even though, as we shall argue shortly, the practices and techniques of propagandists and those of marketers increasingly overlap, more and more propagandists

emerge from the fields of advertising, marketing and public relations, and relentless persuasion in the consumer sphere surely renders people more amenable to propagandistic appeals in the political sphere. All that said, the aims and impacts of those who offer pitches on behalf of products and those who offer pitches on behalf of political causes are significantly different.

The major difference between the two spheres has to do with the fact that the sphere of consumption, at least at the level of individual choice, is essentially amoral, while the political sphere is, at all levels, inherently moral. The kinship between the political and the moral spheres has received extended attention most recently from George Lakoff, who begins from the premise that “political perspectives are derived from systems of moral concepts” (41), and exhaustively explores the implications of that assumption for contemporary American politics. Behind questions about health care, abortion, social security, taxation and so forth lie fundamental questions about fairness and happiness and the sanctity of life. To the extent that we bracket off moral questions from political issues and conceive of choice on the model of selecting from among competing brands of beer, we trivialize those issues and potentially alienate citizens from the political process. Lakoff’s larger point, however, is not so much that the moral dimension of politics has been ignored in recent years, it is that the moral dimension of politics has been grossly oversimplified in order to manipulate audiences in a manner that by our lights appears to be propagandistic. For moral questions to properly inform political issues, the prevailing moral view must be sufficiently inclusive to ensure that every major moral position gets a hearing and that a moral consensus emerges from some sort of dialectic process. To the extent that political discourse in the public sphere is dominated by a single set of moral beliefs intolerant of dissent, and to the extent that those beliefs are in turn not seen as ends in themselves, but rather as means of controlling those who subscribe to them and achieving interested political ends, the quality of our political decisions and the acuteness of our moral sensibilities will suffer accordingly.

But while Ellul’s definition of propaganda acknowledges the use of “psychological manipulations” such as those we’ve just described as part and parcel of the propagandist enterprise, it does not automatically extend to the practice of lying. Indeed, the belief that a message must be intentionally untruthful to qualify as propaganda is one of the

most important barriers to its recognition. While propagandists may on occasion resort to the spread of “disinformation,” the risks of being caught out in an outright lie are sufficiently great to discourage grand scale lying. The ideal propaganda message would be full of accurate facts saturated in speculative innuendo, repeated constantly over an extended period of time until the innuendo takes on the character of fact. In the language of early advertisers, “Repetition is reputation,” a formula that works largely because of our tendency to mistake familiarity for certainty, the “film of custom” for truth.

To borrow again from Lakoff, propaganda is more a matter of “framing” information so as to induce people to draw desired conclusions than it is a matter of feeding people faulty information and insulating them against truthful information. Framing is typically conceived of as the careful selection of a vocabulary that prejudices the issues under discussion. The tacit metaphoric implications of word choices will tilt the audience in the desired direction. To use one of Lakoff’s favorite examples, to couch a discussion of tax policy in the rubric of “tax relief” as opposed to “tax cuts” implies that taxes are an oppressive burden on the taxpayer; while there may be a limit on how much one may wish to “cut” taxes, there is no limit on how much one may seek “relief” from taxes.

But for our purposes, framing may be extended from matters of vocabulary and metaphor to the medium through which a message is received. In today’s highly sophisticated media, issues are often literally framed by the scene in which they are presented. To cite one contemporary example, “Hannity and Colmes,” a long-running Fox TV News program, features a conservative point of view (Hannity) “balanced” by a liberal point of view (Colmes). But even a cursory viewing of the program will convince some that a heavy thumb disturbs the balance. Hannity has the look of a network anchorman; he’s a vigorous, blustery fellow, full of certitude who dominates his supposed liberal foe Colmes, a sepulchral fellow with the look of a small market weatherman and a tendency to mumble, who often offers up arguments with an air of wistful hopelessness. Colmes appears seldom to score many points in their exchanges, let alone come away with many wins. No “lies” need be told in such a format because ineffectual truths work just fine.

