

# ***Psychagogia* and the Rhetoric of Desire and Affect**

**Samuel Mateus**

**Madeira University**

E-mail: sammateu@gmail.com

**Abstract:** When referring to rhetoric, most people focus on the argumentative, rational and critical reasoning involved in the art of persuasion. It is that logocratic (*logos*) dimension that is most alluded to when we think about the discursive skills an orator must possess in order to convince others that it is plausible to accept the arguments he advances that support his claims. Yet, affect is another way through which we reason and think.

In this paper, I want to explore the genealogy of affective rhetoric. I suggest that not only pondering on emotional persuasion is crucial to contemporary, mediatized communication (including advertising and political communication), as also affective rhetoric is already implicit in the definition of early Greek rhetoric. In his dialogue *Phaedrus*, Plato already describes the affective nature of rhetoric and persuasion when he qualifies it as *psychagogia*.

Exploring rhetoric as *psychagogia* opens the door to the rhetoric of desire and the pervasive role of emotions in today's advertising rhetoric. Emotions and desire are not a secondary or even a to-avoid aspect of rhetorical persuasion but the very core through which we think, decide and decide to act.

**Keywords:** rhetoric, emotions, desire, affect, *psychagogia*, advertising rhetoric.

## **Introduction**

Although rhetoric - seen as the art of persuasive speaking - is such an important skill to influence people and lead them to the comprehension and acceptance of our goals, it is often neglected outside academia. When we think about comedians, teachers or even politicians most of us do not think that they must be able to inspire, impress (even entertain) in order to successfully communicate. Even if many times forgotten, a skillful rhetoric is a powerful way of ensuring citizens engage with and stay committed to democracy and politics. For instance, his ability to communicate led Barack Obama to be considered one of the most cherished and recognized presidents of the USA.

But even when they talk about rhetoric, most people refer to the argumentative, rational and critical reasoning involved in the art of persuasion. It is that logocratic (*logos*) dimension [1] (Aristotle, 2012) that is most alluded to when we think about the discursive skills an orator must possess in order to convince others that it is plausible to accept the arguments he advances that support his claims. Argumentation theory shows the tendency to put aside *pathos* concentrating, above all, in the linguistic, logical, critical and argumentative properties of rhetorical discussion. Appeals to emotion tend to be tolerated as fallacies (Hamblin, 1970) [2] and emotions are seen as weak forms of persuasion and argumentation. For example, Toulmin's model of argument (1958) [3] does not include the role of emotions as affect, just like Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca's *New Rhetoric* (1958) [4] tends to exclude their role in argumentative reasoning. Emotions are, thus, taken as poorer forms of persuasion since emotions disturb reason, they involve a deceitful form of argumentation and persuasion.

Traditionally, the study of reason has been separated from the study of emotion. Philosophers<sup>1</sup>, psychologists and neuroscientists view cognition and emotion as

separable, distinct, and isolated phenomena (Zadra & Clore, 2011) [5]. Recent research on the topic has revealed how reason and emotion form a dual entity in cognitive reasoning (Lerner & Tieddens, 2006) [6]. Indeed, studies have found that neurological impairments significantly reduce an individual's ability to feel emotion and to reasonably decide (Damásio, 1994). [7] Some social psychologists even assume now that emotions are the dominant drivers of most meaningful decisions in life (Lerner *et al.*, 2015). [8] The primary purpose of the emotion system is to elicit adaptive responses through the alterations of processing, physiology and motivation (DeSteno *et al.*, 2004). [9] According to this perspective, emotions constitute powerful mechanisms to decision-making, attitude-change (Petty, DeSteno & Rucker, 2001) [10] and have a key impact on judgement. They are not random or epiphenomenal manifestations that contrive, hinder or impair reason: they are fundamental in the process of how we feel the world around us, but also how we think about it. The most accurate decision may, in fact, rely on the complex interaction between thought and feeling (Peters *et al.*, 2006). [11]

Affect and reason are involved in the very core of persuasion process. In effect, affect - understood as passions, moods, feelings or sentiments - are another way through which we reason and think. This is most evident in health communication and the persuasive intent of visual appeals to fear in cigarette packages. Emotions are here rational elements because, in order for this visual information to have meaning and for decisions to be made (stop smoking), some kind of emotional or affective processing is required. Affect is here central because it enables smokers to use a feeling to orient their decision-making. Emotional reaction is, in this case, a critical element to understand smokers' actions and future decisions.

