

Rhetoric and Bullshit

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The study of bullshit,¹ what I will call *taurascatics*, has been making a splash of late. It was Harry Frankfurt who tossed the stone: his essay “On Bullshit” came out in *Raritan* in 1986, hit the *New York Times* best-seller list as a book in 1995, and has been adopted, adapted, and criticized across the academy since. The ripples spread from philosophy to sociology, psychology, economics, public policy, and even to college composition.² Philip Eubanks and John Schaffer considered the implications of Frankfurt’s text for academic prose and for the field of composition specifically (I discuss their views briefly later), while Peter Smagorinsky and his coauthors more recently examined the student term paper subtype. But I will argue that *taurascatics* includes a much broader field than that articulated by either Frankfurt or any of his disciplinary successors, and that it therefore should be of central concern to students of rhetoric. The study of bullshit should occupy an important place alongside rhetoric because *taurascatics* is the *antistrophe* of rhetorical theory, for both are concerned with the politics of semiotic interaction, and with the frameworks within which that interaction will be produced, interpreted, and judged. An understanding of rhetoric will help in the analysis of bullshit—its distinctive qualities and its types—and, more to the point, an analysis of bullshit will clarify the identifying features of rhetoric. I’ll begin with a brief review of Frankfurt’s text and its limitations, and then use that review to construct a rhetorically informed taxonomy of approaches to bullshit. Finally, I’ll return to the question of how these two fields of study—rhetoric and bullshit—can inform each other. First, Frankfurt:

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FRANKFURT ON BULLSHIT

Bullshit, says Frankfurt, is what results when speakers conceal from their audience a lack of concern for the truth. The bullshitter merely *pretends* to be having a serious conversation. Thus bullshitting is not the same as a lying: whereas liars must care about the truth in order to steer their listeners reliably away from it, bullshitters show no such concern. They are closer to phonies than to liars. A bullshitter is “faking things,” says Frankfurt, “but this does not mean [. . .] necessarily get[ting] them wrong” (48). More important than what the bullshitter says is the intent behind the statement. Bullshitters’ goal is certainly not to tell the truth, but neither is it to lead the audience astray. Rather, their motive is to say whatever “suits [. . .] their purpose” (56). For this reason, whereas a lie is an “act with a sharp focus,” bullshit is usually “panoramic” and involves “a program of producing bullshit to whatever extent the circumstances require” (51). Bullshit is thus “less a matter of craft than of art” (52–53): hence the phrase “bullshit artist.”

The value of Frankfurt’s achievement (despite his nod to Procrustes) lies in the remarkable deftness with which he teases out the differences between similar terms and behaviors (lying, deceiving, falsely implicating, faking, bluffing, pretense, imposture, humbug, and the like) to arrive finally, and more precisely, at his target concept. The result feels right, and is easily supported with anecdotes in which someone’s lack of concern for the truth results in what we would all recognize as bullshit. There are problems with this definition, though, and I want to focus on two of them here. For Frankfurt, discourse can be divided into two categories: that which is motivated by the truth and that which isn’t. He doesn’t, however, consider discourse that is motivated by multiple factors (in addition to a concern for the truth), nor does he consider the variation the speaker may feel in her level of confidence in the truth.

We might pose these as questions: What motives for speaking might there be other than a concern to say things “as they really are”? And how confident need the speaker be in the truth value of what she says? Thus, a speaker might be (and, I would argue, most are) motivated by other factors in addition to a commitment to the truth. These include the desire to project an appropriate or effective image (figured as *ethos*, *persona*, or *face*) through language, for example, and a desire to evoke a certain response in the audience. What’s more, even if we focus only on the speaker’s attitude toward the truth, it’s clear that statements themselves differ, within the same speaker, even in the same situation, between those about which the speaker feels very confident (things she has just witnessed) and those that inspire only moderate or little confidence (things she recalls dimly from memory or has heard from sources of unknown reliability). And equally clearly, audiences will differ in their response to a speaker’s statements and motives, some seeing truth and honesty where others see various degrees of bias, deception, and misinformation. Other variables would add other complications: How conscious are speakers of their various motivations

for speaking? How likely is it that they are deceiving themselves? And even, to what degree are speakers' assertions their own, and to what degree are they voicing the attitudes or expectations of their family, culture, institution, or corporation?