In framing information, propagandists may distort its significance, exaggerate or understate its future implications, obscure or disguise

the intentions of the speaker, or attribute doubtful motivations (usually the propagandist's own, least presentable, motivations (Ellul 58) to their adversaries. Like some popular TV shows, propagandists love "stories ripped from the headlines," converting current events, particularly spectacular events that conform to popular myths (45), to crises demanding the attention of the masses. In Ellul's words,

Obviously, propaganda can succeed only when man feels challenged. It can have no influence when the individual is stabilized, relaxing in the midst of total security. Neither past events nor great metaphysical problems challenge the average individual, the ordinary man of our times. He is not sensitive to what is tragic in life and is not anguished by a question that God might put to him; he does not feel challenged except by current events, political and economic. Therefore, propaganda must start with current events. (44)

To repeat: we do not share, here or elsewhere, Ellul's disdain for "the ordinary man of our times," but his contention that news is a constant source of propagandistic fodder seems, if anything, truer today in the age of the 24/7 news cycle than when he made it more than four decades ago. Some distortions of current events are, to be sure, inevitably introduced in the reporting of those events by mainstream news media. But such media represent a dwindling share of what passes for news today. For most of the serious propagandizing taking place today, we can look to the rapidly growing segment of news broadcasting that is "secondary" to journalistic news. This is the world of "Hannity and Colmes," of pundits and political consultants, bloggers, editorialists, and foundation policy wonks who spin and interpret the news, through various forms of infotainment that are far cheaper to produce than actual news coverage. One way to gauge the propagandistic slant of such programs is to note the extent to which they are conducted "in the language of *indignation*, a tone which is almost always the mark of propaganda" (Ellul 58). In extreme cases—think "talk radio"—such programs appeal to the crudest feelings such as "hate, hunger . . . pride" (38) and fear to stir its audience's passions.

Burke echoes many of the above points in his discussion of Hitler, whose rhetoric is a model of "impure" rhetoric on Burke's continuum.

In the introduction to his review of *Mein Kampf*, the occasion of his essay, Burke simultaneously calls attention to the impurities of Hitler's rhetoric and the responsibility of rhetoricians to articulate the dynamic of that rhetoric. Reviewers have an obligation to analyze "exasperating, even nauseating" (*Philosophy* 191) books like Hitler's. He likens a hasty, dismissive review of *Mein Kampf* to burning it on a pyre, ala Hitler himself. In so doing, Burke argues, we miss an opportunity to discover how Hitler has managed to concoct a medicine so gladly swallowed by many millions of people, and thereby to "forestall the concocting of similar medicine in America" (191). Burke goes on to point out that while Americans might believe that our virtues will protect us from Hitler's spell, it is in fact "the *conflict among our vices*" (192), the parliamentary wrangling of our differences—that is, rhetoric itself—that protects us from the charms of Hitler's "perfect" system, his unified field theory of human nature.

One of the themes in Burke's analysis echoed twenty-five years later in Ellul's is the association between modern propaganda and the techniques of marketing and advertising. Modern propaganda, as opposed to its earliest manifestations as "agit-prop" or invective used to stir up partisan fervor, is considerably more subtle and scientific. As Burke notes of Hitler, he possesses the "'rationality' of a skilled advertising man planning a new sales campaign. Politics, he says, must be sold like soap—and soap is not sold in a trance" (216). Ellul, by the same token, characterizes the propagandist as "more and more the technician who treats his patients in various ways, but keeps himself cold and aloof, selecting his words and actions for purely technical reasons" (25). What was characteristic of propaganda in the mid-twentieth century seems today to be paradigmatic. Thanks to technological advances, the convergences between propaganda and marketing are even more pronounced in today's highly mediated environment. The line between the two activities is ever less bright and ever more frequently crossed by an "occupationally psychotic" core of people who spin candidates, policies, wars, and sport utility vehicles with equal aplomb using many of the same techniques.

One of the most important lessons propagandists learn from advertisers concerns techniques for carefully dividing one's audience, an art perfected by legions of demographic and psychographic researchers employed by marketers. Propaganda is, to use Ellul's social scientific term, "partitioned" (212), or to use Burke's more traditional

rhetorical descriptor for “advantage-seeking” rhetoric, propaganda is “addressed.” In a famous speech Burke gave in 1935 to the American Writer’s Congress, he described the propagandist’s parasitic relationship to his audience as follows: “As a propagandizer, it is not his work to convince the convinced, but to plead with the unconvinced, which requires him to use *their* vocabulary, *their* values, *their* symbols, insofar as this is possible” (Simons 271-72). Which is why propagandists, like advertisers, study audiences so closely, so that their messages will be expressed in the appropriate vocabularies, values and symbols that will find their mark with finely discriminated groups whose needs, desires and fears are scrupulously mapped.

