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Alice Grosu
alice.grosu@pepperdine.edu

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Taking Responsibility for Systemic Failures: Rhetorical Homologies and Discourses of Sustainability, Health, and Voting

Alice Grosu, Pepperdine University¹

Abstract

When considering the discourse of presidential candidates, talk show hosts discussing mental health issues, and companies advertising sustainable goods, this essay argues that they share a formal resemblance. Whenever the same formal resemblance, or the same pattern, can be found within different instances of rhetoric, this indicates that the texts are homologous. Making sense of these instances of discourse is essential if one seeks to understand the way in which the public's political engagement can be hindered by these rhetorical acts.

Keywords

rhetorical homology, sustainability, health, voting, Walter Benjamin, Kenneth Burke

When considering the discourse of presidential candidates, talk show hosts discussing mental health issues, and companies advertising sustainable goods, this essay argues that they share a formal resemblance. Whenever the same formal resemblance, or the same pattern, can be found within different instances of rhetoric, this indicates that the texts are homologous. Making sense of these instances of discourse is essential if one seeks to understand the way in which the public's political engagement can be hindered by these rhetorical acts.

Presidential candidates usually dominate all platforms, everyone being aware of their discourse as a result. In 2022, Joe Biden reminded people of how crucial every single vote is (Washington, 5:02), and his statement reflects the sentiment of the American people. Voting, of

¹ *Alice Grosu is a Philosophy Major with a Rhetoric and Leadership Minor at Seaver College.*

course, is conceived of as a civic duty, the only means by which citizens can truly enact change. Even so, some philosophers consider voting to be irrational, given the empirical work that has been performed on this topic (Brennan, 2020, para. 8). In any case, the people persuaded by the discourse which highlights the individual's importance in the instance of voting will take it upon themselves to fulfill this responsibility. Similarly, therapeutic discourses are just as widespread and persuasive as discourses relating to voting. Therapeutic discourses—a term that rhetorical critics such as Dana Cloud have used in the past—are instances in which people are encouraged to bear the responsibility of systemic failures. To illustrate, Dr. Phil's talk show features regular people who appear to reconcile conflicts with their loved ones after the host identifies the mental health issues causing their problems. Dr. Phil—or some other expert who is invited as a guest on the show—never fails to find a solution for the difficulties his guests experience. He does all this without mentioning any structural features that might be at play in some of his diagnoses, and as a result, the audience member is encouraged to believe that, were they to have similar problems to the ones that the people on the show are having, the responsibility would lay entirely on their shoulders.

The last participants in the homology, namely companies advertising sustainable goods, target their audience specifically on social media platforms. Grove Collaborative is an example of such a company, with 37% of its new customers being acquired via Instagram (Grove, 2022). Given the increased amounts of climate change-related uneasiness in younger populations, the company's success on social media platforms is not surprising. Concerned about the future, consumers believe that the climate change crisis can be avoided if they make ethical purchases. However, the change that the consumers believe themselves to enact is individual and potentially ineffective on a grander scale. Like the other two participants in the homology, the consumer seeking to make ethical purchases privatizes the blame for climate change.

Stemming from this formal resemblance, this essay will identify a homology constituted of three steps. The three steps go as follows: (1) the average American citizen is exposed daily to the platforms that the rhetor—a trusted rhetor, in the case of news stories and presidential candidates—uses to enact their discourse, (2) the rhetor makes some demands of the citizens, in light of an exigence that they mention, and (3) the viewer takes on the responsibility of fulfilling the rhetor's demands, specifically in the way that the rhetor recommends they do so. Crucial to this paper is that the person is not only convinced that the problem the rhetor addresses in his discourse must be solved, but also that it is within their power to solve complex issues by means of individual action. In this sense, the average American citizen, I will argue, privatizes the responsibility of various systemic failures, endlessly seeking to correct them by inefficient means.