It is clear that in many ways, these questions follow familiar rhetorical ground: motives for speaking are never pure, Kenneth Burke reminds us, and the certainty of our truths is never absolute. In fact, taurascatic theories before and since Frankfurt can be categorized into a familiar rhetorical triad: they tie bullshit variously to the intent or character of the speaker, to the features of the text itself, or to the proclivities and biases of the audience.³ The parallel to the Aristotelian rhetorical triad is not accidental, for like rhetoric, bullshit presumes a speaker, a listener, and a text that enacts a symbolic exchange characteristic of language in use. Both rhetoric and bullshit attend to the power of speech, not only to shape and influence the speaker, the listener, their relationship, and their shared world, but to construct each of these elements from moment to moment through the ongoing negotiation of each encounter. And bullshit, like rhetoric, must emphasize the centrality of the response of the audience as the end of any given encounter. Neither rhetorical nor taurascatic analysis can dispense with the audience. Each of these three perspectives (the speaker, the text, the audience) brings with it a set of strengths and weaknesses, each can be conceived of in both positive and negative terms, and each can be seen to have roots in traditional explorations of rhetorical artistry.

THE BULLSHITTER

Among those interested in the bullshitter, Frankfurt is the leading proponent. His definition of bullshit turns upon the intent of the bullshitter, in this case the intent to deceive listeners about his lack of concern for the truth. Unlike liars, who deceive others about the real state of affairs, or humbugs, who deceive others about their true beliefs or attitudes (concerning that state of affairs), bullshitters deceive others about the fact that “the truth value of [their] statements are of no central interest to [them]” (55). Bullshitters “[misrepresent] what [they are] up to” (54). Thus the normal assumptions that interlocutors make about the veracity and relevance of another's statements (relying on Paul Grice's maxim of Quality,⁴ for example) are misplaced when applied to the bullshitter: we think this person is having a “serious” conversation when such is not the case.⁵ Frankfurt here responds to and follows the lead of Max Black, who is interested in a related phenomenon, humbug, and similarly defines the concept in terms of the deceptive intent of the speaker. The humbug, says Black, “deceptively misrepresents, especially by pretentious word or deed, his or her own thoughts, feelings, or attitudes” (143).⁶ Frankfurt, like Black before him, places bullshit within the larger category of deception and so defines bullshit through reference to lying, with all its associated moral implications.

Frankfurt is also indebted (indirectly) to Plato: *Phaedrus* is as much about the bullshitter's (Lysias's or the non-lover's) lack of concern for (or "love" for) the truth as is Frankfurt's brief tome. From the perspective of Plato, Lysias's speech in praise of the non-lover is just so much bullshit not simply because it is not true, but because Lysias is not concerned with telling the truth so much as he is with gaining the affection and attention of his audience: the beloved boy, the paying student or, more to the point, that lover of speeches, Phaedrus himself.

The non-lover described by Lysias in *Phaedrus* is best understood as Plato's allegory for sophists who reject any "natural" truth and who remain committed to contradictory arguments as the practical consequence of their general agnosticism. For Lysias's non-lover, language is not for telling the truth, because the truth is inaccessible: language is for finding and strengthening positions, for gaining advantage, and for exerting influence over others. Richard Weaver offers a similar reading of *Phaedrus* that sees the non-lover as representing an attitude toward language use (though for Weaver the non-lover is not a sophist, but a scientist).

Others interested in the bullshitter apply a different, more favorable lens. Daniel Mears, for example, draws on Chandra Mukerji's study of bullshit among hitchhikers, and more generally on Erving Goffman's study of self-presentation in the interaction order (for example, "Role Distance" and *Interaction Rituals*) to highlight bullshit as a form of impression management: what, as Mears notes, Suzanne Eggins and Diana Slade call a "framing device" for the "construction and maintenance of our social identities and social relationships" (qtd. in Mears 279). For Mears, bullshit is the deliberate (albeit playful) creation of possible but ultimately misleading impressions of self or reality, whether for expressive or instrumental reasons (4).

Like Frankfurt, Mears locates the source of bullshit in the speaker herself and her desire to craft a creditable self-image. But whereas Frankfurt sees bullshitting as a species of deception worse than lying (because at least liars have to know the truth if only to lead us away from it, whereas bullshitters have no concern at all for the truth), Mears understands bullshit as a significant social phenomenon that serves several prosocial functions.⁷ For Mears, we engage in bullshit for purposes of socialization and play, for self-exploration and self-expression, for the resolution of social tensions and cognitive dissonance, and for gaining an advantage in encounters.

Like Mukerji, Mears emphasizes the playful (though often nontrivial and highly consequential) quality of bullshit, much as the ancient sophists composed speeches as "play": as exercises and exempla, for enjoyment, for display and impression management, and for study separate from the "real world" of politics and law.⁸ Mears also employs a weak version of the sophistic claim that the reality (or truth) of social encounters is not immediately available or self-evident, but is rather "subject to ongoing negotiation, interpretation, and manipulation" (5).⁹ Because we cannot read one another's minds, miscommunication, concealment, and various levels of deception

are not only common but inevitable across a wide range of social contexts. Hence, the ubiquity of bullshitting.