This has great consequences to rhetoric. In order to describe persuasion, one needs not only to conceive logical argumentation but also how emotions intervene, shape and alter argumentative reasoning in persuasion. So, a rhetoric of emotion or an affective rhetoric may explain how emotions constitute persuasion processes. Affective Rhetoric (Mateus, 2018) [12] is a possible mode to refer to different terms including Aristotle, Hippocrates and Galen's "humors", the Stoics' and also 17<sup>th</sup> century rationalism "passion", and 18<sup>th</sup> century philosophy of "sentiment". In an alternative to these theoretically pregnant notions, we refer to a specific use of emotional persuasion as affective rhetoric. Affect is more of a neutral term that is the dominant term in Psychology enabling us to divert from Spinoza or Leibniz theories on passion and sentiment. Affect encompasses passions, moods, feelings and emotions as a recurrent them in the history of philosophy, sociology, neurosciences or psychology.

In this paper, I want to explore the genealogy of affective rhetoric. I propose that not only pondering on emotional persuasion is crucial to contemporary, mediatized, communication (including advertising and political communication), as also affective rhetoric is already implicit in the definition of early Greek rhetoric. It is only because Plato opens the door to desire in his dialogue *Phaedrus*, that it is plausible to describe the affective nature of rhetoric and persuasion.

This is to say that emotions are not a secondary or even a to-avoid aspect of rhetorical persuasion: instead, rhetoric, since its first descriptions, is tied to desire and emotions. It respects mental aspects of reasoning that appeal to affect and to the soul. Rhetoric, says Plato, is a *psychachogia* because it leads, directs and acts upon individuals' souls. It is exactly this ability to inflict souls and elicit desire that is at the core of affective rhetoric.

### ***Psychagogia* and the Rhetoric of Desire**

One can only fully appreciate the significance of affective rhetoric if one attends to the theoretical matrix that have originated it: *psychagogia*, or soul-leading.

Let's begin by distinguishing two perspectives on rhetoric by Plato and its connections to *eros* and desire.

### **Rhetoric on *Gorgias* and in *Phaedrus***

Plato's critique, in *Gorgias*, to Sophists and Rethoric is well known. Rhetoric is here seen as flattery. Public persuasion is not concerned with Truth (*episteme*) but just to convince others, through opinion (*doxa*) that the sophist knows what he is saying. For Plato, sophistic rhetoric needs only to appear to have true knowledge without, in reality, having it. Sophists teach about justice while having no real knowledge of justice itself. Justice, for Plato, is a kind of knowledge that requires study and dedication that only philosophy can give (Plato, *Gorgias*). [13] Socrates believes that people need philosophy to teach them what is right, and that oratory cannot be righteous without philosophy. In this light, Rhetoric is a sham art, a use of language that makes up and cloaks the fact the sophist does not have True Knowledge (*episteme*). Just like cosmetics mask imperfection, so rhetoric eloquence masks ignorance.

What is sometimes not considered is that Plato, in the *Phaedrus*, also discusses genuine rhetoric (Asmis, 1986) [14] or "philosophical rhetoric" (Yunis, 2005) [15], a more positive conception of rhetorical persuasion. In effect, the *Phaedrus* takes up where *Gorgias* has left out making a transition from a rhetoric conceived mostly as public persuasion to the practice of influencing individuals on matters of individual concern. "Must not the art of rhetoric taken as a whole be a kind of soul-moving power (*psychagogia*) of discourse, not only in courts of law and other public gatherings, but in private places also?" (Plato, *Phaedrus*). [16] Plato posits that the function of speech is a kind of *psychagogia* or soul-leading in which the speaker leads the hearer's soul toward the love of wisdom. To educate someone is to, then, to lead their soul from the sensible world (its pleasures and honors) towards the Forms or Intelligible world. It's to foster the seeds of Truth by planting similar seeds in another soul (Asmis, 1986). [17] The rhetoric in *Phaedrus* is a philosophical use of speech to lead individuals from unworthy things to worthy things. And rhetoric is a *psychagogia* because it has this ability to conduct people's souls to the contemplation of Knowledge (*episteme*). This is good rhetoric having a laudatory meaning, in clear contrast to the rhetoric of *Gorgias*.

In *Phaedrus*, rhetoric is a guidance of the soul through the universal art of discourse applying to "all things that are said" (Plato, *Phaedrus*) [18] – prose and poetry, public and private, spoken and written, rhetorical and dialectical (Yunis, 2005). [19]

### **Rhetoric as soul-leading and its relation to desire (*eros*)**

What is important to retain about rhetoric in the dialogue *Phaedrus* is that now rhetoric is being associated with beguilement, seduction and alluring. Etymologically, *psychagog* – means conjuring or evoking souls of the dead (Asmis, 1986). [20] It is a word used to signify persuasion while having some implications of enchantment (Moss, 2012). [21]

It is directed towards a soul, not reason itself. Rhetoric is, surprisingly described as a power working out the soul, guide and orient it. It is as if words of persuasion could have a drug-like effect, enchanting the soul while directing it. It is a kind of soul-magnet or summoner of souls charming people, appealing them, affecting them.

