PRESS FREEDOM AND CITIZEN AGENCY IN SOUTH AFRICA: A RHETORICAL APPROACH

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Abstract

South African democracy, in stark contrast to the apartheid regime, holds freedom of expression to be a fundamental, entrenched right. This is one of the hard-won victories of the negotiated revolution of 1990 to 1994. Freedom of expression, and its corollaries, such as freedom of the press, are embedded in a new culture of democratic deliberation that truly permeates the South African public sphere. Citizen agency is put to the test in how expression of values is activated in the media. Three sites have been carved out for the purpose of this article. First, how public engagement strategies are devised and proposed in the glossy, lifestyle and fashion magazines, usually not associated with democratic transformation and agency. Second, how mass circulation newspapers have elaborated a standard reporting procedure (supplements) by which the nation is given a voice — and one that is staged as being both public and deliberative about its own freedom of expression. Third, a bulletin for mass consumption that accompanied the writing of the new Constitution. Citizens in the making were made to argue and invent the public sphere. All three sites share a fundamental belief that citizen agency is rooted in what is called a "plasmatic" strategy by which the simulacra of autonomy do help foster public agency.

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Introduction

Press Freedom Day in South Africa on Thursday, October 19th, 2000 passed unnoticed. Yet, press freedom barely existing under apartheid, finds itself firmly entrenched in the democratic constitution of South Africa (Act 108 of 1996). It is listed in Chapter 2, section 16 of the Constitution and, like most provisions of this prefatory *Bill of Rights*, it is one of many outcomes of lengthy negotiations between the apartheid régime and the liberation forces. The result was a peaceful end to the former hegemony in November 1993, when multiparty negotiators agreed on the shape of the new devolution in advance of the first democratic elections of 1994 that led to the presidency of Nelson Mandela in May 1994. The Bill of Rights — as I have shown elsewhere with regard to a provision regarding slavery[1] — is not merely a table of wishful contents: it is the direct result of the liberation struggle and the popular identification with democratic values. Regarding freedom of the press, section 16 (1) (a) is a quaint rhetorical trope: "Everyone has the right to freedom of expression, which includes — (a) freedom of the press and other media". The trope — in rhetorical terms — is that freedom of the press is postulated as metonymic of freedom of expression; at the same time, it is — under a state of emergency — a "derogable right" (appendix, section 37), albeit under severe constraints imposed on Parliament to effectuate such derogation. In other words, freedom of the press is seen as "fundamental" to democracy, yet not as essential as a "non-derogable right," including equality (with some provisos), human dignity, life, freedom and security of the person (with some provisos), slavery (forced labour is derogable), protection of children (with the exception of teenagers between 16 and 18), rights of arrested, detained and accused persons (again, some derogations qualify the non-derogability).

This constitutional background is an essential factor, since the rights contained in Chapter 2 are considered victories over Calvinist, racial, and patriarchal values that supported apartheid (see Salazar 2001). The press, muzzled under apartheid, is considered alongside other media (especially independent community-based, albeit commercial broadcasting since the deregulation of the mid-90s), the main gatekeeper of democratic communication, relaying and shaping values of the democratic interface. Communication is truly perceived as a freedom won at a harsh price. The print media in South Africa (by and large controlled by either the (foreign) Independent group — mainly English-speaking — or Naspers — Afrikaans-speaking — as far as dailies and weeklies are concerned, and by international groups like Hachette-Filipacchi and Condé-Nast in the ever expanding market of glossy magazines) are perceived as major agents of shaping democratic values, especially the notion of "freedom." Pronouncements by the government (especially by the current Deputy-President) that the press should act "responsibly," and by Members of Parliament (notably the ANC majority) that the press "misrepresents" them, are largely disregarded by the public. At the same time, in the wake of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, whose amnesty committee is currently closing its investigation, an analogous inquest into how the contemporary press behaves towards racism led to a vigorous, yet short-lived, debate in 2000. It highlighted the degree of press freedom (to tell the Human Rights Commissioners that they were wrong) and the freedom of the reading public regarding such a debate; at the same time, it suggested how most journalists — across racial lines — were assertive of

the apodeictic link between press freedom and individual freedom, and of newspapers as the main agencies of empowering citizens to feel free.

