

Issue 59 (July 2019)

Reading, Argumentation and Persuasion: Using Rhetorical Analysis in Textual Interpretation

David E. Susa
Justus Liebig University Giessen

Contact: david.susa@ggk.uni-giessen.de

Abstract:

This 2017 monograph by Martin Camper, *Arguing over Texts. The Rhetoric of Interpretation*, presents a method to structure and analyze the process of talking and arguing over texts based on the classical concept of stasis and expands it, combining rhetoric and twentieth-century linguistics. The book is an entertaining journey that travels through each stasis, illustrating them with examples from multiple fields, and updates a topic that can be seen as distant but holds great importance in the contemporary world.

How to cite:

Susa, David E. "Reading, Argumentation and Persuasion: Using Rhetorical Analysis in Textual Interpretation. [Review of: Camper, Martin: *Arguing over Texts. The Rhetoric of Interpretation*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2018.]" In: KULT_online 59 (2019).

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.22029/ko.2019.292>



Reading, Argumentation and Persuasion: Using Rhetorical Analysis in Textual Interpretation

Justus Liebig University Giessen

Camper, Martin: *Arguing over Texts. The Rhetoric of Interpretation*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2018. 208 pages, 53 GBP. ISBN: 978-0-19-067712-1.

Abstract:

This 2017 monograph by Martin Camper, *Arguing over Texts. The Rhetoric of Interpretation*, presents a method to structure and analyze the process of talking and arguing over texts based on the classical concept of stasis and expands it, combining rhetoric and twentieth-century linguistics. The book is an entertaining journey that travels through each stasis, illustrating them with examples from multiple fields, and updates a topic that can be seen as distant but holds great importance in the contemporary world.

Multiple phenomena – including the growing power of the so-called ‘post-truth’ and the fragmentation of social communities, especially virtual ones, which are incapable of communicating with each other – create a very hostile environment for debate and discussion. The possibility of persuading someone or being persuaded seems almost alien in a world in which proofs and facts are secondary. This state of affairs can make us turn again to partially neglected arts like rhetoric, because it does not matter sometimes whether a claim is true or not, but who makes a claim, how it is made, and to which audience it is directed.

Martin Camper’s *Arguing over Texts. The Rhetoric of Interpretation* deals with some of these issues and shows us how they can be understood and analyzed. The book gives the reader multiple tools not just to comprehend rhetorical argumentation, but to apply its conceptual constructs to reading and arguing over written and oral text. Camper, Assistant Professor at Loyola University Maryland, reintroduces the classic stases theory (stasis, in singular) and develops it to new horizons. Stases are a method based on creating questions that allow a rhetor (an orator) to anticipate possible responses and create arguments. Combining them with classical analysis of recurring argumentative lines, topoi, and elements of twentieth-century linguistics (J. L. Austin’s Performative utterances and H. P. Grice’s

Cooperative principle), the book presents a coherent and well-structured method called “interpretive stases” (p. 3).

As the author explains, the idea of the text is to underline the relation between text interpretation, discussion, and argumentation on multiple levels: “Although the ties between hermeneutics in its various stripes and the interpretive stases have frayed and in some cases have been severed, these connections should be restored” (pp. 5-6). To achieve this, in principle, vast objective the book offers a simple structure of eight chapters, the first being a general introduction to the project of his work and the last one an appropriate closing that combines the multiple stases. The core of the book is the characterization of the six stases: ambiguity, definition, letter versus spirit, conflicting passages, assimilation, and jurisdiction. Each is a different path that an argument over textual documents can travel.

Every chapter is constructed in a similar fashion. A case study is presented and the respective stasis is characterized through its multiple manifestations, theoretical and practical implications, followed by a guide on how one can argue with it. The chapter closes with the application of the concepts previously presented to the case study from the beginning. The logical progression of the text is a coherent and clear framework and brings abstract debates to the practical world. The third chapter (Definition), for instance, starts presenting a US Supreme Court decision related to the Second Amendment and its consequences. This case illustrates concrete problems that spawn from different definitions of two terms: ‘privileges’ and ‘immunities.’ The author, then, develops his theory by presenting multiples possibilities for articulating and defending various definitions in numerous contexts. Finally, he revisits the case he first gave and uses the now presented conceptual scheme to explain the argumentative possibilities.

I highlight the continuous use of examples in the book as a pedagogical tool. These, along with his clear writing style, allows the reader to see the concrete applications of the stases. The author proposes examples from all kinds of topics: race, law, sexuality, environmental protection, and religion, which is used the most.

The book as a whole achieves its objective of revitalizing and completing the stases theory with a new, reinvigorated spirit. It shows that reading, even in solitude, is always a dialectic process. When someone reads and interprets a word or a passage, the polysemous nature of language manifests itself in multiple possible meanings and the reader chooses, consciously or not, one or multiple possible connotations. “From this perspective, textual interpretation is an inherently argumentative process

because it always involves reasoning from assumptions and the available evidence to justify belief in a particular meaning of a text” (p. 171).

Simultaneously, the book, as a good treaty about rhetoric, does not concern itself with the ‘correct’ or ‘adequate’ reading of a text. From the beginning, this *techne* (τέχνη) concentrates on persuasion, even if it is not based on rational or factual argumentation. Camper shows us a logical path to approach an argument and to respond to it. Nevertheless, the book displays that rhetoric is the art of *peitho* (Πειθώ) and that this is its principal virtue and what makes it different from other fields. For all the above reasons, this is a read recommended not only to the specialists in rhetoric or argumentation, but also to all those who work with texts, not just in the academic world.

In a time in which factual evidence is more and more tenuous, rhetoric seems to have a more important role in daily decisions and, in the most telling case, in political debates around the globe. Books like Camper’s *Arguing over Texts. The Rhetoric of Interpretation* will give the reader a better overview of the ideas presented in texts, their multidimensional nature, and how to argue about particular interpretations.

German Abstract:

Lesen, Argumentation und Überredungskünste: Rhetorische Analyse in der Textinterpretation

Martin Campers Buch, *Arguing over Texts. The Rhetoric of Interpretation*, entwickelt eine Methode und einen Prozess, um über Texte zu reden und zu argumentieren. Diese basiert auf dem klassischen Begriff der ‚Stasis,‘ wird jedoch kombiniert mit Rhetorik und Linguistik des 20. Jahrhunderts. Das Buch ist eine unterhaltsame Reise, die jede Stufe der Stasis erklärt, mit vielfältigen Beispielen illustriert und ein Thema aktualisiert, dass weit entfernt scheint, jedoch große Bedeutung für die Gegenwart bereithält.

David E. Susa
Justus Liebig University Giessen

Contact: david.susa@ggk.uni-giessen.de

How to cite:

Susa, David E. “Reading, Argumentation and Persuasion: Using Rhetorical Analysis in Textual Interpretation. [Review of: Camper, Martin: *Arguing over Texts. The Rhetoric of Interpretation*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2018.]”. In: KULT_ online 59 (2019).

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.22029/ko.2019.292>