In a closed, homogeneous society, like Hitler’s Germany, this means that propaganda can be channeled through a single medium to appeal to a massive group of “ins,” whose needs, anxieties and aspirations, not to mention their myths and fantasies, are exhaustively understood, at the expense of the minority “outs” who represent the ins’ worst fears about themselves. But in a pluralistic society like America, this means that propaganda, to be effective, must have access to multiple outlets for custom-crafted messages targeting diverse constituencies. Ironically thus, our apparently free and robust press, and the countless channels of information it provides, may prove as invaluable to propagandists as it has to advertisers in dividing and conquering audiences.

As this last remark suggests, however invaluable a free press may be to combating propaganda, it is only a necessary, not a sufficient condition for resistance. As Ellul points out, “All propaganda has to set its group off from all other groups” (212) which is done by ensuring that every group has media outlets devoted to its beliefs. “They learn more and more that their group is right, that its actions are justified” (213) while rival groups are repeatedly affirmed to be wrongheaded and wrongly motivated:

This criticism of one’s neighbor, which is not heard by that neighbor, is known to those inside the group that expresses it. The anti-Communist will be constantly more convinced of the evilness of the Communist, and vice versa. As a result, people ignore each other more and more. They cease altogether to be open to an exchange of reason, arguments, points of view. (213)

More than forty years later, with the advent of digital and satellite TV offering hundreds of channels of information, the Internet with its numberless portals and blog sites, not to mention talk radio, Ellul's critique would seem to be even more salient. We truly do live, as Burke suggests, in "the state of Babel, after the Fall," and to the extent that modern media multiply and harden divisions among a citizenry, they render the rhetorical antidote to such a state—something like Rorty and Oakeshott's conversation of mankind—that much less efficacious.

The partitioning problem described above is compounded when one takes into account the indirect effects of media on those elected to represent the citizenry. Because of ever escalating cost of winning elections, due primarily to the high cost of buying media time and producing political ads that themselves exhibit increasingly propagandistic tendencies, office holders are more and more beholden to special interests willing to subsidize their campaigns. Fealty to special interests in turn makes it increasingly difficult for representative bodies to transcend their partisan wrangling and harmonize their interests in the name of the public good. The oft remarked decrease in comity and productive conversation in the American Congress is a sign that Ellul's partitioning model has been extended from the electorate to our elected bodies. Indeed, Burke suggests that this has always been the case and that the changing nature of media may have simply exacerbated a chronic affliction within elected bodies.

Burke's conclusions about the underlying causes of legislative divisions come in the context of his discussion of Hitler's psychology, a discussion conducted in the language of Freud. Burke argues that Hitler's own "parliamentary self" was deeply riven by conflicts among the id, ego and superego. Hitler in turn projected the prodigious inner struggles besetting his personality onto the world, in particular the deeply divided parliament of the collapsing Habsburg Empire. Imposing his totalitarian vision on the world represented a magical cure for his inner divisions. All evidences of heterogeneity, of difference, hence became for Hitler symptoms of "democracy fallen upon evil days" (200). The inevitably messy democratic political process with its emphasis on debate, compromise, and consensus is converted by Hitler into a "Babel of voices, and by the method of associative mergers, *using ideas as images*, it became tied up in the Hitler rhetoric with 'Babylon,' Vienna as the city of poverty, prostitution, immorality, coalitions, half-

measures, incest, democracy (i.e., majority rule leading to ‘lack of personal responsibility’). . . .” (200). On some of the more rabid talk radio programs, one can hear similar analyses conducted in similar tones of righteous indignation and moral outrage by today’s news fabulists. According to Burke the newspaper editorialists of his day followed the form, if not the pitch of Hitler’s rhetoric, a remark that seems still to resonate:

Every conflict among the parliamentary spokesmen represents a corresponding conflict among the material interests of the groups for whom they are speaking. But Hitler did not discuss the babel from this angle. He discussed it on a purely symptomatic basis. The strategy of our orthodox press, in thus ridiculing the cacophonous verbal output of Congress, is obvious: by thus centering attack upon the symptoms of business conflict, as they reveal themselves on the dial of political wrangling, and leaving the underlying cause, the business conflicts themselves, out of the case, they can gratify the very public they would otherwise alienate; namely, the businessmen who are the activating members of their reading public. (201)

The net result of the above scenario is to weaken public faith in government. Insofar as rules, institutions, principles, and traditions of government may limit propagandists’ power or impede a particular program they wish to enact, they would not view this as necessarily a bad thing. Hence Ellul’s declaration that insofar as citizens are “uninterested in political matters” they (the state and/or those who control it) will be left with a “free hand” (191). But at the same time, there is a point of diminishing returns beyond which continuing to weaken public confidence in government may not be in the self interest of those who control, or wish to control, levers of governmental power. If public dismay about government deepens without check, propaganda “has absolutely no effect on those who live in . . . indifference or skepticism” (190). How then do political propagandists simultaneously undermine confidence in government as an institution while expanding those governmental powers that serve their ends?

