

The Comedian as Antagonist in the Age of Eristic Public Discourse

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Eristic

- Eris, the ancient Greek goddess of strife, chaos and discord
- An “eristic argument” is an argument with the goal of “winning” the discussion and not finding the truth.
- The term is used to attack the sophists who used it as an exercise in which the student had to refute an answer regardless of its content
- Plato condemns eristic arguments (“erizein”)
- “he will imitate the dialectician who is seeking for truth, and not the eristic, who is contradicting for the sake of amusement” (Republic, Book 7; 454a)



Eris, Vasenbild nach Gerhard, *Ges. akad. Abhandl.*
Atlas Taf. X Fig. 5. © www.maicar.com

definition

- We will define an eristic agent as an agent engaging in a communicative exchange for the goal of "winning" an argument by defeating another agent's argument and not to seek the truth.
- An argument is considered "won" if the argument presented by a given agent is accepted to be true or better by some or all of the participants.

The Rebirth of Political Satire

- Since 2000, in the US, the most visible, mainstream opposition voice has been that of political satire:
- Jon Stewart's and Stephen Colbert's rise to fame with the Daily Show (1999-2015) and the Colbert Report (2005-2014) (Baym, 2005; Brewer & Marquardt, 2007; Fox et al., 2007; Hmielowski, 2011; Hoffman & Young, 2011; Young & Hoffmann, 2012; Lee & Kwak, 2014).
 - Trevor Noah, Bill Maher, Samantha Bee, John Oliver, etc.
 - SNL revival
- See Shifman et al., 2005, for a broader perspective

What happened?

- How do we explain this? Did people suddenly want political satire?
 - Not an explanation: why did they suddenly want political satire?
 - Why the Millenium? No idea.
- Then I read a newspaper article that pointed out that the birth of fake news and politicians that openly lie goes as far back as the mid 1990s.
- Berlusconi starts his political career in 1994.

Eristic discourse in politics

- Wodak, 2017, 2019.
 - discourse in which the purpose is not to convey information or to cooperate, but rather to win or score points against the interlocutor
- Not to be confused with argument in which two interlocutors try to convince each other of the validity of their opinions = truth oriented
- Contemporary eristic discourse is largely (mostly?) mediatic.
 - TV, Internet

Eristic discourse is non-cooperative

- In eristic discourse the validity of one's argument, factual truth, or even relevance are immaterial.
- The purpose is not to convince the interlocutor, but to perform a rhetorical "win,"
 - to convey to one's supporters the impression, entirely logically unmotivated, that since one has "won" the argument then he/she must have been right.
- Therefore eristic discourse violates all the principles and rules that make cooperative communication possible (Grice's CP, Relevance, Rationality, Davidsonian Charity, etc.).

An Italian example

- “Convocherò oggi il ministro degli Interni, e darò a lui istruzioni dettagliate su come intervenire attraverso le forze dell'ordine per evitare che questo [students sit ins in schools] possa succedere.” Berlusconi [October 22nd, 2008]
- “Non ho mai detto che servisse mandare la polizia nelle scuole” Berlusconi [October 23rd, 2008]

Translation of the Berlusconi example

- “I will summon today the minister of interior affairs and will give him detailed instructions on how to intervene through the police [literally: forces of order] to avoid that this [=students’ sit-ins in schools] may happen.” (Oct 22nd, 2008)
- “I never said that sending the police on the schools would be needed.” (Oct 23rd, 2008)

The Berlusconi Strategy

- Make a statement X that appeals to your base
- The press or other politicians challenge statement X on various grounds
- Deny that you made statement X
- Ignore all evidence, including video and audio recordings of having made statement X
- It works:
 - The base hears X
 - The base hears the denial (presented as the press or other politicians are liars)
 - The news cycle moves on
 - Complete lack of accountability
 - Accountability in the Gricean/Daidsonian/Habermasian social order comes from one's responsibility for one's words.

Can Eristic Discourse be Defeated Through Argument?

- No.
- It is impossible to counter an eristic argument with another argument
- Because of the capacity and willingness of the eristic agent to violate all forms of socially-accepted discursive practice, cooperative rules, etc.
- The eristic agent can manipulate facts and figures, invent completely false points, talk beside the point, contradict themselves, even utter nonsensical utterances

Can Eristic Discourse be Defeated at all?

- Yes. There are at least two forms of argument that may defeat an eristic agent
- Be an eristic agent yourself.
 - Speaker 1: “...and therefore my opponent, speaker 2, is a liar and a cheat.”
 - Speaker 2: “Possibly, but you are a convicted pedophile.”
 - Problem with this strategy: you have to be an eristic agent.
- Ridicule.

Ridicule as a Rhetorical Counter to Eristic Discourse

- It is impossible to counter an eristic argument with another argument, *but*
- By mocking the eristic agent's argument or the agent him/herself, the comedian transcends the argument by invoking the meta-status of humor.
 - Note that ridicule is not (necessarily) an actual argument, but neither is the eristic argument.
 - If I mock someone's looks (for example, Beppe Grillo invariably referred to Berlusconi as "The dwarf.") it's pure ridicule, *but it still counts as a counter in rhetorical terms.*
- Debasing function of humor
- Deniability of humor ("I was just joking"? "it's just satire," "I am just a comedian")
 - Eristic agents are vindictive, too

Conclusion

- The rise of eristic discourse has caused the rise of the political satirist as the only effective form of oppositional discourse in the mainstream media.
- This explains the revival of political satire in the past 20 years.

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