Rhetoric and Climate Change Discourse

Climate change discourse is surrounded by intricacies, and critics have been trying to make sense of its various factors. As such, there have been many ways in which the discourses surrounding this topic have been characterized. Some critics maintain that uncertainty lies at the core of the instances of communication concerned with climate change, while others have pointed to the temporal appeals invoked in some speeches. Other interesting findings are revealed by scholars who are committed to the aspect of privatization of responsibility, namely with the way in which the individual is asked to bear the burden of systemic problems.

A rhetorical critic who postulates that explaining the crisis in terms of uncertainty would help us understand the disheartening lack of action is Marlia Banning. She seeks to characterize how policies do not reflect the severity of the current state of affairs by pointing out that governmental and personal uncertainty regarding the exigence of climate change is at the core of the possibility for action (Banning, 2011, p. 645). Other critics have also outlined reasons for unfounded skepticism,

particularly as it concerns the persons in the United States (Paliewicz & McHendry, 2020, p. 138), which, in turn, gives rise to feelings of uncertainty amidst the public. Feelings of uncertainty cripple the public, thus erasing the possibility of action. This being the case, critics have taken an interest in other features of climate change discourse that aim to directly affect action, such as when temporality is invoked.

Chronotopes, for instance, have been discussed in their capacity to bring about change (Jack, 2006, p. 53). In their paper, Matthew Houdek and Kendall R. Phillips (2020) highlight that climate change discourse bears similarities with the discourse of protests, in the sense that they focus on temporality, stressing the importance of the present moment in order to motivate action (p. 369). Other rhetorical critics, such as Matthew P. Brigham argued that the controversies—as it applies to his analysis of whale hunting—can be explained by considering clashing notions of time (2017, p. 244). Kelly Meyers introduces the concept of *kairos* into the rhetorical discourse surrounding temporality, as well as this concept's relationship with *metanoia*, thus successfully contrasting the notions of opportunity and regret to showcase their potent persuasive status (2011, p. 2). She also argues for an expanded view of these two concepts, which help bring about a beneficial reflective state (2011, p. 11). Collin Bjork offers a comprehensive account of *ethos* in relation to temporality, favoring a view of *ethos* which emphasizes not only its *kairos* and fixed character but also its chronic characteristics (2022, p. 240). Since these rhetorical critics emphasize how temporality is invoked to bring about action, the question of who is capable of instantiating that action arises. Even though individuals might be confronted with a desire to enact their agency to bring about change, discussing the individual's limitations is imperative when seeking to advance successful theories. Thus, the need for a discussion of how individuals are asked to privatize responsibility for climate change surfaces, and Cloud's work prevails in light of this. Even though she discusses therapeutic discourses, her work

is still relevant insofar as it shows that societal problems, such as mental health issues, are privatized rather than discussed in terms of a grander scheme.

She discusses therapy's personalized approach in relation to societal issues, arguing that therapeutic discourses privatize the individual's mental health issues instead of discussing them on the broader scale of society's ills (1998, p. xv). In other words, she identifies the mental health problems that individuals may have not as a quirk of particular individuals—as they have been discussed within therapeutic discourse—but rather as a normal reaction to the injustices and horrors of the world. A relevant issue when discussing the manner in which individuals privatize responsibility is the fact that this seems to be a reasonable response when the true entity responsible for climate change cannot be delineated. Yet another critic who has been concerned with individual action—or, more explicitly, its limitations—is Mark Fisher. In *Capitalist Realism*, he stresses the importance of individual action in the case of protests. He considers the revolutionary potential of protests and argues that protests such as Live 8, which had “exorbitant demands that politicians legislate away poverty” (2009, p. 14), perfectly explain how the logic of personal action instantiates itself. In other words, he advises against the conception that individuals can solve poverty “without the need for any kind of political solution or systemic reorganization” (2009, p. 15). His work helps bring down the conception that consumers can end climate change by further consumption, which is essential to the present analysis. A critic who offers an alternative way of tackling the crisis, a way that would prevent individuals from holding such unfounded beliefs, is Christopher Bruner. Rather than placing responsibility on individuals, he calls for reform within corporations to achieve sustainability. He emphasizes that essential features of the corporate form are unsustainable on many layers (Bruner, 2022, p. 1226). He draws attention to the form of corporations, which he maintains needs to be reformed if authentic sustainability is ever to be achieved.