The trick, according to both Burke and Ellul, is to personalize government, identifying it increasingly with the personality or personali-

ties of its leadership. According to Ellul, “The cult of the hero is the absolutely necessary complement of the massification of society” (172). Through the hero, Ellul argues, the average person “lives vicariously” (172), whether the hero happens to be a movie celebrity or president. In the political realm, Ellul sees this theme play out most clearly in the political parties, whose propagandists (or PR people if one prefers) exploit “the inclination of the masses to admire personal power. . . . by creating the image of a leader and investing it with attributes of omnipresence and omniscience. . . .” (217). To buttress his contention here, Ellul cites the 1952 American presidential race in which Eisenhower successfully exploited this inclination at the expense of Adlai Stevenson, the quintessential aloof intellectual, who viewed his ideas, not his persona, as the key to his claims on the presidency.

Ellul, in passing, notes how Fascism repeatedly claimed to have “restored Personality to its place of honor” (172), a point that in turn looms large in Burke’s analysis of Hitler’s propaganda. In particular, Hitler is skillful at “spiritualizing” or “ethicizing” the material bonds linking different strata of society by “personalizing” such links, making it “crass to treat employers and employees as different *classes* with a corresponding difference in the classification of their interests. Instead, relations between employer and employee must be on the ‘personal’ basis of leader and follower. . . .” (217). (By the same token, those who today point out inequities among social classes are charged with instigating “class warfare,” while the general populace is inundated with books, tapes and seminars on “leadership,” a mystical quality that is rewarded with ever more fabulous sums of money.) The vocabulary Hitler uses in effecting such magical transformations is the prestige terminology of religion, a terminology he hijacks with impunity.

Here again is where Hitler’s corrupt use of religious patterns comes to the fore. Church thought, being primarily concerned with matters of the “personality,” with problems of moral betterment, naturally, and I think rightly, stresses as a necessary feature, the act of will upon the part of the individual. Hence its resistance to a purely “environmental” account of human ills. Hence its emphasis upon the “person.” Hence its proneness to seek a noneconomic explanation of economic phenomena. (201)

This personalization of all relationships within the Nazi state is eventually extended to the image of the state itself. In the interest of achieving peace and harmony “the wrangle of the parliamentary is to be stilled by the giving of *one* voice to the whole people, this to be the ‘inner voice’ of Hitler, made uniform throughout the German boundaries, as leader and people were completely identified with each other” (207). Hitler thus offers the German people “the *bad* filling of a *good* need” (210), by perverting the religious desire for ultimacy. In effecting this unification Hitler turns to criticism of a peculiarly propagandistic sort. “Not criticism in the ‘parliamentary’ sense of doubt, of hearkening to the opposition and attempting to mature a policy in the light of counter-policies; but the ‘unified’ kind of criticism that simply seeks for conscious ways of making one’s position more ‘efficient,’ more thoroughly itself” (211). The world Hitler creates through propaganda, censoring opposition, excluding contradiction, identifying the essential unity of the state with the “blood” of the Aryan race, is Ellul’s propagandistic dystopia, a hermetically sealed world in which the individual has no “outside points of reference.”

For all that propaganda is ordinarily identified with rhetoric, both Ellul’s and Burke’s understanding of the term renders it more of an anti-rhetoric. What happens to propaganda in Hitler’s Germany and Ellul’s Western democracies is what happens to any term allowed to become too “thoroughly itself.” In Burke’s language, it succumbs to the paradox of purity and becomes different in kind from every instance of the term from which the ultimate definition has been built. It simply reverses the process by which we earlier arrived at the concept of pure persuasion, eliminating every hint of sacrifice and standoffishness, of dialectic and invention, until it is purely “addressed” and every potential interlocutor has been transformed into a motion.