What is more striking in Plato's definition of rhetoric as *psychagogia* or soul-leading is its relation to desire (*eros*). *Phaedrus* has been described as a dialogue on love (*eros*)

and it is this imbrication between rhetoric and love that is at the origin of Affective Rhetoric. As soon as Plato defines rhetoric as the soul-moving power of discourse he prefigures a rhetoric of emotions and opens up the path to affects in persuasion<sup>2</sup>. A competent rhetor will know the types of soul and types of discourse better suited to the occasion and knows which souls are better affected and suggesting, in each case, the type of speech appropriated to each soul. “Since the function of discourse is in fact to move men’s souls, the intending orator must know what type of souls are there” (Plato, *Phaedrus*, 271 d). [22] There is a psychological training involved in the task of rhetoric that can be interpreted as an example of the importance of emotional persuasion already present in Plato. A trained speaker will, then, convince others by relying in this ability to respond to the audience’s affects. By acknowledging other persons’ emotional reactions, the well-trained speaker applies the appropriated form of discourse in order to trigger in each type of soul the desired response.

This is a crucial step. On Plato’s account, persuasion is not just a matter of verbal discourse and argument: rhetoric as a *psychagogia* points to the fact rhetorical persuasion is also about the creation of desire in the auditor’s soul.

Recognizing the soul-moving aspect of rhetoric takes us to accept that rhetoric is related to the exploration of the emotional functioning of audiences. Rhetoric as *psychagogia* opens the door to a kind of Affective Rhetoric because it posits that persuasion as something to do with recognizing, controlling and evocation of the natural disposition of persons to desire (*eros*). Since it leads the soul, rhetoric is also moving the desire (*eros*) present in the auditor’s soul.

### **Emotions and Rhetoric Today: advertising**

By conceiving rhetoric as a *psychagogia*, Plato is opening a field of rhetoric operation: desire, emotions and the influence over souls, not exclusively reason. It is this simple move towards a philosophical rhetoric that enabled that persuasion could also be emotionally established to the point of today we need to designate a kind of rhetoric dealing with desire arousal and emotional persuasion.

The necessity implied in *psychagogia* of gathering and converting souls, and the link between persuasion and desire (by extension, affects) is, in our days, well-illustrated by advertising. Most of advertising discourses are based on the arousal of desire and on the (manifest or latent) appeal to an emotion. *Eros* is still very much in play in the persuasive message of advertising as a specific type of discourse aimed to affect consumers.

Emotion in advertising is pervasive and may be found in persuasive messages of most products from baby towels, through luxury cars until high-end watches and jewelry. There are six basic human emotions (Ekman, 1992) [23]: anger, disgust, fear, happiness, sadness, and surprise that affective rhetoric in advertising put forth. Advertising is about generating a response in its viewers, hopefully a decision to purchase. But sometimes we do not realize that part of that response is about emotional arousal. Advertising plays with emotions in order to trigger a response. So, messages of this kind use emotions to persuade, be it specific types of emotional appeals (Stayman, Aaker and Bruzzone 1989) [24] or the effect of emotions on as purchase intentions (Burke and Edell, 1989). [25] In fact, people rely on emotions - rather than information - to decide about advertising messages to the point that emotional responses may be more important than the argumentative content of the message (Zhang *et ali.*, 2014). [26] More, emotionally charged messages help to shape powerful memories that, ultimately, may drive us to action. A stronger memory and more positive judgments were associated with emotional messages (Friestad and Thorson, 1986). [27]

As advertisers know too well, emotional responses are hard-wired into our brains and essential to our survival (Plessis, 2008). [28] Advertising rhetoric only has to acknowledge this and link *emotional-based* human experiences to *emotional-built* persuasive messages. Part of the success of advertising discourse comes from its skill to focus our attention and thinking on a positive experience that the product promises to give. But this promise is emotionally made. It is frequently grounded, not on functional attributes but desirable, attractive and affective attributes. So, for example, Axe's *The Fallen Angel* campaign appeals to the young seductive man promising to make him so desirable that even angels will fall from the sky. The product's name is also suggesting: "*Axe Excite*" in a direct relation to love and sexual arousal. Axe aims to sell this deodorant and make it a sales-success. But is Axe's persuasive message about specific ingredients or qualities? No. In contrast, the ad is all about desire and how male consumers will feel (confident and sexy) once they use the deodorant. They feel their way to reason. It is the product, by means of hyperbolization, that affectively promises romance and sex-appeal. The advertising provokes an emotional state that is intended to guide the "rational", economic choice of purchasing Axe instead of any other brand. This is a clear example that emotional persuasion is such a central element in affective rhetoric.