Exploring the Concept of Form: Rhetorical Homologies

Rhetorical Homology as a rhetorical approach has been discussed by Barry Brummett (2004; 2006; 2013) as being linked with Kenneth's Burke works. Brummett is renowned for performing extensive research concerning this approach, defining homology as being "a formal structure that must be identified, described, and shown to be manifested in the particular content of texts and experiences" (2004, pp. 1-2). He further characterizes rhetorical homology as a "special case of formal resemblance, grounded in discursive properties, that facilitates the work of political and social rhetoric, or influence" (2004, p. 3). To go back to the incipient stages of this method, it is crucial to mention that Brummett bestows praise upon Burke for being "one of the great theoreticians of homology in the twentieth century" (2004, p. 12), although Burke does not use the term explicitly.

Brummett traces the emergence of homology to Burke's work titled *The Philosophy of Literary Form*, stating that it "points to homology, without ever using that term" (2004, p. 25). He explains that "in this work Burke is concerned [...] with the idea that a discourse has an internal structure or *form* that connects to the scene of which it is a part" (2004, p. 25). Form, for Brummett, consists of "the physical manifestation of a message" (2004, p. 4), as well as the "patterns and irregularities" (2004, p. 4) of the message. He suggests that form and content are inseparable, and this is consistent with Burke's opinion on this matter (2004, p. 5). He also argues that human capacity for form is innate and that we "create perceptions and cognitions" (2004, p. 39) based upon processes of abstraction that are socially shared (2004, p. 39). In other words, form is essential, as it explains the way in which people might make sense of their experiences in the world in socially shared ways. The role of homology, Brummett states, is "to link disparate orders of experience by way of the same form" (2004, pp. 5-6). The element of disparity is also what Brummett considers to be "theoretically interesting" (2004, pp. 40-41).

Not only did Brummett perform an analysis of the approach itself, but he has also employed this method to reveal the formal resemblances of various instances of rhetorical interest. One example is his exploration of the way in which movies can convey values by means of form (2013, p. 61). He seeks to overturn the idea that values can only be conveyed through language by showing that artistic and formal evocation is another way in which values can be appealed to (2013, p. 63). In another of his works, he analyzes the unique/copy binary in relation to the movie *The Ring*, thus explaining the horrors of reproductions and their threat to individuality (2006, p. 451).

Brummett is correct to point out that critics “have an interesting, powerful, and useful homology when many disparate kinds of actions, objects, and events in human experience can be shown to be following the same pattern that underlies texts and the media that conveys texts” (2004, p. 63). Kathryn Olson’s work clearly exemplifies this point when she argues that the interpretive framework shared by the discourse of sport hunters, hate criminals, and stranger rapists represent a variation of the motivational rhetoric that is to be found within contemporary American society (2002, p. 215). She also points out how the patterns discovered in rhetorical homologies are derived “socially or culturally [...] and exercised symbolically by group members making meaningful order of their experiences” (2002, p. 217). She identifies these types of violence as “impersonal violence against sensate beings” (2002, p. 216), and she highlights that the homology she identifies possesses four features. The last feature concerns the process of Othering, which allows for the violence of the dominant group to be enacted. The process of Othering has been extensively discussed in the field of rhetorical criticism, with some scholars being interested in how advertisements promote a way of thinking that encourages consumers to identify marginalized groups as Others, thus carrying out a harmful process of naturalizing and legitimizing stereotypes (Winslow, 2010, pp. 257-258).

