

CASE STUDY

The New Rhetoric movement and the role of argument

This was demonstrated at the end of the 1950s – and therefore long before it was realized by semioticians and anthropologists – by theorists of argumentation like the Polish philosopher of law, Chaïm Perelman (1912–84), the Belgian sociologist Lucie Olbrechts-Tyteca (1899–1988), and the British philosopher of science Stephen E. Toulmin. These thinkers on the one hand broke with the Cartesian rationalist tradition which maintained that facts are self-evident and do not require argumentation. On the other, they continued, using new tools, the Greek tradition of rhetoric and dialectics (particularly Aristotelian). According to these authors, we frequently encounter episodes or facts whose interpretations are dubious, uncertain or ambiguous. The same applies to the robustness of many hypotheses and theories. In the absence of unequivocal evidence, if a hypothesis is to be admissible, it must be founded, not on rationality but on ‘good reasons’ recognized as such by other members of the scientific community. And the ability to convince the reader of the goodness of interpretations rests mainly on rhetoric, that is, the use of argument. The *new rhetoric* concerns ‘the study of the discursive techniques allowing us to *induce or increase the mind’s adherence to the theses presented for its assent*’ (Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca, 1958/1969: 4). These authors also anticipated the concept of the Model Reader, in that they maintained that every argumentation is determined by the need to establish a mental contact with the audience addressed, taking account (consciously or unconsciously) of the means best suited to persuading the audience of a thesis. One can therefore plausibly claim that it is the audience that determines the quality of the argumentation.