Others who focus on the producer of bullshit note the qualities (or flaws) of mind or character that make someone likely to produce bullshit, from the lack of an attitude of genuine inquiry (de Waal), to the use of inadequate methods of justification (Kimbrough), to the various personality disorders or neuroses that lead one to a biased perception of reality and thus a biased and inaccurate use of language (Bernal). Shelley Taylor and Jonathon Brown have more recently examined the adaptive consequences of positive self-illusions (illusory or exaggerated estimations of one's skills, abilities, or degree of social control), particularly in the case of students' inflated self-reports of their grade averages. Paul Christensen sees the malady in quasi-mystical terms: bullshit is "the power to throw oneself into the mind of another," or into "the great glass cathedral of knowing"—a mixture of Muslim ta'wil and nirvana (192).

This approach has its limitations, of course. For those who focus on the bullshitter, no discourse can properly be called bullshit without first ascertaining an internal state: the speaker's motives and goals, adequacy of methods, and mental health. Yet we often recognize some statement or act as bullshit without necessarily thereby imputing anything about the speaker's state of mind or, for that matter, knowing anything about the speaker at all. Someone may, for example, see theories of intelligent design or French Marxism as bullshit despite the apparent sincerity, seriousness, and sanity of their adherents. This view of bullshit, then, can be only partial; a full view of the phenomenon would have to account for the interactional quality of bullshit, involving not only a speaker with a specific set of qualities or concerns (his or her intent or ethos), but also characteristic features of the bullshit itself (logos), and any resulting responses on the part of the audience or addressee (pathos), as well as the embeddedness of this interaction within the larger social drama.

THE BULLSHIT

George Orwell was perhaps the major contemporary forerunner of an approach to bullshit that focuses on the text itself, in his denunciation of various forms of what has come to be called *doublespeak* (though Orwell himself does not use this term). His "Politics and the English Language" became a manifesto of sorts in denouncing and acting against all manners of cliché, dead metaphor, empty verbiage, euphemism, and bureaucratese regardless of the intent or purpose of its producer. He famously parodied *Ecclesiastes* 9:11 to illustrate the depths to which English could sink:

Objective considerations of contemporary phenomena compel the conclusion that success or failure in competitive activities exhibits no tendency to be commensurate with innate capacity, but that a considerable element of the unpredictable must invariably be taken into account. (Orwell 429)

Where Frankfurt and others are interested in language as a vehicle for conveying truth (about the world), Orwell was interested in language as a vehicle for conveying and manipulating *meaning*. Orwell points to deceptive intent as *one* problem contributing to the general decline of language, but he also suggests that language itself can work to corrupt and muddy thought. Thus he has much to say about nonsensical and meaningless language as itself a culprit in the proliferation of empty verbiage and immoral action. In its benign form, says Orwell, meaningless prose comes from incapacity, indifference, or sheer laziness. We adopt hackneyed phrases and dead metaphors for their familiar sound rather than their specific sense. The result, says Orwell, is necessarily stale and imprecise, because composed for another purpose.

The more malignant form of such prose arises from “the defence of the indefensible” (Orwell 432), and it is this form that he made famous in the “newspeak” of *1984* and that has been singled out for special attention by subsequent denouncers of doublespeak: “collateral damage” for civilians accidentally killed in military actions; “servicing the target” for killing or assassinating enemies; “rightsizing” for firing people; and “aggressive” or “alternative interrogation techniques” for torture. But even here, Orwell is interested not only, or even primarily, in the dishonesty of the bullshitter (to say nothing of the indefensible acts glossed over), but also in the resulting habits of language use that get adopted out of sheer expedience despite their semantic emptiness and moral bankruptcy. For Orwell, “a bad usage can spread by imitation and tradition even among people who should and do know better” (433). Corrupt language corrupts thought so that the defense of the indefensible transforms via habit into banal linguistic evil.