Moreover, the injustices against people of color, more specifically against Black individuals, have also been explained in terms of the process of Othering. Stephen Underhill, for instance, engages the homology of the urban jungle to criticize the rhetoric of law enforcement institutions, arguing that the injustices against Black individuals that these institutions carry out can be exposed when considering the savage/explorer dichotomy (2016, p. 396). In other words, he demonstrates that the way in which “the white spatial imaginary” (2016, p. 397) conceives of Black neighborhoods is as though they were “a jungle for whites to explore, settle, and civilize” (2016, p. 397). To this effect, his analysis focused on racialized Othering, and he employs the savage/explorer binary to conduct his criticism of law enforcement institutions. Aside from criticizing institutions, scholars have also explored how various ideologies can generate homologies. Luke Winslow, more specifically, uncovered the homological relationship between grant writing and prosperity theology, pinpointing neoliberalism as the source of their commonalities (2015, p. 275).

In the past, critics have also used homology to uncover how artifacts affect the public’s agency. A prime example of an analysis that raises the question of agency is the work performed by Diana Martínez. She points toward the formal similarities between the mechanical creation of copies of original works of art—which Walter Benjamin has analyzed in the past—and the reproduction of disaster, specifically in the case of Hurricane Katrina disaster tourism (2018, p. 267). She sheds light upon the way that people enact their agency in a manner that allows them to process tragedy symbolically, which she uncovers with the use of the method of rhetorical homologies (2018, p. 268). A different scholar whose analysis can help shed light upon the issue of agency is Thomas Salek, who argues that the ambivalent attitudes that the American people hold regarding financial excess are exemplified by the rhetorical homology between the movie *The Wolf of Wall Street* and Jordan Belfort’s rhetoric (2018, p. 1). The movie depicts the rise and fall of the main character, who acquires

immense amounts of wealth through illegitimate means, and Jordan Belfort is the person who wrote the memoir upon which the movie is based. These two instances of discourse—the memoir and the movie—perfectly represent the excess and greed that wealthy individuals possess that leads them to perform “illegal and unethical business practices” (Salek, 2018, p. 2). Even so, the audience might identify these distressing actions as a personal shortcoming of rich individuals instead of recognizing that they are systemic faults (Salek, 2018, p. 2). In this sense, the audience bestows responsibility on the rich individuals, which might cause them to suspend their agency instead of considering taking action against the institutions that make such excesses possible.

The articles just mentioned have shown how rhetorical homologies can bring seemingly unrelated rhetorical instances together and expose their common patterns. In my paper, I will argue that the act of voting, the discourse surrounding mental health, and the discourse surrounding climate change, share the same formal pattern. I will then argue that the pattern they share lies in their privatization of responsibility, thus deflecting persons from seeking justice through other forms. I will first examine an advertisement of sustainable goods that clearly embodies the attitude that consumers are asked to have in relation to the climate change crisis. After a description of its narrative, as well as its visual characteristics, I make a case for alternative courses of action that consumers might seek to adopt. Afterward, I will consider the present discourse on mental health issues. Finally, I will consider the rationality of voting in relation to individual persons.

Rhetorical Homologies and Unrelated Instances of Discourse

Rhetorical homologies provide critics with a way to compare seemingly unrelated texts. This section focuses on the form of climate change discourse, followed by a section discussing the recurring therapeutic discourses in Dr. Phil. The last section is dedicated to analyzing the discourse

of politicians who encourage the public to vote, followed by a summary of my findings and discusses how rhetorical critics might benefit from the present analysis.