However, a fundamental question of agency must be posed: Has freedom of the press and communication about/in a democratic ecology of deliberation enhanced the agency of citizens? Has print-media communication been harnessed to nurture the new democracy? Has the public sphere been enriched or simply played upon by the newly-found freedom of the press in acquiring at last what was denied it and the public: the power to communicate?

Strategies of Newspapers for a "Communicative Empowerment" of Readers

I would like to take the example of three different engagement strategies developed by three contrasting print media actors to position themselves as agencies for democracy and communication; both aspects are subsumed under a common belief that freedom and communication imply that the press must precisely devise strategies of engagement.

(1) The first one — drawn from the fashion print media — concerns the editorial trajectory of *Elle South Africa*. *Elle*'s appearance on the South African scene in 1996 (the year the Constitution was formally introduced) as the first African edition was a startling move. It signalled the re-entry of glamour and imagination on a scale only *Elle* or *Vogue* could offer to social perceptions of black women, specifically, in a democracy.

The first cover of *Elle* in April 1996 featured a South African top model, Georgina Grenville, one in a long line of South African beauties. Images of glamour as elements in the construction of "South-African-ness" are part of a popular deliberation of the nature of South African identity. Although their social history remains to be fully investigated, there are many suggestions in place, which help better comprehend the role and location of *Elle* as a deliberative force and agent of nation building.

For instance, most South Africans are aware that South Africa holds a special place in the social history of female beauty/autonomy, as canonised in the press. The conservative Afrikaner town of Krugersdorp produced Kathy Keeton (1939-1997), who rose in 1965 from being South Africa's first "exotic" dancer in Paris's Pigalle, to creating a glamour media empire centred on *Penthouse*. In 1994 she received the Ellis Island award for the greatest community contribution by a non-native American, having collected in the course of her media career the New York City Community Award for her efforts with black children in Harlem. Nevertheless, the choice of a white "icon" by *Elle* for the cover of its first African venture was an odd marketing strategy.[2] A year later (1/12, March 1997) the cover showed the face of a "coloured"[3] model, Meg Petersen (as opposed to "black" in terms of South African perceptions), before returning to Georgina Grenville for issue 2/1. On the second-year cover (3/1, April 1998) *Elle* featured no less than three black models. Over the span of one year (not counting the launch issue), *Elle*'s editorial trajectory projects a shift in cover models as a potent marker in a developing argument regarding black women (meaning here non-white) as democratic free agents and empowered citizens.

Beyond this visual rhetoric, however, *Elle* engaged in a regular survey of South African women as citizens in "feature" articles. Thus, titles such as "We are family" (1/1), "Gifted, Black, Female" (1/12), and "Women Who've Changed Their Lives" (2/1) indicate a dynamic vision, empowerment, progress, accomplishment, and, therefore, change; they also suggest that women as citizens are free agents and able communicators and underscore the tenor of an argument concerning South African women as citizens and their ability to express themselves and communicate freely.

In "We are Family" (*Elle*, 1/1, April 1996, 44-50) four grandmother-mother-granddaughter groupings are presented to mirror the evolution of South Africa in the personal lives of three generations of women, from pre-apartheid to nascent post-apartheid. Interestingly enough, the racial ratio partly reflects *Elle*'s choice or prejudice noted above; included are two white groups, balanced by one black and one Indian grouping[4]. The prejudice is not without self-critique, however, as the two white groupings are culturally different, they are Afrikaans and South-African English. There is no coloured grouping. Taking this qualification into consideration, readers, by and large, will respond well to the feature. The four matrilineal groupings act like rhetorical commonplaces. They help readers to "take stock" of racial apartheid classifications, once deemed incontrovertible. At the same time — because some of the interviewees, particularly the grandmothers, have lived eventful lives (two of them as political activists) — such commonplaces for identification are also charged with exemplary functions at two rhetorical levels, as reference and model. In short, they are value-laden, which is the purpose of "We are family." Nevertheless, the rhetorical strategy of the feature is such that it will not lead readers beyond identification and stocktaking. The granddaughters' narratives are, indeed, marked by semantic traits that point to the future without actually describing it ("dreaming of", "ambition to") leaving the trajectory open-ended. Why? Because the response will only be provided by the shaping of perceptions as elaborated in *Elle*'s editorial strategy.