More recently, G. A. Cohen has challenged Frankfurt’s definition of bullshit (and expanded on Orwell) by pointing to a particular brand of academese characterized by “unclarifiable unclarity.” He is particularly exercised by a culture of academia (most notable in the humanities and in critical theory) that not only tolerates but rewards what we can call *Cohen bullshit*: nonsense that passes as brilliance because written by luminaries infamous for their obscurantism. He has in mind especially the labyrinthine discourse of French Marxists like Louis Althusser.¹⁰ This species of bullshit, says Cohen, flourishes not because of dishonesty, laziness, corruption, or neurosis, but through, first, obscurantism, and then a kind of “cognitive dissonance reduction.” Scholars adopt an obscurantist style as a philosophical tool or program, and their followers then “struggle for ages with some rebarbative text,” working to extract “a reasonable idea” which they then defend as profound rather than admitting that they have wasted their time on bullshit, even though that new idea is “a banality that could have been expressed in a couple of sentences” (118). Even more than Orwell, Cohen focuses on features of the discourse itself as meriting the bullshit appellation, arguing that even honest students with a sincere concern for the truth can produce “second order” bullshit (129–30) by parroting primary bullshit that they

have read and come to accept as profound. Despite their good faith, says Cohen, the result is still bullshit.

He offers two complementary criteria for detecting this species of bullshit: translation and negation. The translation criterion says that any attempt to render a piece of bullshit unobscure will “create something that isn’t recognizable as a version of what was said” (Cohen 130). Anyone attempting to paraphrase Jacques Derrida or Jacques Lacan to the uninitiated, Cohen argues, will end up only with bland truisms and that vague sense of frustration common among readers of abstruse theory. Cohen’s negation criterion for “unclarifiable unclarity” says that if you can assert the negation of any statement without loss of plausibility, that statement is bullshit. Not surprisingly, the Socratic *elenchus* operates in a manner similar to Cohen’s criteria: by asking a series of questions that lead the interlocutor to assert the negation of his original proposition, Socrates demonstrates the original assertion to have been bullshit; by asking questions that reduce the interlocutor to silence, he demonstrates the original statement’s resistance to exegetical elaboration and thus similarly reveals the assertion to be bullshit.

Others see bullshit as inhering in the complex demands of discursive situations and their characteristic genres: metaphysics (Hardcastle), recommendation letters and resumes (Richardson), student exams (Perry) or student papers (Smagorinsky et al.); or as arising more generally from bureaucratization, professional specialization, or institutional insularity. “Dictionaries” that list and translate bullshit terms and phrases from different social sectors (business, law, politics, medicine, the military, and so on) have proliferated recently (Beckwith; Penny; Webb). Each of these focuses on a different set of textual features—characteristic structures, styles, lexicons, phrases, or individual words—rather than on the bullshitter’s motives or qualities of mind.

This negative view of bullshit-as-text could be countered by a view of textual bullshit as a necessary and functional aspect of language use. We might consider the central theorist in this vein to be Burke, who demonstrates that the eulogistic and dyslogistic terms denounced by Jeremy Bentham were in fact inevitable, a truly neutral language being not only impossible, but useless. For Burke, the perpetual debunking of linguistic bias or “spin” becomes as problematic as is deliberately tendentious language because it implies that a neutral and objective language is actually possible. Edward P. J. Corbett similarly notes the inevitable overlap between doublespeak and the rhetorical devices characteristic of everyday language use, an argument echoed by Eubanks and Schaffer, who see bullshit as a “graded” category including forms of academese that are both necessary and beneficial. Indeed, a full understanding of the discursive techniques that fall under the rubric of bullshit would overlap nicely with Western rhetorical theory from the sophists forward.

Like bullshitter bullshit, bullshit bullshit focuses on one important element of the bullshit phenomenon, complementing other contributing features like the

intent of the speaker and, as I'll discuss later, the reception of the audience. As with bullshitter bullshit, bullshit bullshit includes both a negative or pejorative view that sees bullshit as a perversion of language use, one that can be reduced or eliminated through corrective action (having speakers be more concerned about the truth, for example, or more precise in the meanings that they convey) as well as a more neutral or positive view that sees these qualities of language use as inevitable, their regrettable effects being inseparable from and inherent in the very nature of what it means to be human and a user of signs.

THE BULLSHITTEE

Finally, a third group of scholars locate bullshit not with the speaker or the text, but with the audience itself. Most point to the weakness of audiences as the primary reason for the proliferation of bullshit: the indifference or irrationality that renders them susceptible to bullshit. Consuelo Preti, for example, notes that bullshit has to be accepted by an audience to work, and so places the responsibility for the ubiquity of bullshit on the apathy of the listener. She recommends as an antidote that we all simply *care* more about the truth (inverting Frankfurt's indictment of the *bullshitter* for not caring about the truth). We need, says Preti, to be more like analytic philosopher G. E. Moore, who "could never tolerate anything but truth, common sense, and reality" (Leonard Woolf, qtd. in Preti 27). We all need to begin asking each other questions like, "What *exactly* do you mean?" and "Do you *really* believe that?" We need, in other words, to become analytic philosophers or Moorists.

