ABSTRACT:

Good old Rhetoric and the Joys and Dangers of Digital Media

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New media and communication platforms seem to evolve so rapidly in the digital age that scholars interested in analyzing what is going on probably feel the urge to quickly present new theories, concepts, and models trying to grasp the modern media reality.

In this context, it may seem odd that I want to revisit ancient theories about rhetoric, and even more odd to suggest that certain concepts from Aristotle and Cicero hold keys – or at least some timely inspiration - to an academic understanding of the dynamics of modern media.

Though Aristotle and Cicero were concerned with analyzing oral rhetoric only - and for obvious reasons did not directly address film, television, social media, video games, virtual reality, and the like - many of their analytical concepts about the immediacy, the situational or contextual nature of public speaking (e.g. the concept of *kairos*) seem surprisingly fresh and relevant today.

Furthermore, a relatively new phenomenological approach to Aristotle's concept of *pathos* (one of the well-known three forms of appeal: *logos – ethos – pathos*) goes beyond the traditional and trivial interpretations of this as just "an appeal to emotions". The use of *pathos* can be interpreted as making an audience see new things by *moving them* (their imagination and attention) to new times and places. And this is exactly what modern audio-visual media like film, television, and not least video games and virtual reality are very good at: when looking and listening to these media you feel immediately transported to a new world - you are immersed in it, participating and perhaps even interacting with it.

Following Aristotle rather closely (though a few hundred years later) Cicero in Rome also writes about *pathos* as trying to (almost literally) *move* the audience (he uses the Latin verb: *movere*). Cicero insists that a good speech cannot be defined independently of the actual *situation*, *audience*, *rhetor*, and *topic*. The persuasive power of a speech depends on its propriety or suitability – *quid aptum sit* – with respect to the actual and specific here-and-now of these four aspects. This insight from Cicero has sometimes been

popularized, drawn up and mis-represented as a five-point model, called Cicero's Pentagon or Pentagram. However, a closer look at Cicero's original latin text (*De Oratore III*, 210-212) reveals a much more intelligible "communication model" operating with four aspects only.

My point is that the dynamics, immediacy, audio-visuality, liveliness and participatory nature of modern media bear a phenomenological resemblance to the highly situated live performance and attention of the classic speaker– adapting and communicating. Rapidly refreshed social media posts and the ping-pong of chats seem to resemble live speaking face-to-face more than traditional written communication by means of books and journals. Therefore, it might be worthwhile to revisit the old rhetoricians and ask for their assistance in analyzing and evaluating the possible joys and dangers of media communication in the digital age.