One response, on a dynamic curve, is provided by "Gifted, Black, Female..." (1/12, March 1997, 48-52). The unfinished title is completed on the first page of the article by the phrase "& tired of dressing the corporate window," while "black" is printed in oversized characters. The feature tackles head-on the labour question of affirmative action (both black and female); but as this is a glamour magazine, it locates this thorny issue in the mythical "corporate world," where the process of empowerment and affirmative action appointments has been riddled with accusations of tokenism and reverse racism, while remaining singularly male-oriented.

In rhetorical terms, the option chosen is a fiction — a *plasma* (Cassin's term 1995, 470-512, in her reading of the Sophists and democratic communication); it is a narration of "things that have not taken place but are told like things that have taken place, that is: a narrative that carries the qualifications of reality but is not a *historia*, an event, a real life-story (like an ethnographic survey). Contrary to the women presented in issue 1/1, Thandi, the heroine of issue 1/12, is a fabricated character, designed for young, black, urban, female graduates to identify with her. The text is all the more convincing, since it is narrated by "Dr Adele Thomas" (from a leading business school), a female voice of authority who mixes factual and value statements in a narration that evolves in the present tense. The narrative is that of a thwarted career — the granddaughter's shattered dream — and, by way

of a large insert in the concluding section, a carefully-worded explanation of what constitutes a sound policy of "managing diversity" (to quote one such policy of "training and development" at a large para-statal company). It is peculiar that a glamour magazine warns "grand daughters" (who embody future South African women) about the dangers of glamour in career decisions and stresses the imperative need for unglamorous "training and development." The argument is effective precisely because the magazine presents unselfishly a possible scenario for women's development in a democracy.

The "real" scenario (since a "plasma" it is just that, a "scenario"), according to *Elle*, is proposed under "Women Who've Changed Their Lives" (2/1, April 1997, 40-44). From despondency to independence, daughters now speak (narrating in the first person) about how they have overcome the (fictitious) pitfalls of affirmative action and changed their lives — in short, "empowered" themselves. The piece consists of a series of short narratives of roughly four hundred words each by women in the age 24 to 38, and representative in terms of "racial" perceptions. The argument is apparently contained in the simple story telling of well educated or well connected young women, who have moved from a chartered future to a self-determined change. As a result, they are "empowered" and live happy lives. This fiction relies on the elimination of two factors that were determinant in the two previous features: the familial example set by "mothers" and the expectations set by government-driven "affirmative action."

The reportage discards, indeed, two factors that can rhetorically be ascribed to a single category (the commonplace of authority vested on "mothers" and "affirmative action"). It argues for personal independence, private autonomy, and individual choice. The hidden argument is all the more powerful in that most of the jobs are not "glamorous" (Aids-worker, Laundromat owner, and electrical engineer are balanced against a career in the still infant South African film industry). The feature is, therefore, forward-looking rather than reminiscent of the past and displays a social argumentation about South Africa and the need to be unencumbered by history. The argument finds (temporary) editorial closure in the remarkable "Special Second Birthday Issue" (3/1, April 1998) whose cover contains no less than three faces of black models, Nompumelela, Lenah and Pumla, above the caption, "Celebrate Africa!" The movement is complete, as it is the fulfilment of a rhetorical brief to convince readers of the shaping of South African women into Africans. To follow Eugene Garver's analysis of rhetoric's ends (1994, 35), it is clear that *Elle*'s strategy is "kinetic;" it aims — over a trajectory (*kinesis*) — to persuade its market and achieve its given end — to turn profits. By doing so, *Elle* helps shape perceptions regarding the autonomy of citizens concerning race, as well as regarding the ability of the press to express such changes, perhaps more persuasively than social policies. *Elle* affirms and confirms a belief in the press as an autonomous agent for communicating and realising freedom — in this case, the freedom of women in a democratic South Africa.