Kenneth Taylor faults not our apathy or our credulity, but the structural flaws of the human mind, the "architectural foibles and limits that render it susceptible to a host of manipulations" (51). He points specifically to self-deception, confirmation bias (the tendency disproportionately to notice things that confirm one's beliefs), and framing (our susceptibility to assessing events differently depending on the context or "frame" within which they are perceived) as the kinds of flaws in reasoning that prevent people from recognizing bullshit when they see it. And Taylor recommends not simply that we care more, but that we acquire "an insatiable appetite for unyielding argument," that we learn "skills of reframing," and that we acquire the "habit of asking after that which is invariant across alternative frames" (61). Such appetites, skills, and habits would inoculate us, as it were, against the spread of bullshit that arises from our own cognitive incapacities. He does not wonder over the efficacy of any cognitive attempt to correct cognitive flaws inherent in the mind.

These and similar audience-centered taurascatic theories focus on the infirmities that make audiences responsible for their own duping, conveying a kind of *caveat auditor*. These auditors are not unlike Phaedrus who, in the dialogue named for him, is shown to betray just the kinds of intellectual frailties that sophists like Lysias

routinely take advantage of (unless they are prevented from doing so by philosophers like Plato's Socrates). It is one goal of the dialogue to illustrate how a rhetorical innocent like Phaedrus can be introduced to serious philosophical inquiry (perhaps through elaborate myths) and saved from the initially appealing but ultimately unpalatable excreta of the sophists.

A more positive focus on the audience might attend not to what audiences lack that allows bullshit to thrive, but to how audience awareness gives rise to the charge of bullshit in the first place. Politeness (and impoliteness) studies have moved in a parallel direction to focus not only on speaker intent and linguistic form, but also on the perception and evaluation of the hearer within the total discursive context (Eelen 255; Spencer-Oatey 2–3; Fukushima). If, as most authors suggest, we are now buried hip-deep in b.s., this may be not because more is being produced, but because we are in fact getting better at detecting it and publicizing it, due, in part, to a culture of cynicism that has been on the rise since the 1960s. *The Daily Show*, *The Colbert Report*, *The Onion*, and *The Bluffer's Guide* series are all, in their own way, twenty-first-century crap detectors, sniffing out political and corporate bullshit in the best tradition of Mark Twain and Neil Postman, and holding it up to ridicule via parody and satire.

Juxtaposition and ironic restatement are two common comedic techniques for crap detection: Jon Stewart of *The Daily Show* (in his “moment of Zen”) often demonstrates the bullshit of one statement (made, for example, by a press secretary or elected official) by juxtaposing this video clip with another in which the same person says the opposite, or by showing how often the statement is repeated, ironically revealing its triteness or scripted rigidity. For example, take the October 27, 2008, episode featuring two journalists asking Sarah Palin the question, “Are you a feminist?” In the first (with a male interviewer), Palin responds by saying that she is not going to “label [herself] anything,” while in the second (with a female interviewer), she answers, “I do. A feminist who believes in equal rights.” Ironic restatement also works when the faux news anchor or pundit adopts a politician's words or style, or a journalistic register with parodic intent. In the *Saturday Night Live* episode of September 30, 2008, Tina Fey simply repeats word for word the interview responses given by Sarah Palin to Katie Couric. Similarly, *The Onion* article of September 27, 2008 (“Wealthy Teen Nearly Experiences Consequences”), adopts the journalistic register of a narrowly averted tragedy to describe a privileged youth's close brush with consequences following an alcohol-related traffic collision. These and similar comedy staples not only highlight the varieties of bullshit that saturate American culture (making it seem more prevalent than it might otherwise appear) but also educate the audience in the practices of crap detection.

In its strongest form, a definition of bullshit that focuses on audience perception holds that there *is* no bullshit unless and until some audience member *perceives* an

interaction in those terms. When not so perceived, the symbolic act (however deceitful, insincere, unfair, or nonsensical) will simply be taken seriously and accepted at face value. When someone does feel or express that an action or statement is bullshit, it is liable either to be put on probation, as it were, and the statement or gesture subjected to heightened scrutiny to determine whether it ought to be accepted as sincere, true, just, or right, or to be rejected outright.

Mears gestures toward this view when he notes that an encounter becomes bullshit “only when it is so defined by or recognized as such by participants or observers” (4). But this subjective orientation toward bull departs from the bulk of his analysis, which rests not on audience perception, but on the strategic manipulation of the social frame by *actors* in order to create a favorable impression. Thus, the final element of his definition feels tacked on, so that he doesn’t notice the implicit contradiction: bullshit as impression management succeeds only when it goes unnoticed, yet the charge of bullshit implies its failure.