The Privatization of Responsibility Concerning Climate Change Discourse

On an average day, the average person purchases a variety of goods. Some companies advertise their products by claiming they are sustainable and, therefore, more desirable for the consumer. The instance of advertising of this sort that I will be focusing my analysis on is Grove Collaborative's introductory video, which I believe perfectly represents sustainability claims. With climate change being a pressing issue in our lives, some consumers are becoming hyper-aware of the products they acquire. This awareness is reflected by considerations within corporations, experts stating that "companies and countries that do not respond to stakeholders and address sustainability risks will encounter growing skepticism from the markets, and in turn, a higher cost of capital" (Bruner, 2022, p. 1226). In other words, the market simply reflects the desires of the consumers.

This introductory video is the first participant in the homology, and it serves as an example of the way in which the steps are brought about. First of all, (1) the average American citizen, the consumer, in this case, is exposed on a daily basis to social media platforms. As previously mentioned, 37% of Grove Collaborative's new customers are acquired as a result of advertising on Instagram (Grove, 2022). Secondly, (2) the rhetor must make some sort of demand from the consumer so that the exigence that they raise can be solved. In this case, the exigence is global warming, where the rhetor advises the consumer to solve this exigence by means of consuming the marketed goods. Lastly, (3) since they are a consumer, the viewer is going to feel responsible for their consumption habits, which, if we follow the same line of logic, have greatly contributed to climate change, and they will seek to change these habits to solve this crisis.

Though the first two steps of the homology do not require that the consumer acts in any way, step (3) is abundant in its interaction with the consumer's agency. First of all, the person must be persuaded, and second of all, they must act in such a way that they are to solve the problem that the rhetor raises in step (2). Accordingly, a discussion of the persuasiveness of the discourse is in order, as it pertains to the advertising of sustainable goods. One crucial persuasive element of the advertisement is the appeal to emotion. According to Brummett, "texts have rhetorical effects on people outside of expositional argument—indeed, outside of language per se" (2013, p. 62), and this is perfectly exemplified by the visual imagery of Grove Collaborative's introductory video. During the advertisement's one minute and twenty-four seconds, multiple emotional appeals are made, but of particular interest are the frames that depict children performing different activities, such as playing, cooking, or browsing through books showcasing different species of animals. This way of emphasizing the future of the human species is a highly personalized one, since people tend to be extremely concerned with the future of their own children, rather than with mankind as a whole.

Early in the video, the company reveals its purpose to the viewer. They depict what seems to be a modern suburban homeowner who is collecting his package from the company from his front porch. A soothing voice accompanies the visual imagery with its narration and states that Grove Collaborative "exist[s] to transform the products you use at home into a force for good" (Grove, 2022, 0:19). In addition to the soothing voice, many parallelograms are present in this frame, which, according to the rhetorical analysis of visual images, "indicate dullness, honesty, and straightness" (Borchers, 2013, p. 157). The fact that the consumer might come to perceive the narrator's statements as more truthful as a consequence of being exposed to the persuasive tactics prevalent in the visual imagery of the introductory video can aid in understanding why such advertisements are so compelling.

The feelings that a climate-conscious person might experience upon viewing the advertisement might reflect a desire for change and action, as well as a personal desire to be involved in this noble cause. This is because, throughout the video, the narrator uses words that make the consumer feel as though their purchase has the capacity to change the world. The storyteller explains that “We believe that [...] what we use to soothe our body, how we clean our homes, and what we teach our kids have the power to create a brighter, more sustainable world” (Grove, 2022, 0:30). Later in the video, an emphasis is placed on the fact that the future of the world lies in the hands of those who make sustainable choices. By stating that it is in the consumer’s capacity to end climate change, these sustainable companies offer a solution that is much easier and more convenient than its alternative. More specifically, the companies assure the consumer that consuming is the righteous choice to make, and thus successfully change the course of the desire for change and action, which would be best directed at political change.

