

## Association for Rhetoric and Communication in Southern Africa (ARCSA)

*Philippe-Joseph Salazar*

*Why is rhetoric central to the idea of a university in a democracy?*

ARCSA was established in July 1994, in the wake of the first Symposium of Rhetoric in Africa (now a regular biennial event). It formed a scholarly response to the advent of democracy in South Africa which provided a telling demonstration of the power of persuasion and the value placed, in postmodernism, on public deliberation and citizens' empowerment. The 100 top scholars in rhetoric studies who gathered in Cape Town in July 1994 all agreed that Nelson Mandela's election was the best omen possible to celebrate the birth of rhetoric studies in this new democracy. At a recent seminar in Cape Town, we heard a similar case made concerning Poland. ARCSA's contention and mission is to foster rhetoric studies as an academic intervention in democracy.

ARCSA's brief is to foster research in the interface between rhetoric (the study of deliberation in the public sphere) and the development of democracy – by engaging in three main activities: hosting Research Fellows through the Centre for Rhetoric Studies in Cape Town, organizing biennial academic conferences in Sub-Saharan Africa, and promoting the development of graduate programmes in Rhetoric Studies, as well as giving international exposure to rhetoric by co-hosting or co-organizing events at the American National Communication Association, the International Society for the History of Rhetoric, the Collège International de Philosophie, Paris and, since 2000, at FILLM. With ARCSA being the first learned society in rhetoric to affiliate to FILLM, and the second association in Africa, after the West African MLA, we feel a special task has been vested in us to make FILLM aware of the potential rhetoric studies represents for the growth of sometime beleaguered 'literary' disciplines. Rhetoric studies, as witnessed in their sustained development in the United States, can give an edge and a bite to language-based disciplines at large by inscribing them in public policy, public advocacy, public deliberation.

In Africa, as postmodern democracies emerge in Nigeria and South Africa, where public deliberation has come to the fore as a major agent for change and transformation, rhetoric studies have a role to play.

Since 1995 ARCSA has been instrumental in driving this message home by hosting a series of meetings, the results of which have been, firstly, to bring rhetoricians out of their home departments; and, secondly, to delocalize rhetoric and bring colleagues from the wider Sub-Saharan region to ARCSA. Our membership, although small at this stage, draws from countries as diverse as Congo, Zambia, Nigeria, Lesotho, South Africa, with regular participation by American, European and Latin American scholars. Appropriately these biennial conferences are called 'African Symposiums of Rhetoric'.

In 1994 ARCSA met first to reflect on 'power and persuasion', imbued with the peaceful exercise in political rhetoric that marked the end of apartheid. In 1996 we followed suit with the theme 'rhetorics of diversity' – this being a key public policy issue in any democratic sphere. In 1998, to celebrate the Universal Declaration, ARCSA met on 'rhetorics of human rights', an occasion to reflect on divergent traditions and the impact of globalization. In 2000 the Association moved to Zambia, choosing as a topic the interface of western rhetoric and African orality. In 2002, in Lesotho, ARCSA will offer its membership the opportunity to discuss how gender is argued in postmodern democracies.

International meetings do build academic presence, but academic activity must not be restricted to them, especially in a growing field.

In this light, ARCSA represents an aggressive stance in advocating rhetoric at universities. We think that, in addition to numeracy and literacy, there is 'rhetoric'. Graduates in science, engineering, the built environment, primary health care need to be able to translate their technical knowledge into 'public knowledge', to put persuasively the case for their skills and solutions to the public.

In the humanities, it is clear that this persuasive dimension is obfuscated by the belief that command of language and command of theories 'speak for themselves'. Recent surveys in the United States have shown that we, in the humanities, have the knack to be the less persuasive when making the case for our disciplines. At ARCSA we think that if the three-prong approach in training citizens – literacy, numeracy, rhetoric – can be circumvented in strong western democracies, where the possibility always exists for graduates to look 'in the world out there' for further training, in emerging democracies and transforming societies rhetoricians have a singular task. Their task, our task, is to redress what I would call 'a deficit of deliberation' for, as is often the case, civil society agencies are few and far between and intellectuals or critical agents are located within the universities. Let me add that this deleterious, and challenging, concentration of the intelligentsia at tertiary institutions, coupled with a weak 'deliberative ecology', is not only the hallmark of new democracies; the same phenomenon happens at regional or local levels in old democracies. It is in such conditions that rhetoric studies must engage with civic life and foster deliberative empowerment of citizens.

In South Africa, where ARCSA has its mainstay, such a challenge has been taken up, by introducing at the University of Cape Town an MPhil in rhetoric studies, the first one of its kind on this continent. ARCSA thinks this is the way forward. We propose it as a blue-print to understand the positioning of rhetoric studies within FILLM.

Besides holding a range of meetings focusing on the events described, ARCSA has in the past few years hosted some 16 Fellows who share its concerns, sought funding from appropriate institutions, organized a system of student internships, encouraged a form of community service under which members give workshops to legislative bodies, established international links with a number of bodies, and embarked upon a publishing programme.

In brief terms, what I have outlined is how at ARCSA we conceive our presence at FILLM. We envision it as developmental, as interventionist, as rooted in the tradition but open to the main challenge that faces the humanities, and the language-based disciplines in the Third Millennium: how to remain an active participant in civil society and, by the same gesture, help restore where we come from – the humane letters that shaped the Renaissance and Enlightenment understanding that people are the measure of all things. In our case: how to make our students leave our classrooms with a sense of empowerment as citizens. As the Sophists, the 'teachers of democracy', said: 'Language, that Great Dynast'. Rhetoric Studies, thanks to ARCSA, wishes to bring to FILLM that sort of tradition and that sort of opening.

*[www.uct.ac.za/depts/rhetoricafrika](http://www.uct.ac.za/depts/rhetoricafrika)*