It was, rather, Postman who first identified bullshit not in terms of the bullshitter’s motives, nor the features of the bullshit itself (nor even in terms of audience deficiencies), but in terms of audience *sensitivities*. Insofar as he understood bullshit *as addressed*, Postman was also the forerunner of all subsequent taurascaticians, including Mears, Cohen, and Frankfurt himself. For Postman, bullshit is “what we call language that treats people in ways that we don’t approve of,” from relatively harmless forms of pomposity and inanity to more dangerous superstitions and that particular brand of bureaucratic fanaticism that he calls *Eichmannism*. Postman’s admirably laconic definition emphasizes the sensibilities of the participants in an encounter, either as addressees or bystanders, in registering when they themselves or others are being treated badly. If for Frankfurt the function of language is to tell the truth about, or to accurately reflect, “the way things are,” and for Orwell it is to communicate meaning concisely and perspicuously, then for Postman, language is for acting upon others ethically. Because of his view, Frankfurt sees any use of language not constrained (only) by a concern for the truth as necessarily a kind of falsehood. But, as I remarked earlier, rhetoricians since Burke have understood that the motives for symbol use are never pure, and that the suasive intrudes in every manifestation of the symbolic, especially in those most ardently proclaiming their objectivity, accuracy, or truth.

Language, in other words, is unavoidably phatic, and is used not simply to say true things about the world or convey meaning to one another, but to maintain and enhance human relationships. Postman here views language as act and as instrument, within the context of situated human encounters and cultural value systems, for constructing the social, rather than simply as a neutral medium for transmitting information (about the mind or the world).¹¹ That is, Postman sees bullshit rhetorically.

Thus any language exchange could appear to one of its participants as bullshit,

precisely because bullshit, for Postman, is not a quality of texts per se, nor of speakers and their intents, but of audiences and their sense of language as motivated (and therefore ethically charged) action. This makes the charge of bullshit highly subjective or, as Postman says, “One man’s bullshit is another man’s catechism.” Any text by any speaker *can* (and will) be perceived as bullshit by *someone*, from celebrity apologies to declarations of global warming, from French post-structuralism to Barack Obama’s campaign language of “hope” and “change” (satirized by Sarah Palin in her Tea Party speech of February 6, 2010). And, because of his understanding of the situatedness of bullshit and its sensitivity to an audience’s value system, Postman recognizes that we all, at some point or another, produce what will be seen by someone else as bullshit, especially those of us most confident in the rightness of our beliefs: we have, in the words of Pogo, met the enemy and he is us.

WHAT BULLSHIT(TING) IS

I want finally to develop a view of bullshit that borrows most heavily from interactional analysis as developed by Goffman and applied to bullshit by Mears; from Postman’s attention to participant sensitivities; and from a Burkean view of the inevitable multiplicity of motives that drive discourse as addressed. Within these parameters, I would define bullshit as a function of social encounters: semiotic interactions between role others who act in turn as speaker and listener within a context for interpretation, including platform encounters, bureaucratized encounters, and mediated or virtual encounters. It is important to emphasize in this regard that we typically treat all kinds of encounters (via text messages or recorded phone menu options, for example) on the basis of the same network of interactional conventions and expectations that we bring to face-to-face encounters. We expect to be shown deference, to be listened to, to be treated with politeness, to be given a turn to speak, to be responded to as individuals with unique needs and situations, to be given relevant information, and the like. In short, we expect to participate in shaping a uniquely unfolding interaction, and to have a say in its outcome. Even in interactions that depart from the model of the face-to-face conversation, we seek and expect markers of politeness, parity, and responsiveness. So, we devise symbols to convey the congeniality of our tone (text smileys) and grow annoyed when others (like telemarketers) do not observe conventions of turn taking, or when they “shout” through the use of ALL CAPS.

Interactions typically proceed within the context of rituals of politeness. We act and treat others through scripted roles in which we attempt to preserve the positive social value claimed by others (their “face”) while also maintaining or enhancing our own. Or, more accurately, we behave as though these expectations were in place, and we expect others to behave similarly. Goffman borrows from Emile Durkheim his view of the sacred quality of the interaction order (and of the social self). We regard

selves in interaction with some of the deference with which we hold the sacred, and we rely on rituals of civility to avoid profanation (Goffman, *Interaction Ritual* 47). The sacred quality that we ascribe to selves in interaction generates rituals of politeness and deference, and the abrogation of these rituals produces much of the affective intensity to charges of bullshit: the feeling that our personal integrity has been, in some way, disregarded. Lies don't feel like bullshit when they don't threaten "face" (Brown and Levinson).

