Write a trace on one of these issues: rhetorical situation, subjectivity/identity, or audience. Use three theorists and only use readings from the course.

The role of the rhetor is discussed in Lloyd F. Bitzer’s article (1968) “The Rhetorical Situation,” Richard E. Vatz (1973) in “The Myth of the Rhetorical Situation,” and in “Rhetoric and Its Situations” (1974) by Scott Consigny. As each scholar defines and explores the rhetorical situation. Bitzer, Vatz, and Consigny differ in their opinion of the rhetorical situation, specifically whether it is the situation that is rhetorical, or if it rhetoric that makes the situation. Their differing views impact the constraints and affordances of the rhetor. The purpose of this paper is to trace the issue of the rhetorical situation; specifically defining the rhetorical situation and the implications of each definition has on the role and purpose of the rhetor, and on work in the field of rhetoric.

Lloyd F. Bitzer in “The Rhetorical Situation” argues that rhetoric is situational. He arrives at this observation after first making note of the lack of work done within rhetoric about the context that creates rhetorical discourse. In an attempt to make the characteristics of “the rhetorical situation” known, Bitzer sets out to define rhetorical situation, and then explore the elements that influence that definition (p.1). Bitzer is thorough in examining first what does not qualify as a rhetorical situation and/or rhetorical response. He states “The existence of a rhetorical address is a reliable sign of the existence of situation,” but more importantly it “does not follow that a situation exists only when the discourse exists,” (p. 2) therefore rhetoric is situational.

When Bitzer (1968) labels rhetoric as situational, he is also clear that discourse existing does not equate to a situation being rhetorical (p. 3). Understanding a speech does not equate to understanding the “context of meaning,” and therefore this does not automatically qualify it as a rhetorical situation. Bitzer is also careful in writing that a “persuasive situation” is also not equal to a rhetorical situation just because “an audience can be changed in belief or action by means of speech” (p. 3). The situation that creates rhetoric is far more specific and complex than these examples. For instance, “a work is rhetorical because it is a response to a situation of a certain kind,” and the specific kind of situation must require that the response will “ultimately produce action or change in the world; it performs a task” (p. 3). The situation invites the response, and the discourse is only in existence because of the specific condition.

Bitzer furthers his explanation of the rhetorical situation as “a natural context of persons, events, objects, relations, and exigence which strongly invites utterance,” therefore the situation is in control of any response (p. 5). If the rhetoric is situational, then it ought be considered the “ground of rhetorical activity” and as such rhetoric exists as a result of a situation (p. 5). This view of rhetoric means that rhetoric is depending on the situation itself, which exists of its own “peculiarities,” therefore it occurs only in “response to a situation,” in an attempt to give an “answer as a solution” (p. 5). Bitzer’s more precise definition of the rhetorical situation is any “situation that may be defined as a complex of persons, events, objects, and relations presenting an actual or potential exigence which can be completely or partially removed if discourse, can so constrain human decision or action as to bring about the significant medication of the exigence” (p. 6). If the exigence can’t be changed, then the situation is not rhetorical. An audience, or the people in Bitzer’s definition, is required because to bring about change requires action, and for there to be action there must be actors. The constraints mentioned in his definition are necessary in creating a rhetorical situation because they possess the “power to constrain decision and action needed to modify the exigence” (p. 8).

These three elements thus make up the characteristics of a rhetorical situation, and when regonized by a rhetor then it is possible for the rhetorical discourse to be “called into existence by situation” (p. 9). Bitzer also calls to our attention the fact that not any response will satisfy the needs of the situation. Much like the situation must be specific to create the need for a response, the response must also be “fitting” to the situation itself, which also means that the situation calls for a specific type of response (p. 10). The reponse is not fitting in the sense that it is sensible. Rather the response is fitting because the situation constrains the response. The constraints of the situation dictate a very specific response. It is thus the job of the rhetor to understand the situation and the necessary response that will bring about the change the situation requires. Rhetorical situations may be simple, or complex, but ultimately Bitzer writes that they “evolve to just the time when a rhetorical discourse would be most fitting” (p.13). Detractors that may question whether or not rhetoric is needed in the world need only look to Bitzer’s observation that our world “invites change” and as such rhetoric is needed to address an audience and create a response that results in actors of change. Bitzer’s argument regarding the role of a rhetor, the skills the rhetor must possess, and what defines a situation is challenged by Richard E. Vatz in 1973.