(2) A second case will be drawn from the sphere of mass circulation newspapers. Shaping a nation requires, in rhetorical terms, a process of popular argumentation in conjunction with and beyond public argumentation. The latter rests largely on single "orators," whose function it is to deliberate and perform, argue and show the way, as well as to give a nation a stock of tropes for policies to reflect on or detract from in the process of nation building. In contrast, and beyond the largely

ritualistic and controlled "mild voice of reason," which most liberal theorists believe in, popular argumentation and communication, in order not to be a fiction, need to be disseminated and multi-authored insofar as media are relays between the "people's voice" and the initial *inventio* by "orators." Rhetorically, this process can be termed "epideictic." The people are led not so much to reflect, ponder, and deliberate as to "demonstrate," to "show off" (*epideixis*) their phrasing of communal values and, by the same token, to perform these values, to give them rhetorical substance, "to own the process." This epideictic coil ensures a sense of legitimacy for those who control the media by whom it is channelled, be they print or audio-visual media, or politicians.

For this reason I must turn to *True Colours* — a 1997 nation-wide reportage in the major English-language group of newspapers. (*True Colours* was published as a supplement to the *Cape Times, The Star, The Mercury, Pretoria News, Diamond Fields Advertiser*, belonging to the Independent group of newspapers owned by an Irish press baron, Tony O'Reilly.) In April 1997, the Shell Oil Company sponsored a nation-wide reportage about what it means to be South African, a journey to the heartland of the "rainbow nation." Two reporters travelled 8,000 kilometres, met with one thousand South Africans, and visited a hundred towns and cities. They took photos and recorded interviews. Their strategy was obvious: to bring together the new South African citizens and make them communicate "plasmatically," to impact readers with new values, communication, and expression by "letting things off your chest." In fact, the corporate and public agendas were closely associated in a series of slogans that framed the report: "Go well. Go Shell" was combined with "Empowering South Africans into the future" to suggest that Shell can empower readers — both as gasoline buyers and citizens. This argumentative structure also frames the title of the report, "True Colours," a dubious pun whereby the "real people" show the "true colours" of the "rainbow nation," speaking and showing their "true colours" — e.g., what they really are. The "true colours" of democracy reside in the power and the wish to communicate with one another via the press report.

This strategy epitomises many other such campaigns and surveys, a careful collocation of corporate and civic ethos that relies on word manipulation (injecting new meaning into cliché expressions through cross-pollination) to seemingly make the readers (as a metonymic part of the nation) identify with interviewees. *True Colours*, because of its detailed brief and careful composition and wide success, is an exemplar or blueprint for subsequent reports.

The 8-page supplement contains an average of 25 excerpts of interviews per page, with visuals (photographs of the interviewees), and about one page devoted to one of South Africa's nine provinces, presented in the order of the reporters' itinerary (Western Cape, Northern Cape, Free State, North-West, Northern Province, Mpumalanga, Gauteng, Kwa-Zulu Natal, Eastern Cape). The front page is a complex piece of visual rhetoric. Below the title, the reader finds a quotation from Nelson Mandela ("We must regularly take stock, critically and honestly of the progress we are making"). It lends the supplement authority and places it squarely within nation building, where it functions like a Biblical text in relation to a sermon. It sets the audience's mind on track, focuses attention, and by implication, places the prime communicator (the supplement) in the place of the quotation's

author, a pole of authority. The page contains footer, inscribed with both the name (Shell) and the logo of the company, together with a caption, "Empowering South Africans into the future". This is a "forum" for expression, a template for democratic deliberation.

The front page displays four photographs under the Mandela quotation of three middle-aged, working-class men and one woman. The top left photograph is of a balding white male, an Afrikaans farmer, with slightly protruding ears, and an anxious look on his face; in the top right position is a smiling, elderly black male with sunglasses and a tweed cap; the bottom left space is filled by a grinning, coloured male, who wears a fisherman's cap; while the bottom right corner is occupied by a woman of aboriginal descent in a scarf and with the quizzical and restrained look typical of many rural people. The head-and-shoulders portraits are unidentified; in contrast to the photographs of interviewees, they tend once more towards the abstract: they are faces whence words come out. They are, truly, "speakers."

Below these portraits, readers find a map to show that the reporters set out from Cape Town (the "Mother City"); they travelled around the edges of the country, along the West Coast of the Cape, up to the northern borders; then from the Kimberley diamond fields, they cut inland eastwards across the Free State, then backtracked to the Johannesburg-Pretoria region (Gauteng), before crossing to the Indian ocean coast (Kwazulu-Natal), and ending their journey in the Eastern Cape. The map gives the impression that the country has been circumnavigated — neatly circumscribed, or "framed". The "route" is supplemented by the "brief."