Sustainable products thus, become the buyer’s choice, as well as the only way in which the person can express their dissatisfaction regarding climate change. The discourse that can be observed in the marketing of sustainable goods—which privatizes climate change responsibility as the consumer’s problem—serves the function of pacifying the consumers. This is because it prevents them from seeking political action that would challenge the system from which these issues stem. This observation, namely that the consumer is persuaded to make the judgment that the best way in which they can solve the exigence of climate change is by further consumption, exemplifies my claim that the consumers believe that it is in their power to solve the complex issue of climate change by means of individual action. By privatizing the responsibility for climate change, and turning it into a personal problem, the potential of correcting systemic failures fades. Cristopher Bruner, a professor specializing in Business Law, urges for reform within corporations, so that true sustainability can be

achieved. More specifically, he directs his criticism on “the problems of excessive risk-taking and cost externalization, embedded as they are at the heart of the corporate form” (2022, p. 1251). His work highlights the way in which corporations fail to achieve authentic sustainability as long as their very form is not reformed, and he does not refrain from mentioning how theoretically laborious achieving this will be (2022, p. 1276). His observations also clarify the way in which the consumer might be oblivious to corporate issues that make them unsustainable, climate change issues aside. His paper calls for corporate responsibility, which is a type of responsibility that the consumers ought to call for, instead of taking that responsibility upon themselves.

Dr. Phil and Therapeutic Discourses

The next instance of discourse that partakes in the formal resemblance is brought about by rhetors who participate in talk shows and discuss health issues. More specifically, the person at the focal point of this analysis is Dr. Phil, since his discourse shows one occasion in which the form and content of the message merge. This combination of the form and content proves, once again, Brummett’s claim that “the distinction between form and content is continuous and variable rather than sharply dichotomous” (2004, p. 3). The content of the messages that Dr. Phil conveys are inextricably linked with the physical manifestations of the message, as well as the patterns and regularities of the message (Brummett, 2004, p. 4).

The *Dr. Phil* episode that I am going to analyze is an episode focusing on Fibromyalgia, also known as the invisible illness. The episode begins by depicting the life story of a woman suffering from this disease for fourteen years (Pfizer, p. 2014, 0:20). From her narration, the viewer learns that the husband is skeptical of the illness, and one of Dr. Phil’s main aims is to make the husband understand that his wife’s suffering is valid. He invites a medical expert on the show, who is affiliated with Pfizer, to give the patient advice regarding the ways in which she can cope with the illness. The

tone that all of the participants use is a calm one, suited to the average viewer who is watching this episode from home. As a result, a sense of familiarity and calmness is induced in the viewer. Dr. Phil is also a rhetor who possesses high amounts of ethos, since he is such an iconic figure in the media. The important aspect to note is that Dr. Phil is a trusted rhetor, which will make his recommendations persuasive to the viewer. In this sense, (1) the platform in which he enacts his discourse is television, and he has a wide audience as a result of that, (2) he is trusted to make recommendations regarding the health issues that his patients are experiencing, and (3) not only the patient, but also the viewer might identify with some of the ills that the participants are experiencing as their own, and thus seek to implement the advice that Dr. Phil offers.

Upon examining the socio-demographic characteristics, health experts have shown that “the typical FM [Fibromyalgia] patient graduated from primary school [...] was married and was a housewife” (Turkyilmaz et. al, 2012, pp. 90-91). There is a perfect overlap between these observations and the patient’s characteristics. The participant, a woman, and a housewife, wants help “on how to manage her daily life as a wife and a mother” (Pfizer, 2014, 6:53). Her husband narrates that she is “tired [and] done” (Pfizer, 2014, 0:52), which places him in “a bad mood” (Pfizer, 2014, 1:00). He starts, then, to label her illness as being an excuse—to put it simply—for laziness. In his eyes, the wife is neglecting her duties, but his ignorance is placing a toll on the patient as well, who feels that her productivity rates have gone down and that she has no way to return to her previous self. One of the suggestions that the expert on the show offers her is to reduce her stress, relax, and improve her nutrition (Pfizer, 2014, 8:17). In other words, the discourse surrounding her illness is completely individualized, and the viewer, as well as the patient, might get the sense that her issue is a completely private one. Not once does Dr. Phil or the expert invited on the show mention that this illness occurs most commonly in women who are housewives, and who are also overworked. If they were to do so,

then perhaps the patriarchal structure that places women in these positions might have been challenged, but this is not the case. Women everywhere, watching this show, might come to think that they should bear responsibility for this health problem, without understanding the systemic failures that contribute to this particular illness. In this sense, the discourse that occurs in this episode of Dr. Phil is therapeutic.