Sometimes, consumers simply rationalize, that is, we tend to believe our choices are justified by sound, strong reason, not by feelings. Even if the "right choice" feels good, individuals tend to justify the decision to buy a product with a rational choice. But this does not erase the fact that triggering certain feelings may be the main goal of today's advertisers and that they use affective rhetoric based on one's expected desires.

Let us focus on another famous perfume advertising: António Banderas' *King of Seduction*.



Figure 1- António Banderas' *King of Seduction* Press Ad

I am not pursuing here a detailed semiotic or rhetorical analysis. I will only point out some elements that directly explore affect and that can illustrate how part of the rhetoric functioning is based on emotional persuasion and the instillation of desire to which Plato already alludes in his definition of rhetoric as *psychogogia*. In the image of the ad we see a renowned actor - António Banderas - (a desire to be famous), a privileged space to observe the sunset (a desire to exclusivity), a special means of transport, that is, a personal boat (a desire to be rich) and an attractive woman attracted by an (several years) older man (a desire to be loved; a desire to be younger). Condensed in this visual

message, we have, at least, four different assumptions about the fragrance that stimulate emotional appeals to the product. However, what is more, we have a verbal message (“*King of Seduction*”) stating explicitly what the masculine consumer can (allegedly) obtain: becoming a seductive man. Notice that consumers are not dealing with complex arguments, nor are here dealing with rational (economic, functional) advantages. Also remark that there are few words. This advert is not being persuasive through deliberation or argumentative reasoning. The advert is mainly relying in the soul-moving ability of rhetoric.

## Conclusion

Plato’s rhetoric as *psychagogia* was the first historical step assuming the purposeful use of emotions with persuasive intent. Emotions are powerful alluring mechanisms. Words are important because they provide reasons and entail judgments. By its side, desire and affects are significant because they are much more subtle, spontaneous, even unnoticeable. Emotions are, thus, leading and driving individuals even if they do not spot that. More importantly, emotions are more difficult to impose a choice. Sometimes it is almost impossible not to react emotionally. That is what makes us humans. So, while we can reject claims, it is not easy not to feel something the persuasive message has passed into us.

Affective Rhetoric is indebted to Plato’s notion of rhetoric as *psychagogia* as the act of directing and leading a *psyché* or soul. What Plato’s *psychagogia* pre-announces is that audiences also judge through their feelings and emotions. There is an imbrication between affects and reason, so persuasion is not just about sounding or “rational” arguments”: persuasion is also about the “rational” use of affects as tools to demonstrate certain claims *via* feeling. Affective rhetoric does not presuppose a passive role to an audience. Instead, it gives an audience an active role to evaluate the orator’s revindications by feeling them. Thinking and feeling are here reciprocated.

Yet, *psychagogia* does not suppose an asymmetric communication between an active and a passive role. Just like contemporary advertising working under emotional persuasion demonstrates, there is always, in every instance of rhetoric, someone claiming and someone judging that claim. A useful analogy of the use of emotions in emotional persuasion is given by the chariot. Is the charioteer at the mercy of his horses by the fact are horses those who pull and move the chariot? In fact, horses provide the power but they do no lead the charioteer. Instead, it is the charioteer who drives the horses in the direction he wants. The same happens with affective rhetoric and audiences. Emotions drive individuals helping to shape and influence the persuasion process. Nonetheless, audience are the powerful force that will accept or reject the orator’s revindications. In this process, rhetoric as *psychagogia* means that rhetoric is an emotional art in which the orator relies on affects to help him direct, lead and drive the audience towards the feelings most adequate and pertinent to prove his point.

So, since its beginning, rhetoric is a kind of an emotional persuasion process. And because it can be traceable to *psychagogia* we can talk in the role of emotions and effects in rhetoric. The rhetoric of today’s advertising only confirms that persuasion is a much more complex process that tangles thinking and feeling.

Given this, the task ahead is simple, although complex to achieve: to de-tangle the multiplicity of persuasive uses of emotions. I hope that by stressing rhetoric as *psychagogia* one more step to achieve this task has been taken.

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#### NOTES:

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<sup>1</sup> Of course, there are some remarkable exceptions. David Hume, in his *Treatise on Human Nature* wrote: "Reason is, and ought only to be the slave of passions, and can never pretend to any other office than to serve and obey them. (T 2.3.3 p. 415). But, probably, this is just one of the few cases where Philosophy does not follow Plato.

<sup>2</sup> Yunis (2005: 114) even uses the expression "rhetorical psychology".

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