The "brief" is intended to guide readers; or, as its conclusion puts it (in bold type), "Listen carefully; maybe you will hear yourself;" it is intended to make readers identify with interviewees (in the persuasive simulacrum of a printed text that "speaks"). The brief is another neat example of historical retrodiction (Paul Veyne's expression); it offers current tropes on the democratic instauration together with a concerted effort to erase anything than would seem divisive — given that "diversity" must be assimilated into "one."

> *Three years ago millions of South Africans voted for the first time* [retrodiction: previous racial disenfranchisement is erased from this statement], *ending more than 300 years of white government* [retrodiction: apartheid is diluted within a complex colonial history that goes back more than "300 years"; the immediate cause is once more erased] *and of decades of conflict between the state and its citizens* [retrodiction: the dividing line was within the nation rather than between "state" and "citizenry;" the "state" was not the abstract entity readers are led to believe it was]. *The peaceful political transition* [retrodiction: the transition was not peaceful, and was the result of sometimes brutal negotiations] *was termed a miracle* [note the passive voice - authority is called upon] *and the new South Africa christened* [note the value-laden term] *The Rainbow Nation* [note the definite article and capitalisation] (*True Colours*, 1).

This series of apparently formal, impartial, objective statements seems nondebatable unless readers start deconstructing them and leads to a number of questions ultimately addressed to readers, who will find the answers in the interviews. The process is dialogic.

> *Are you satisfied with the country's progress? How do you rate President Nelson Mandela's performance? How do you define yourself? Have relationships between black and white South Africans changed? Is apartheid really gone? Are we one nation?* (*True Colours*, 1.)

These questions operate on four levels: they address individuals, citizens, diversity, and "oneness." They do not examine the initial statements (which function as hidden premises); for instance, the notion of the "state," which has been disqualified as the sole cause of conflict in the past, remains unquestioned. As a result, the only question regarding power is made personal and concerns Nelson Mandela — not his administration, the ANC, or its tripartite alliance with the Communist Party and the Congress of South African Trade Unions. At work is a rhetoric of consensus, based on the *loci* of "virtue" — either of readers or politicians — reduced to one singular expression. In other words, the brief begs the very question it purports to pose. It is, in its own rhetoric, pure "rainbow-ism."

Further, the lay-out at the bottom of the cover page is repeated on every page, except the last one, with a different caption; for instance: "Many rights, one constitution;" "Many voices, one parliament;" "Many cultures, one nation;" "Many parties, one democracy;" "Many paths, one direction;" or "Many ideals, one freedom" (*True Colours*, 2-7). The captions, placed below interviews and photographs, are rhetorically a proof by induction. They infer from dispersed illustrations an abstract and general conclusion, suggesting that readers first identify with concrete persons and values before moving to a cognitive level. These captions also work horizontally, as the eye moves from page to page, and shape an argument that is, by contrast, wholly abstract. Serialised, these captions offer yet another type of proof: a series of aphorisms which, once re-assembled, constitute an argument regarding what is meant by expressing the newly acquired freedom of expression. This presentation is an argumentative device, inducing readers to interpret the captions as a collocation of predications: Many voices is one parliament is many cultures is one nation ... is one freedom — or simply "freedom."

Interestingly, instead of a caption the last page features a large reproduction of a painting by an artist who had returned from exile; it is entitled "Freedom through Education." The painting (in the Social Realist manner of official Eastern European art of the communist era) provides an iconic summary of the captions, a lesson heavily underlined by the painting's explanatory notes ("This vibrant and compelling oil painting ... reflects humanity's quest for freedom"), which pick up where the last caption ended — on freedom. The painting is also self-referential; it extols Shell's Education Service (funds for teachers' development), and — by *implicatio* — the educational nature of *True Colours.* The magazine offers a complex narrative structure of "expressions" that helps bind together the multi-vocity of citizen agency.

