

Why Huey's 'New State Capitol Building' Ain't a Penis, or, Dispelling the  
Demagogic Phallacy

PRESENTATION SCRIPT

*Part One: Huey Pierce Long and the Red Stick*

Across the street from my home in the historic neighborhood known as Spanish Town, Louisiana's so-called "New" State Capital towers thirty stories above the Mississippi, seated in an impressive series of sunken gardens and carefully groomed shrubbery. I had never seen the building before moving to Baton Rouge, and shortly after my arrival in July of 2002, I walked across the street to experience the monument for myself. I was overcome with the kind of adolescent bemusement immortalized in the Washington Monument scene from the 1996 theatrical hit, *Beavis and Butthead Do America*.

Aside from providing me with a perennial reference for dick jokes, what is particularly interesting about this structure, this *Das Ding*, is the way in which Huey is rhetorically articulated to it. The following description

from a field guide to the state capital is typical of the kind of rhetoric circulating in the Louisianian imaginary:

Huey P. Long [was] one of the most dynamic personalities ever to flash across the American political scene . . . . Ironically, he was mortally wounded in a still-unexplained melee inside the capitol, the magnificent structure he conceived . . . . Even today, more than four decades after his untimely death, his presence still looms large over the entire edifice.

At least in part, the haunting of Huey is guaranteed by the close proximity of his interred and presumably RIGID corpse, upon which a large, bronze statue of the demagogue was erected, facing the state capital, with one hand thrown back in astonishment, and the other resting atop a scaled model of the building's tower. Tellingly, the hand resting on the model is just a foot shy of where we expect it to be.

Now, my paper today is not about the tower or the tombstone in their singularity, but rather, their dialogue. The conversation between these two monuments is about gifts and gifting, and consequently, the rhetoric of responsibility. With regards to Derrida, I want to meditate on the status of

the state capital as a Freudian "gift," as a cause of desire and delight, to help advance a theory of southern demagoguery. My thesis is that demagogic rhetoric is goaded by the psychological structures of neurosis, and that understanding these structures helps us to explain the complexities of the figure of the southern demagogue. To this end I first discuss the formal, symbolic meaning of the phallus as a object of power, and then move to a discussion of the neuroses of obsession and hysteria.

*Part Two: The Neuroses of Demagoguery*

Somewhere in the middle of *Naked Lunch*, Burroughs relates the story of the man who teaches his asshole how to speak. "His whole abdomen would move up and down," writes Burroughs, "farting out the words. It was unlike anything I had ever heard." Unfortunately, though, his asshole is not a great companion and the story ends miserably. The asshole grew teeth and liberated itself from his pants, demanding equal rights. "It would get drunk, too," writes Burroughs, "and have crying jags nobody loved it and it wanted to be kissed same as any other mouth." Eventually, the man's mouth sealed up and his anus took over until, finally, the eyes died too.

Burroughs scatological humor teaches us something about the symbolic here: first, the original place of all gifts, the anus, marks our entry into economy, broadly conceived. This is why the man who taught his asshole how to talk developed an act and took it on the road, demanding money in exchange for shit. Second, and more important, the symbolic, the system of exchange, is more in control of us than we are of it. In other words, the *symbolic structures us*. The truth of Burroughs story is not its literal meaning, but it's figurative teaching: in the END, we are slaves to the symbolic—and then, perhaps, we die.

Understood as a symbolic structure, then, despite all resemblances, the “New State” capital is *not a penis*. Were this so, the architects would have placed a fountain on top. Huey's phallus is obviously not a penis, but rather, as Lacan would eventually suggest, a symbolic form that represents desire itself, the signifier that does not have a signified. The phallus is a structure, and therefore, a *culturally constructive normative* that is associated with the male sex, but *not by nature*. The relationship of the phallus to the penis is analogous to the vexed relationship between "feminine style" and the female sex: whereas the penis has been construed as the biological mark of maleness, the phallus has *no essential or necessary relationship to biological*

*sex*. In fact, one of key benefits of psychoanalysis is precisely the fact that language or discourse and biology are radically alien to one another.

In psychoanalysis the phallus is originally an object of barter in childhood development, synonymous with babies, feces, and money, which are objects that children observe being exchanged among adults. The child learns that these objects are articulated to love and favor, and thereby she is introduced to the notion of economy. As Burroughs has taught us, her introduction to the logic of exchange is initially through the rites of potty-training; in exchange for producing shit, she is given praise and love. After one's entry into adulthood, this imaginary phallus gives way to the symbolic phallus, an object that can represent both power (principally for us, the power to speak) and its abject absence. In short, the phallus is what we would like to possess make the Other love us.

In this respect the history of the development of Louisiana's "New" State Capital building is particularly telling: despite the fact that the building is overdetermined as "Huey's Monument," it was not designed by him, nor did he oversee its construction. That honor goes to the architectural firm of Weiss, Dreyfous and Seiferth. Huey simply insisted that the building be a

skyscraper depicting Louisiana's history. That the monument so completely cues the phallus, then, is *not* so much a consequence of Huey's desire, but rather, the result of a popular hunger. "Huey's Monument" is a colossal phallus precisely because it represents the desperation of his constituency and the soul-deep need of the impoverished; it represents what Huey Pierce Long represented to them, a complete self-made man impervious to want and need, a creature of absolute symbolic and economic autonomy, a masterful signifier without a signified. The New State Capital is metonymy—or better, synecdoche—for a man whose visage rested alongside none other than Jesus Christ above the fireplaces of the good people of Louisiana.