Cloud is a rhetorical critic particularly concerned with the issue of responsibility, and she discusses therapy's personalized approach in relation to societal issues (1998, p. xv). She argues that therapeutic discourses—such as the one just described—make it seem as though an individual's mental health issues are completely disconnected from societal problems (1998, p. xv). In other words, she identifies the mental health problems that individuals may have not as something that just happen to occur, but rather as a normal reaction to the injustices and horrors of the world. As it applies to the Dr. Phil episode currently under examination, the therapeutic discourse consists of the experts suggesting better relaxation to the patient, rather than acknowledging the fact that the patient's material conditions might be preventing the possibility of implementing relaxation. Since therapeutic discourses are not contextualized in relation to society, they have the characteristic of appeasing individual persons, helping them cope with the status quo, rather than identifying their issues in relation to that which is externally occurring, which she argues is at the root of the problem. Cloud also points out that the nuclear family should be viewed as “a potent and disciplinary ideological fiction that produces a normative gendered division of labor and discrimination [...]” (1998, p. 57). In this sense, we might understand the patient's suffering as being related to her gender, considering the expectations that are imposed upon her by her husband as unequal.

Thus, Cloud highlights that individual desire for action is controlled and redirected by these therapeutic discourses, as they offer a way of coping instead of a way of revolting. I claim, in

accordance with Cloud, that the fact that audiences choose to direct their agency toward fulfilling the recommendations that the rhetor provides them with is misguided. Instead, the audiences should seek radical change. In the case of the Dr. Phil episode, viewers should, of course, take the time to care for themselves, but they should also challenge the patriarchal constitution of society from which these seemingly individual problems emerge.

Voting and Capacity for Change

The third element of the homology is represented by politicians who encourage their audience to vote. This year, President Joe Biden offered a speech to the public, following the “January 6th insurrection on the citadel of our democracy” (Washington Post, 2022, 1:07). In a tranquil tone, he reminds the citizens of the United States of the importance of voting, stating that “the right to vote, and to have that vote counted, is democracy’s threshold liberty. Without it, nothing is possible. But with it, anything is possible” (Washington Post, 2022, 5:02). Joe Biden is surrounded by his audience, who is calmly listening to his speech. During the thirty minutes of speech that are being recorded, the audience barely seems to move, which signifies how entranced they are with his speech. In any case, the 2021 United States Capitol attack came as a shock to many people, which could be another reason why the audience is seeking comfort from the rhetor’s discourse. Once again, we are able to see the three steps of the homology at play. (1) Firstly, Joe Biden, a rhetor with considerable amounts of access to the platforms that the average American citizen is prone to be exposed to, (2) explains to the public that voting solves undemocratic transfers of power, such as the one exemplified by the event on January 6, and therefore (3) urges the viewers that voting is the only way in which one can enact change.

While perhaps not all voters were completely satisfied with voting for Joe Biden to be POTUS, many believed that he would be a much better option than his opposition. Having to make this choice

should be enough to frighten anyone who believes in democratic values. The public's demands, in this sense, take the form of negation—namely, we do not want the opposition—but the positive aspect of this election fades. Joe Biden restates the immense difference that voting can make, claiming that people have “built a broad coalition of voters [...] and [...] changed the state by bringing more people, legally, to the polls” (Washington Post, 2022, 6:12). Even so, it seems as though the change that the votes are going to make is mysterious, since “empirical work generally finds that most voters are badly informed, and further, that many of them are not voting for the purpose of promoting certain policies or platforms over others” (Brennan, 2020, para. 8). The ethics and rationality of voting have been extensively discussed in the field of philosophy, and these discussions have occurred in light of the paradox of voting.