The first narrative feature of *True Colours* is the spontaneous unfolding of personal stories concerning identity. Replies vary to the question, "how do you define yourself;" they suggest that the nomenclature of racial classification, adumbrated in the Population Registration Act of 1950, has been adroitly re-appropriated by South Africans and given fresh twists. Self-identifications thus range from "Cape Coloured" to "Tswana," or from "quite white" to "African" (in one instance, the informant is an Afrikaner), from "Boer" to "Child of God," from "English" to "Afrikaner," and often simply, "South African." A remarkable feature of this unto-

ward list of community identifications is its fluidity. The 1950 classification not only recognised "white," "coloured," and "native" categories — hereafter refined by government ethnographers to include sub-categories such as "Cape Coloured," "Griqua," and "Asian" or "Zulu," and "Xhosa." To decline one's identity as a "Boer" (Afrikaans farmer) is an act of defiance, whereas to simply affirm a "Child of God" status does away with classification altogether. The narrative of identity commonplaces offers readers the possibility of having a "voice," however singular it may be. The underlying argument at work in the suite of identities is that all are indiscriminately equal in the act of communication.

Another feature of the reportage is the visual and rhetorical juxtaposition of exemplary communicators. For instance, as readers open the newspaper, pages two and three show side-by-side photographs of an elderly man and a young black boy; the old man tends his rose garden and declares that he is "quite white" ("For me it makes no difference. They [coloured farmers] can call me coloured or white"), while the boy shows off his ugly, scared leg and explains that "white women's dogs do bite [only Blacks]." The persuasive intent is to show — as the eye scans the double page — the effect of racial prejudice and how it can be overcome (by admitting to the operative "quite"). A similar diptych provides a similar argument (on pages six and seven). The left picture shows a white family (father, mother, and small daughter) hitch-hiking; they are poor white farm-labourers who tell a tale of abuse and exploitation at the hands of AWB (white supremacist) farmers and declare that the little help they received had come from black people, in whom they now place their hopes. To the right are photos of three middle-class Kwazulu-Natal inhabitants, two women (one "Asian" and one "white") and a man (a "South African Indian"). Their testimonies offer a counterweight to the optimism and trust of poor whites in their black compatriots; the "Indian" shopkeeper admits to being racist by education, the "South African Indian" berates the decline in standards of hygiene (due to the influx of the black population), and the "white" woman pins all her hopes on Nelson Mandela, whom she "has met twice." The logical purpose of the diptych is to show readers how racial clichés can be challenged once white people are presumably confronted with reality. It also subtly turns upside down perceptions of wealth, and, more radically, of social solidarity.

The rhetoric of the reportage can be best summed up as the creation of a fiction: a scenario for public deliberation regarding identity and freedom of expression. This scenario has been facilitated by the format of the reportage itself. Readers who do not want to read all of the narratives can simply scan through captions (which are quotations from answers) and photographs of the informants. As captions range from the comical ("And then the paw-paw hit the fan") to the downright offensive ("Mandela ... was born a kaffir[5] and will die a kaffir"), together with a fair showing of sensible remarks ("It is getting better but it will take a long time"), they offer readers fundamental commonplace positions. Indeed, the report intimates, "The nation has talked, in your very terms, now think about it." The "miracle" is that we can say these things to each other without having to resort to murder or oppression. The press intimates that it can truly shape freedom and make communication happen, as is the case in a "normal" democracy.

(3) A third case is offered by the official mouthpiece of the Constitutional Assembly, which drafted the Constitution (1994 to 1996). The drafting itself was preceded by an extensive Public Participation Programme supported and publicised

until May 1996 by the Constitutional Assembly with the aid of an official newsletter, *Constitutional Talk* (after initial problems, it was regularly and widely distributed).[6] *Constitutional Talk* — besides informing the public about progress made by the six "Theme Committees" in charge of deliberating on major areas of the Constitution — helped run "educational programmes" with which the Constitutional Assembly attempted to meet communities, explain its work, and gather as many "ideas" as possible from direct "input."[7] The tone of *Constitutional Talk* is somewhat self-congratulatory.