In fact, I see the affective element—the feeling of disregard—as a defining feature of the phenomenon, and it is here that Postman's emphasis on audience sensitivity becomes central: bullshit is that variety of semiotic interaction in which one participant perceives the positive social value claimed for a party in interaction to have been denigrated. And because politeness involves a number of behavioral maxims (following Geoffrey Leech, we can list tact, approbation, generosity, agreement, modesty, and sympathy; see also Grice), bullshit can take place, or be perceived, through a number of different types of violations (not simply lying). Clearly, though, bullshit goes beyond instances of impoliteness or incivility. Bullshit calls up levels of emotional intensity that impoliteness rarely achieves. The difference, I suggest, is the result of two additional factors. Bullshit usually includes a sense of surprise—the slight is felt to be undeserved and unexpected—and it arises in encounters with asymmetrical power relations.

Inevitably, many encounters will involve power asymmetries between parties in the performance of their roles: orders or instructions from officers to enlisted men, or instructions from parents to children or from employers to employees. In many cases, this power differential is experienced as legitimate and unproblematic, is expressed in line with maxims of politeness, and does not disrupt the flow of activity or the goal of the encounter. Conversation analysis has explored a wide range of strategies through which power disguises itself or mitigates its alienating effects to minimize insult and insubordination, or to protect the status of the subordinate, or to justify or mitigate her subordination, thereby enhancing the cooperative nature of the task or fostering an illusion of conditional equality. Bosses ask questions that are in fact directives, military units go through elaborate rituals of shared fate to enhance group solidarity, parents say please or use "child-speak." These rituals of impression management allow both parties to imagine that the superior is not simply bossing the inferior around, but rather that both are securing agreement to a task of common importance. The rituals allow the subordinate to maintain the illusion of significance and inviolability, of importance in the face of relative powerlessness. In other cases, rituals of politeness are foregone entirely, and we are faced with the raw assertion of power or authority in brusque gestures and commanding tones. This happens, for example, in cases of urgency or danger like war or national disaster, as well as in situations where the cognitive demands of the task call for full concentration:

surgeries or other delicate and critical procedures. Neither of these cases, I suggest, usually merits the charge of bullshit.

But in some encounters, though the rituals of politeness *are* carried out, they are carried out so perfunctorily that the illusion of a mutual encounter—a shared fate based on conditional parity—is broken, and the subordinate is allowed to remember, however momentarily, that she is not only at a disadvantage, but in fact completely powerless to shape the interaction or alter the outcome of the encounter. Eubanks and Schaffer comment on this phenomenon:

No doubt, part of the irritation people feel toward false politeness from corporations is that consumers are, all too apparently, powerless to avoid it or even respond to it—trapped on hold, with no choice but to be mollified again and again by a prerecorded “Your call is important to us.” But it is not just a feeling of helplessness that bothers people; it is the bullshit quality of the corporate language. Its insincerity. Its smugness. The febleness of its attempt to get away with something. (381)

It is the febleness of the attempt, not merely to get away with something, but to retain the patina of politeness, I think, that also gives rise to the feeling of unfairness and unexpectedness that underlies charges of bullshit. The dominant party conveys the forms of politeness, of concern, of attentiveness, but none of the warmth or spontaneity. This party merely goes through the motions.

When the facade of politeness is sufficiently thin, then, the suspension of disbelief manufactured by a well-performed ritual is rent, and one abruptly sees behind the veil of politeness the raw pursuit of efficiency or advantage. We can see this as a kind of enforced role distancing, where subordinates attached (and committed) to their role are forced to recall that they are, in fact, only playing at significance and equality (as though a parent were to say to a child enjoying the merry-go-round, “Well, after all, it’s just a wooden horse on a pole”). The unexpected perception of power asymmetries (and a loss of control) can, in such cases, incite a range of feelings, including impatience, frustration, indignation, shame, vulnerability, and anger, not because the other is in a position of superiority, but because the other doesn’t bother to observe the niceties of mystification that permit the subordinate to save face, niceties that the subordinate has become accustomed to and come to expect.

This describes one species of bullshit, the institutional or bureaucratic type, particularly well, but it goes further in getting at the *feeling* of bullshit common to all types: the feeling among participants that a party in the encounter is sufficiently powerful to forego serious attention to the rituals of politeness, allowing them to appear as *merely* ritualistic. In the process, the bullshitters detach from the role they are performing (thus reasserting their power) and simultaneously remind the others of their subordinate status, whatever the fictions of a mutual interaction. It is the *confidence* in authority that leads to the laxity in performance of the ritual in the first place. A rebarbative theoretical text displays a discursive virtuosity that fails even to

pretend that its goal is to be understood; an acquaintance not only deceives, but is so confident in the deception or so careless in its execution as to insult the victim, who is led to feel undeserving of a more careful attempt; authority figures abuse their power so cavalierly that they don't seem to care how obviously unethical they are toward their subordinates.