The paradox of voting can be spelled out as follows: “Since the expected costs (including opportunity costs) of voting appear to exceed the expected benefits, and since voters could always instead perform some action with positive overall utility, it's surprising that anyone votes” (Brennan, 2020, para. 4). In light of the paradox of voting, the fact that voting does not produce the maximal amount of utility for voters is revealed. What is more, if voting does not produce the maximal amount of utility, it seems as though voting is irrational, specifically because the decisions we make about our time—especially in a capitalist society—tend to be calculated so as to maximize the utility of the actions we perform. If this is true, then it can rightfully be concluded, or at least suggested, that if the paradox of voting is true, then voting is irrational.

More than this, since voting cannot change the outcome of an election, it is generally regarded that voting is irrational unless voters might have a different goal in mind, such as expressing themselves, which would force us to conceive of voting as an activity of consumption, rather than a productive one (Brennan, 2020, para. 25). Voting thus essentially becomes an act no different from

any other act of expressing one's convictions. If one identifies oneself as a peaceful or empathetic person, they might vote in favor of a candidate who does not endorse military actions. The opposite might be true of someone who identifies themselves as a "patriot and a tough guy" (Brennan, 2020, para. 26). In any case, if we are to avoid such conclusions, we must consider other ways in which we can enact social change. Just as Cloud points out, "Where people are most affected by power—in their relation to work, wages, and the material necessities of life—they are granted no decision-making faculty. We do not vote over our wages, work hours, employment status, benefits, or the accessibility of child care and health care—all in realms designated under capitalism as private" (1998, p. 164). Cloud's remarks do not focus on the irrationality of voting, but rather on the notion that even if individual votes did have the power to change the outcome of an election, this would still not affect the average person in the areas that impact his or her livelihood most.

If voting is irrational, and even if it were not, it seems as though the change that one can enact is minimal at best. Even when faced with such a discouraging inference, alternative ways of engaging on a political level, such as political activism, should prove to be more effective at challenging the oppressive structures of the current system.

Homologies and Future Research

Brummett, the leading scholar of rhetorical homologies, states that the role of homology is "to link disparate orders of experience by way of the same form" (2004, pp. 5-6). In this essay, I hope to have shown that there exists a formal resemblance between the discourse of presidential candidates, talk shows who discuss health issues, and companies that advertise sustainable goods. All of these instances provide the viewer with a similar experience, outlined by the three steps of the homology: (1) a rhetor needs to have access to a platform that the usual consumer attends to, (2) the rhetor makes some demands of the citizen, so that the exigence they identify may be solved, and (3) the viewer

privatizes the responsibility for the exigence the rhetor mentions and is inspired to bring about change in the way that the rhetor suggests. These instances of discourse, other than resembling one another formally, also resemble themselves formally. Arguably, “homology is always present wherever form is, since [...] every perception is already the result of more than one unique experience brought together cognitively as the same *sort* of experience” (Brummett, 2014, p. 40). In other words, politicians often urge the public to vote, Dr. Phil often recommends personal solutions for systemic problems, and sustainable companies often make the consumer feel responsible for their consumption habits.

In light of these considerations, this essay has identified a homology between three instances of discourse. The present study can be valuable to critics whose preferred method is rhetorical homologies, as the present homology can be enriched by any other participants they discover. More than this, critics interested in the issue of the privatization of systemic failures could benefit from the paper’s engagement with the three participants in the homology. This paper can also be useful to critics seeking to analyze the discourse of climate change, the rationality of voting, and therapeutic discourses, as this paper offers a critique of how rhetors discuss these issues, as well as to critics who aim to understand why the discourses are so persuasive to the audiences.

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