Truly significant is the pictographic or visual rhetoric (Edwards and Winkler 1997) chosen by the *Constitutional Talk* media team to offer its readers (who were supposed to be "every South African") a picture of themselves at work on the Constitution. The format follows that of the comic strip genre. These strips always appear on the back pages of *Constitutional Talk* to summarise, illustrate, or develop problems or questions raised in each issue. This pictographic style recurs in two summary-style documents, *You and Building the New Constitution*, published at the time of the Public Participation Programme phase and *You and the Constitution*, a booklet released together with a pocket-size text of the Constitution, in a package available in 11 languages and distributed widely to the public (from March 17, 1997 until the close of the Constitutional Assembly, on Human Rights Day, March 21, 1997).

The subsequent strategy of communication and constitution writing is worth analysing in rhetorical terms, since it allows us to scrutinise how talking "freely" is seen as fundamental to agency.

The pictographs on the cover of these booklets are rather interesting: the first one uses construction iconography: ladders, scaffolding, brick and mortar, crowned by a billboard being erected and covered with a poster, announcing the title of the booklet. The metaphor is obvious: to read the booklet (which helps each citizen to build the Public Participation Programme) is to read and write the Constitution. The second pictograph shows two Parliamentary columns transformed into a pastoral or ethnic style of architecture, revealing a vista of a valley and a green hill topped by a tree, under the sun, while people clutching the Constitution stream from the valley, through the arch (crowned by a thatched roof and a hovering dove). From hard work to leisure, from materialism to spirituality, from process to product: the sequence of pictographs is clear; in fact, its clarity is disconcerting.

Indeed, the "we" was "constructed" by the comic strips. Two examples may serve to illustrate the workings of such visual rhetoric — the representation of the nation at work on its own fundamental discourse, or the nation as free discourse. In strict rhetorical terms, the Public Participation Programme can be termed, once more, a *plasma* (Cassin 1995, 470-512), a narration of "things that have not taken place but are told like things that have taken place." The cartoons suggest an imaginary speech, whereby people are seen as giving expression to the nation-to-be. The cartoons thus constitute plasma — a scenario for reality; that is, before the Constitution is at work, it is already "in the works" and "in the words."

This process is expressed by two sets of metaphors ("flow" and "scaffolding") which lead to extolling two rhetorical situations: dialogue between citizens and the iconic figure of the President as communicator.

The trope of the "flow." Until the launch of the Public Participation Programme in mid-February 1995, the key metaphor of constitution building was "the road to

a new constitution," as the Constitutional Assembly actually took to the road as part of its "educational programme." Comic strips show how a submission flows through the system, from posting to sorting to having six characters (emblems of the six themes committees) remitting collated proposals to the Constitutional Assembly, which in turn hands out the "draft Constitution" to a female figure; this embodiment of the Republic addresses the reader (who is in theory among those mailing submissions and starting the flow of processing) by saying, "If you are not satisfied with the Draft Constitution, you'll have another chance to say what you want." The road metaphor takes on an even less arbitrary meaning when, in another comic strip, two female characters — one of them in search of a job — go on an errand that takes them through "People's park, all welcome" (where they encounter a character carrying a placard claiming parental rights for gays), to an employment office, where gender job discrimination is practised, to the steps of the Constitutional Court. This comic strip underscores the enjoyment of the new freedoms entrenched in the 34 Constitutional principles.

We are dealing here with narrativness that stand on the margins of text and image. *Constitutional Talk* offers readers a protocol for expressing themselves. The "flow" of expression by the citizens-in-their-own-making is an invitation to enter the process of participation, and is one of the means by which the rhetoric of free expression does become embodied in real acts of agency: *plasma* propelling *historia*.

The trope of "scaffolding." From March to June — until the winding down of the Public Participation Programme — the iconography of "scaffolding" replaces "flow" to illustrate the 34 Constitutional Principles against which the Constitution will be tested. The metaphor is that of the scaffold which supports the construction of a communal house — the Constitution. Here, everyone is at work. Commonplaces are created; for instance, washing new windows is tagged "transparency." A house of commonplaces is being built — a house of values and words shared in the construction of the Constitution itself. The "constitution" is etymologically and symbolically an act of construction. The horizontality of the first trope is now superseded by the verticality of the second trope, enhancing the building process as the Public Participation Programme is unfolding.