Richard E. Vatz in “The Myth of the Rhetorical Situation” aims to disprove Bitzer’s account of rhetoric as situation. Vatz, in his brief rebuttal to Bitzer, demonstrates that the inverse of Bitzer’s argument is more accurate. That is to say, Vatz does not view the rhetoric as situational, but rather the situation is in fact rhetorical. Vatz’s reasoning for this is that to view rhetoric as situational is to ignore the nature of how we learn. According to Vatz, “we learn of facts and events through someone’s communicating them to us,” and as such how we learn, or have information communicated to us is the result of a two step process (p. 156). First, a choice is made about which events to relay communicate, and because the “world is a scene of inexhaustible events which all compete” (p. 156) a decision was made about what is communicated and what is not. According to Vatz, “one never runs out of context,” or “facts to describe a situation,” so the nature of context cannot determine rhetoric. The second step of the process Vatz describes is that of translation. A situation is “the translation of the chosen information into meaning” (p. 157), and an audience can only view an event as meaningful through the “linguistic depiction” (p. 156) of it. Ultimately, this leads Vatz to his conclusion that “meaning is not discovered in sitautions, but created by rhetors,” (p.156) and this also accounts for his stance on the moral responsibility placed upon rhetors. Vatz here greatly differs from Bitzer. Bitzer does not account for the moral implications of the rhetor, because the rhetor and his rhetorical response are dependent upon the situation. However, Vatz’s view specifically places the rhetor in a position to have to think about their moral obligations, and/or implications as they create both the situation, and the response.

Vatz explains that if “no theory of relationship between situations and rhetoric can neglect the account of the initial linguistic depiction of the situation,” and as a result the rhetoric can lead to the creation of reality, rather than reality creating rhetoric. Because Vatz views situations to be rhetorical utterances “invites exigence,” and a response is not controlled by the situation, rather “rhetoric controls the situational response” to the situation, whatever it may be (p. 159, 160). Again, Vatz presents a different view than Bitzer. Bitzer’s account means that the situation creates the urgency, and the rhetor responds to it, but for Vatz it is the rhetor that creates both through discourse. Rhetoric then is a “cause of meaning,” and rhetors are capable of choosing which situation will become important (p. 160). Its perceived importance, and how it is described will impact how the ways in which an audience acts.

In “Rhetoric and Its Situations” Scott Consigny opposes both the views of both Bitzer and Vatz regarding the rhetorical situation. In his piece Consigny argues that to resolve the issue of whether a situation is rhetorical, or if the practice of rhetoric makes a situation, rhetoric must be viewed as an art. With a full view of the rhetorical act a rhetor can full “engage in situations” (p. 176). Consigny does not outright disagree with everything Bitzer and Vatz argue. However, he does view their explanations of the rhetorical situation as somewhat incomplete, and/or simplifying certain issues.

For example, Bitzer’s work states that the situation is in control of the response, because it (the situation) determines a response. However, Consigny argues that the situation does not determine a response. Vatz, of course, believes that the rhetor creates the situation because at some point information about an event is communicated and in doing so the rhetor has created a situation. Consigny counters Vatz by stating that a “rhetor cannot create exigencies arbitrarily” and that for a rhetor to engage in any situation he/she needs to “take into account the particularities of each situation” (p. 176). Essentially, a rhetor may be able to shape the situation through discourse, but to know every aspect and context of the situation is unlikely. Consigny’s contribution to this argument is his proposed solution of viewing rhetoric as an art, as part of a three step process that gives the full scope of what is and is not possible for a rhetor.

First Consigny argues that it is not the place of the rhetor to “answer questions and solve well-formulated problems,” because the job of the rhetor must be centered on their ability to “ask good questions and to formulate or discover relevant problems in an indeterminate situation” (p. 177). He observes that a problem does not describe itself, nor is it likely that a rhetor will discover a “well-posed problem in a situation” (p.177). The rhetor must be able to “structure” the “indeterminate context” in order to “disclose and formulate problems,” which essentially means that Bitzer’s predetermined response that must fit the situation is unlikely. Consigny also points out that a situation cannont be created through description and choice of included and/or excluded information because the “particularities of the rhetorical situation are always changing” (179). The role, and purpose, of the rhetor is to provide an audience with “a new way of seeing and acting in the situation” so that this “new perspective” can inform the audience, and it is when this occurs that the problem can be solved (p. 179).

Consigny’s second step to understanding, and therefore appropriately dealing with the rhetorical situation is to understand that for rhetoric needs to possess integrity and receptivity. When viewing rhetoric as an art that can provide integrity the rhetor has an opportunity to discover and ultimately decide how to manage a situation. If a situation determines a response, as Bitzer argued, then this would not be possible. Receptivity is important to the art of rhetoric because with it a rhetor can “become engaged in individual situations” and does not create or invent them (p. 181). Consigny is clear that this is vital, because if a rhetor creates the situation, and the problem, then the solution he decides upon based on his own information will not be effective. It is not the role of the rhetor to create a situation, nor is it the role of the rhetor to ignore how information is communicated when a situation arises.

Ultimately this leads Consigny to his conclusion that rather than focusing on rhetoric as situational, or the situation a result of rhetoric, the field should construct rhetoric as “an art of topics or commonplaces,” much like in the rhetorical tradition. A topic allows for interplay between the rhetor and the situation (p. 182). (NEED MORE FROM p. 183)

The importance of the discussion of the rhetorical situation is it questions the role and purpose of the rhetor. It harkens back to our rhetorical tradition of attempting to understand the role and purpose of the rhetor, and proves that our history and tradition is still important and influential, despite its removal from composition classes. The discussion of the role of rhet rhetor also pushes the filed to the moral implications and obligations regarding what he/she can do vs. what he/she should do while understanding the context of each situation before taking action.