Because Huey's phallus was given to him, I submit that demagoguery might be understood as a sacred gift bestowed by discourse, a lively mythic construct that animated Huey—and ultimately killed him.

The problem with rhetorical research on demagoguery to date is its one-sidedness. Much of the rhetorical scholarship on southern demagoguery obsesses on the skills of the rhetor. According to Logue and Dorgan, the southern demagogue has been studied in a number of ways, yet

central to each is the role of emotional appeals, which are consistently described in a pejorative manner. If we characterize the emotional appeal as an attempt to channel and invite desire, a key concept of psychoanalysis, however, a helpful framework emerges.

The framework is as follows: demagoguery can be understood as a desirous relation between the hysterical and the obsessive, which means that demagoguery is essentially a neurotic relationship between a given rhetor and an audience. And neurosis comes in two types: obsession and hysteria. Let me address the features of each in turn.

The extreme obsessional neurotic is an individual who is convinced of his or her completeness and autonomy, and who is resolutely determined to deny the notion of an unconscious or any unconscious desire. Bruce Fink uses an intriguing imaginary scenario to describe the relationship of the obsessive to the object of his desiring: The obsessive neurotic is the kind of person who, while making love to his or her partner, arranges for another love interest to phone during the act. He or she answers the phone and has a conversation while still making love. Such a scenario represents an obsessive fantasy of autonomy: by answering the phone the obsessive erases

or denies the Other as having some claim to him or her. The obsessive cannot tolerate the fact that the Other makes demands on him or her, and by extension, that he or she is not in complete, conscious control. The obsessive fears fading, and for this reason the object of his or her desire is *never enough*. That is to say, the obsessive is like an addict of sorts, and for him others act as various, interchangeable containers for a desire that cannot be achieved—an *impossible desire*. For practicing clinicians, obsessives tend to be men, but not always.

Hysterics, on the other hand, deny or erase themselves, continually establishing an unsatisfied desire. The hysteric identifies with the Other as if he or she were the object of his desires. Or in other words, the hysteric desires as if he or she were someone else, identifying with the gaze of the other, kind of like an out-of-body experience. Freud paints a scenario that helps us understand the hysteric--who, not surprisingly, is usually female. The butcher's wife notices that her faithful and loving husband flirts with another woman one day that is completely not his type. Later that night she dreams that she *is* this other woman, literally identifying with her as her husband's object of desire. Consequently, the hysteric's subject position involves a detour via a man, and the pleasure of her self-erasure is derived

by self-deprivation. Whereas the obsessive is singular or monumentally phallic, the hysteric is implicated, as the pop group New Order has said, in a "bizarre love triangle," a circuit of desire that always implicates a mediating thirdness.

Given this description of the neuroses, we can begin to understand demagoguery as the interplay or dialectic between an obsessional neurotic and a hysterical neurotic. The demagogue presents him or herself as a complete, autonomous individual with a tantalizing, emotional power, and his rhetoric will therefore harbor all the hallmarks of a lover who answers his cell phone while having sex. What has passed as charisma is thus better understood as a demagogue's ability not only to promise love with gifts, but his simultaneous ability to *withhold* his love, his ability to hint to audiences that *he may be insincere*. In other words, the desire the demagogue sets into motion is not reducible to fooling audiences with presents. What has been misunderstood about the rhetorical power of the demagogue is precisely his ability to deploy and maintain suspicion among his lovers, that he may possibly be insincere. Suspicion is pleasure.

Insofar as the obsessional demagogue engenders a circuit of desire, charisma becomes the ability to induce or incite hysteria. The demagogue hystericizes audiences, encouraging them to *see themselves as he claims to see them*. Another way to put this is that demagogues are successful and persuasive only to the extent that audiences derive pleasure from *never truly getting what they are promised*.

*Part Three: The Loaf, Finally Pinched*

In this essay I have attempted to situate demagogic rhetoric as a more constitutive process, ultimately weighting the power of demagoguery in the signifier—in the discourse and myth that animates people. Such a framework, I submit, requires a particular critical procedure: when critiquing the rhetoric of demagogues, our task is to make them more open to the Other and to point out the places in which they are dependent on the Other for existence. Our task is to fade the subject, to hystericize them, to demonstrate how the signifier overcomes their claims to autonomy.

To this end I have attempted to sketch the relationship between the New State Capital and Huey's Tombstone as an illustration of a deeper

rhetorical process. Although the monuments compose a binary, the hidden third here is the role of audience as a *hysteric* who identifies with the object of Huey's desire. The structures represent a circuit among, (a) the object of desire, which is a powerful politician and the love he hoards, (b) the object of his desire, which is political power, and (c) Louisianians—the classic, triangular model of hysteria. Louisianian's gave Huey what they thought he wanted, identifying with his gaze and his object of desire, identifying with what he wants. They gave him a phallic monument. They gave him an impossible, sublime object. And like the man who taught his asshole to speak, eventually, they gave him the gift of death.