Yet, as the Public Participation Programme closes down and the Constitutional Assembly is about to draft the text, a new trope emerges: the dialogue. The latter was always inherent in the tropes of expression and citizen agency, as characters (whether walking or laying bricks) were engaged in question-answer types of conversation. However, now that the Constitutional Assembly is the only dialogical site of debate, the comic strip tries to keep alive the rapport between the Constitutional Assembly's prerogative of dialogue and the people's freedom of expression. However, the key issue of persuasion is the very much absent from the Public Participation Programme.

The *Constitutional Talk* team resolves this difficulty by resorting to presidential *ethos*. The final image of the comic strip in *Constitutional Talk* 11 of 1995 shows the President's hand affixing his signature to the draft; moreover, he is not signing "Nelson Mandela," but uses his affectionate nickname, "Madiba." *Constitutional Talk* 12 goes one step further: it does away with comic strips and replaces them — on the back page — with a full-page picture of Mandela making a call on his cellular telephone to the Constitutional Assembly talk-line. The rhetorical move is a

clever one. From the "ethical" signature and the "ethical" portrait — the former amplified by the latter — from the hand that signs to the hand that holds a portable phone, from assenting voice to common voice, this single-image icon sums up the strategy behind *Constitutional Talk:* to assert the presence in everyone of the President as the hidden *persona* of the process. In other words, the "rainbow nation," the "constitution" of the nation, and the very means to communicate these notions, inscribe in the *ethos* of the President the "friendship that binds citizens" — the *politike philia* — of an Aristotelian democratic theory. What is at work in these images is the creation of a "rhetorical link" based on expression and communication between the people, the Constitutional Assembly, and the President.

The significance of the *Constitutional Talk*'s strategy is inescapable: it is a deliberate strategy of the founding legislators to stimulate popular engagement on an unprecedented scale, and to effectuate constitutional agency[8] by simulating communication as a bedrock of democracy. I contend that if the intention was more on the side of "simulation" than "stimulation," the strategy was short-sighted as it helped shape what has become a non-negotiable element of the South African democracy: that popular agency and freedom of expression, buttressed by the media, are essential to limiting the power of the state.

Conclusion

In conclusion I would like to join the three cases. The *Elle* feature, the *True Colours* survey, and *Constitutional Talk* share a fundamental belief that citizen agency is rooted in the ability of the print media to procure sites and roles for citizens. Public deliberation in a transforming society that is busy creating citizens is presented as feeding on the necessary fiction of autonomy. In turn, journalistic strategies that evoke agency and freedom to communicate are not postulated as downsides to democracy. Their "plasmatic" value resides in their assumed ability to enhance private intervention in the public ecology of democratic deliberation, and presents citizens with patterns and near-ethnographic models for personal and effective communication. Whether this process is autonomous or not remains to be seen. In my opinion it is an aporia. The question is not whether public expression in an emerging democracy is an autonomous process or not, but, more fundamentally, whether public agents of expression and communication are able to evoke *simulacra* that simulate autonomy and, in the end, help foster a democratic culture.

Notes:

1. I refer here to my paper in the proceedings of the international conference, "Rhetoric-Constitution-Agency" organised by Maurice Charland, Concordia University, Montreal, September 2000.

2. I place "icon" in quotation marks because, unless one reflects critically on the Peircean tripartition, icon/index/symbol, the common use of the term is quite unhelpful. An icon is on the same semiotic level as an onomatopoeia or a diagram (see Peirce 1932).

3. "Coloured" (South African English orthography) is roughly equivalent in South Africa to "métis" in French.

4. "Indian" is denotative of people linked with India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh, mainly settled in the Kwa-Zulu-Natal Province on the Indian Ocean.

5. In South African English the epithet is the equivalent of "nigger."

6. *Constitutional Talk* 7, May 19-June 9, 1995 claims that of 150,000 copies of Issue 7, 100,000 were distributed to taxi commuters, 45,000 by mail, 4,000 at public meetings, 1,000 to the Constitutional Assembly members, staff and visitors, which apparently "means that an average of 750,000 people will read about the Constitution."

7. *Constitutional Talk* 8, June 9-June 29, 1995, quotes a survey by the Community Agency for Social Inquiry which shows that 65 % of adult South Africans are aware of the existence of the Constitutional Assembly.

8. At the "Rhetoric-Constitution-Agency" conference.

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