To better understand just why propaganda may have become a more pervasive force in our advanced democracy supposedly immune to its charms, we return to Ellul and an important point he makes about the workings of Western democracy. “For the average Westerner, the will of the people is sacred, and the government that fails to represent that will is an abominable dictatorship” (129). In order for any democratic government to maintain its legitimacy, it must maintain popular support in the form of public opinion, electoral support or both. But public opinion, as anyone who follows polling data knows, is famously fickle. Support for an administration’s or party’s economic

or military policies waxes and wanes depending on how good or bad the news may be on the economic or military front. Yet to be effective, policies must be stable and policy makers need to take the long view; if the news runs against them—and inevitably it will run against them for a time—they must modify or even reverse their policies, accept political defeat or persuade people that their policies are either actually working or just about to work.

The conundrum for politicians is neatly captured by Ellul, who notes that every administration, whatever the party affiliation, “gives the impression of obeying public opinion—after first having built that public opinion. The point is to make the masses demand of the government what the government has already decided to do” (132). In some cases we may—at times correctly—attribute a sinister motive to these clandestine attempts to influence public opinion. The policies being promoted may in fact benefit special interests at the expense of the public good. But even those policies which are in the public interest will face many of the same difficulties as those faced by corrupt practices. The fact that civically sound practices may be easier to defend on rational grounds does not guarantee their popularity or gainsay the need, at least in the eyes of their proponents, to utilize propaganda on their behalf. Hence the inevitability of propaganda.

Propaganda, thus, is not something we can hope to eradicate or, in Burke’s parlance, debunk. We can slow its spread and push it toward more legitimate forms of persuasion by critique and questioning. Like advertising and marketing practices with which it is so intimately linked, propaganda too can be more or less pure, but only if it fails in its cruder forms—advertisements disguised as government press releases touting the benefits of controversial programs, industry-sponsored faux research selectively cited by government officials to support dubious policies, fake journalists lobbing softball questions to government officials, real news commentators offering paid testimonials in support of programs and policies without acknowledging that their support is paid for, and politicians holding “town hall” meetings in Potemkin village settings with carefully selected participants asking scripted questions—thanks to real journalists doing their work and/or because sophisticated audiences have learned how to “discount” suspicious claims and how to critically question symbolic actions.

To assist in this regard, we offer the following brief summary of propagandistic practices.

PROPAGANDA IN A NUTSHELL

Before we consider the symptoms and dynamic of propagandistic practice, we offer the following caveat: The differences between propaganda and other more legitimate forms of rhetorical practice are differences of degree. Every rhetorical practice is more or less pure or impure and none of the following can be applied categorically to a given act. If one were to reduce the whole thing to a soundbite, our view of propaganda might be dubbed “Advertising on steroids for political causes.” Many of the following conditions characterize ordinary political discourse as well as propaganda. Determining when ordinary political discourse becomes propaganda requires “parliamentary wrangling” among people of various political persuasions. Consequently one is perhaps best advised to think of these conditions as conversational gambits rather than taxonomic traits.

1. The dissemination of political propaganda requires that one own *a* stage if not *the* stage. Without a stage, one is powerless not only to disseminate one’s message to a mass audience but to frame the debate so as to undercut competing messages. While not all who disseminate a message need be card-carrying members of an organization or even privy to a plan to engage in the spread of propaganda, those who originate and craft a propagandistic message must do so consciously in the name of a belief system. In the present scheme of things, propaganda often spreads like gossip in an oral culture, through uncritical amplification of consciously crafted propagandistic messages that originate in mass media and then proliferate over the Internet, on talk radio, call-in TV shows, letters to the editor and so forth. Increasingly, the direction of that movement is reversible, as enterprising bloggers initiate propagandistic messages that mimic the messages of the “official” leaders.
2. Like advertisers, propagandists are exacting “partitioners” of markets whose messages often reflect extensive research into the psychological and demographic makeup of their audience. They rely heavily on Burke’s “cunning” in seeking advantage for their ideas, speaking to the fears, wishes, and desires peculiar to their target audience in an attempt to circumvent rational consideration and to induce “motion” in those they address.

Their appeals rest less on evidence and reasons than on “common sense” that “goes without saying.” Also like advertisers, propagandists are adept at persuading large audiences (“You”) that they are speaking to them individually (*you*) and persuading them to hew to a party line in the name of thinking for themselves.