Bullshit can thus take place without either deception or obscurity. A student gives this example: A highway patrol officer pulls over a young black man driving a new sports car for a "busted tail light." The officer asks the driver to exit the vehicle, (legally but inappropriately) scans the rear seat of the car with his flashlight, and asks the driver to step out of the car while he (illegally) examines the trunk. He returns the driver's license and tells the driver to "be sure and fix that tail light," ending the encounter with "You have a good day now." The politeness markers are clearly insufficient to mask the raw and unjust assertion of power, and they give rise to intense feelings of insult, shame, and a loss of face.

Bullshit happens, more generally then, when one party in an encounter feels superior enough (in position, authority, or rhetorical skill, for example) to dispense with the rituals of cooperative interaction, leading the other to feel treated without due deference; when one participant in an exchange appears to have been undeservedly slighted; or when one side of a dialogue is unjustly disregarded. Bullshit arises from arrogant gestures of disregard. If every encounter and every form of social discourse involve at least two parties, at least two perspectives, then bullshit is what results when the arrogance of one party leads the other to feel unacknowledged, taken for granted, disregarded, or unheard. Bullshit is, in this sense, hubris.

This leads me back to the assertion made at the outset of this essay that bullshit is the antistrophe for rhetoric, and that they can benefit from comparative study. Not only has bullshit been explained via a triad of features that characterize the study of rhetoric (speaker and ethos, text and argument, audience and emotion), but most popular views of rhetoric—discourse that is devoid of content, empty, trivial, deliberately confusing, manipulative, misleading, deceptive, or biased—duplicate common uses of the term bullshit. The two terms are often used interchangeably. Bullshit in many ways answers to rhetoric.

I would like to suggest, however, an alternate view: that rhetoric be defined in opposition to the view of bullshit just articulated. If bullshit is one-sided discourse, and arises in encounters characterized by the perception of arrogance and insult, then rhetoric must be defined as discourse that affords due regard to all participants in an encounter and all perspectives in a dialogue or discourse, particularly the non-dominant positions most likely to go unheard. Rhetoric cannot be understood simply as the art or science of persuasive discourse, or the study of the suasive in discourse, or the art of motivated symbolic action; it cannot be defined through reference to a single speaker or discourse. Rather, rhetoric ought always to be understood only in

terms of interacting discourses: statements and counterstatements. Rhetoric ought to be defined with reference to the affordance of due attention and regard to all participants in an encounter, all perspectives in an exchange, all sides of an issue. And it should be defined with reference to the power asymmetries and attitudes of superiority that make bullshit possible. I can think of no more succinct statement of this principle than that of which the sophists were routinely accused: rhetoric is making the weaker argument stronger.

NOTES

1. Thus I do not intend to suggest that these fields produce bullshit, at least no more than any other academic, bureaucratic, or corporate groups.

2. See Eubanks and Schaffer and Smagorinsky et al. An NCTE Committee on Public Doublespeak, formed in 1972, also generated a series of essays on doublespeak in composition journals like *College English* and the *English Journal*.

3. I borrow this tripart organization from rhetorical theory, of course, but also from Cohen, who attends to bullshit bullshit over Frankfurt's concern for bullshitter bullshit.

4. Reviewed in Grice's essay "Logic and Conversation."

5. See also Adler on falsely implicating.

6. This is a close paraphrase of Black's definition of *humbug*.

7. See also Barnum on humbug in this regard.

8. Tying study and education to play, as in the Greek *scholē* or leisure and the Roman *ludus* or play, both of which could also refer to school.

9. By admitting that impression management can be misleading, Mears implies that a non-constructed reality is available against which one's face work can be measured. A strong version of this view would suggest that no such "objective" reality is available outside the process of symbolic interaction and interpretation through which we gauge the truth of self, other, and reality.

10. Alan Sokal has a similar complaint about postmodernism: that it misrepresents scientific knowledge to support (what he sees as) indefensible forms of relativism. See his "Transgressing the Boundaries: Towards a Transgressive Hermeneutics of Quantum Gravity," discussed in "A Physicist Experiments with Cultural Studies." See also *Fashionable Nonsense* by Sokal and Bricmont.

11. The view of bullshit as a failure to be truthful or meaningful will be treated later in this essay.

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