3. However much the techniques used to create and market propaganda are borrowed from advertising, crucial differences remain. Advertisers by and large purchase their stage in straightforward cash transactions. Propagandists, meanwhile, by and large use the public media, in particular the news media, to disseminate their message. Also, advertising is typically presented overtly as advertising, while propaganda is rarely presented as propaganda. To the extent that an audience knows a message is propaganda, the effectiveness of the message is likely diminished. At times, propagandists will go to extreme measures—(e.g., planting fake news stories in mainstream media or creating faux third party organizations, and so forth) to deliver their message while disguising their intentions.
4. The text of the propagandistic message is typically derived from current events. Often it focuses on a problem or crisis that grabs public attention by virtue of its spectacular nature and/or its conformity with a popular mythic theme—(e.g. A Rugged Individual [David] takes on Big Government [Goliath]). The material consequences of the problem are less important to propagandists than its symbolic resonance. (In some cases, in fact, the problem is manufactured in order to divert attention from other problems that are of considerably greater public consequence but which are less tractable and/or reflect less well on those doing the propagandizing.)
5. By hooking on to a problem that has already aroused public attention, propagandists can amplify the themes that animate their message. By framing the meaning of problematic events in keeping with their ideological themes, they can persuade the public that their interpretation of a singular event is in fact a confirmation of an underlying order. Assuming a solution is posed for the problem—as opposed simply to blaming another ideology for the problem—it will reflect the propagandists’

ideology more clearly than it will fit the problem. Often the problem will be reframed as a moral problem and the proposed solution will be more spiritual or moral than pragmatic in nature. Consequently propaganda will shift our attention to the personal dimension of the problem and away from the environmental causes of the problem. In its most virulent forms, propagandistic solutions call for the punishment, exclusion, or impeachment of scapegoats whose behaviors justify the tone of indignation or moral outrage favored by propagandists.

6. Propagandists evidence faint enthusiasm for “self interference” or “proving opposites.” Their arguments are often constructed in secret with little input from diverse sources; they distort, demonize, or entirely exclude opposing views on the topic at hand; they speak to the lowest common denominator in their audience. If propagandistic arguments run up against inconvenient facts or persuasive counter-arguments once they are loosed on the world, those who propose these arguments will not waver, nor will they offer justification. They will repeat the argument endlessly, displaying a heroic fixity of purpose that passes for leadership in some quarters. (Burke notes that Hitler refused to alter a single item of his original 25-point, Nazi platform because he “felt that the fixity of the platform was more important for propagandistic purposes than any revision of his slogans could be, even though the revisions in themselves had much to be said in their favor” [212].)
7. Whereas propaganda in closed societies is often fashioned around a “cult of personality,” propaganda in open societies tends to be fashioned around a “cult of celebrity.” The biographies of those who speak in the name of an ideology will be tortured to fit the myths that underlie that ideology, and they will come to personify the ideology in much the way that movie stars often come to be identified with the characters they play.
8. The more agitated an audience, the more effective propaganda can be. For its reception, propaganda requires an unsettled, anxious, even fearful audience. A sense of crisis, of being under attack, renders an audience more tolerant of one-sided arguments and reduction of one’s opponents to cartoon figures. Propagandists may invent crises, but more typically they simply

gin up actual problems of finite proportions into apocalyptic problems of gargantuan proportions. Internal critics of their propagandizing are then readily lumped in with their amorphous enemies.

That then, is propaganda in a nutshell. In the interest of ourselves being “fair and balanced,” we like to invite our students to apply the above observations not just to the practices of the present administration, but to the films of Michael Moore and to shows on Air America as well.

NOTES

1. One of the best known recent examples of the phenomenon cited here whereby a researcher relies heavily on anecdotal and narrative evidence to establish quantitative categorical judgments about her subject involves the work of Deborah Tannen. While most of her peers in the field of sociolinguistics support the “direction” of her findings about differences in the ways males and females communicate, a number take issue with the quantity of impact and universality of those differences. To conclude from the finding, say, that males are five or ten per cent more likely than females to respond to a particular situation in a particular way that there are categorical differences in their responses (i.e., that they exemplify male and female “styles” of response) appears to overstate the matter. For a fuller rhetorical analysis of Tannen’s methodology, see Ramage’s *Twentieth Century American Success Rhetoric: How to Construct a Suitable Self*. Carbondale: Southern Illinois UP, 2005. 167-85.