

The Nature of Rhetorical Criticism

We live our lives enveloped in symbols. How we perceive, what we know, what we experience, and how we act are the results of our own symbol use and that of those around us. We distinguish between good and bad professors because one-keeps us awake and interested in the subject, and another does not. We see a movie and urge our friends to see it. We listen to a speech by a political candidate and find ourselves supporting her because of the humor and grace with which she presents her arguments and the compassion they reveal. We choose posters, prints, and paintings to decorate our homes that give us new ways of seeing. These are but a few examples of the symbols we encounter every day. As we do, we engage in a process of thinking about symbols, discovering how they work, why they affect us, and choosing to communicate in particular ways as a result of the options they present. This process is called rhetorical criticism, and this book is designed to provide the opportunity to explore the theory of and to develop skills in this process.

Rhetoric

A useful place to start in the study of rhetorical criticism is with an understanding of what rhetoric is. Many of the common uses of the word, rhetoric, have negative connotations. Rhetoric is commonly used to mean empty, bombastic language that has no substance. Political candidates and governmental officials often call for “action, not rhetoric,” from their opponents or the leaders of other nations. In other instances, rhetoric is used to mean flowery, ornamental speech that contains an abundance of metaphors and other figures of speech. These conceptions are not how rhetoric will be viewed in this book.

Here, rhetoric means the action humans perform when they use symbols for the purpose of communicating with one another. This definition suggests that four dimensions are of particular importance in conceptualizing rhetoric: (1) rhetoric is an action; (2) rhetoric is a symbolic action; (3) rhetoric is a human action; and (4) rhetoric functions to enable us to communicate with one another.

Action. When we engage in action, we are making conscious decisions about what to do. When we engage in rhetorical action, not only do we make conscious decisions to communicate, but we also make conscious choices from among our communicative options. The distinction between rhetorical and non-rhetorical action can be clarified with an example of someone who does not exercise regularly and who plays tennis for the first time in many years. Following the match, he tells his partner that he is out of shape and doesn't have much stamina. This is rhetorical activity because he selects symbolic strategies in an effort to explain to his partner how he is feeling, to suggest the source of his discomfort, and perhaps to rationalize his poor performance. The man also experiences an increased heart rate, a red face, and shortness of breath, but these changes in his bodily condition are not conscious choices. They communicate to his partner, just as his words do, but they are not actions he consciously wills and thus are not rhetorical.

Symbolic Action. Rhetoric is accomplished through a system of signs. In the simplest sense, a sign communicates when it is connected to another object. A distorted heart rhythm is connected to a heart attack. The freezing of water in winter is connected to a change in temperature. The word chair is connected to an object on which to sit. Some signs are symbolic; others are not. A non-symbolic sign is inherently connected to its physical referent in the way that changes in heart rate and rhythm are connected to a heart attack and the freezing of water is connected to a low temperature. All of these events are communication, but they are not rhetorical. A symbolic sign, in contrast, is only indirectly connected to its referent and is a human creation. The word chair has

no natural relationship to an object for sitting; it was invented by someone who needed to refer to such an object. Rhetoric involves the kinds of signs that are symbolic; it is the use of arbitrary symbols to communicate with other people. def.

Human Action. The symbols we study in rhetorical criticism are those that are created by human beings or are products of the human imagination. Natural objects and events are not appropriate objects of analysis because they are independent of human invention, will, and control. Thus, we do not criticize the Grand Canyon or anthuriums, even though we may judge them to be grand or beautiful and recognize that they do affect our thought and actions. People can use natural phenomena, however, as part of rhetorical action—they can use them in symbolic ways. The Sierra Club, for example, may use a photograph of the Grand Canyon in a membership-recruitment brochure, and a bouquet of anthuriums placed in the center of a table may be used to create a particular kind of decor; these constitute symbolic uses. Humans, then, use all sorts of non-rhetorical objects in rhetorical ways.

Likewise, communication among animals is not considered to constitute rhetoric. Some people debate whether or not symbol use is a characteristic that distinguishes humans from all other species of animals, pointing to recent research with chimpanzees and gorillas in which these animals have been taught to communicate using American Sign Language or other kinds of signs. The debate about whether symbols are uniquely human is unresolved and perhaps unresolvable. Such communication, however, involves such a difference in degree that whether or not it is also a difference in kind is largely irrelevant to the position that the human is the symbol-using animal. Furthermore, even if certain primates can be taught signs that operate in some fundamentally symbolic ways, these species do not create any substantial part of their reality through their use of symbols. Accordingly, humans are animals who engage in action and who use rhetoric. Birds, bees, and dolphins communicate, but they do not communicate rhetorically. The term, rhetor, then, as used here, is a human designer, creator, or producer of rhetoric such as a speaker, a writer, an architect, or a filmmaker.

Enables Communication. Rhetoric functions in a variety of ways to allow humans to communicate among themselves, and they do so for a variety of reasons. In some cases, we use rhetoric in an effort to persuade others—to encourage others to change in some way. In other instances, rhetoric is an invitation to understanding—we offer our perspective and invite others to enter our world and to see it as we do, not in the hope that they will adopt our perspective but so they can understand us and our perspective better. Sometimes, we use rhetoric simply as a means of self-discovery or for coming to self-knowledge. uses, rkey

We may articulate thoughts or feelings out loud to ourselves or in a journal or diary and, in doing so, come to know ourselves and perhaps come to new perspectives **on, or** make new decisions about our lives.

As we communicate with one another for these various reasons, we are creating, to some extent, a common world. Rhetoric is not simply the translation of some knowledge that we acquired somewhere else into a communicable form. It is the process by which our reality or our world comes into being; reality or knowledge of what is in the world is the result of communicating about it.

The notion that reality is created through rhetoric means that reality is not fixed. It changes according to the symbols we use to talk about it. What we count as “real” or as “knowledge” about the world depends on how we choose to label and talk about things. One example is in our use of terms to describe love. We commonly describe love as madness (“I’m crazy about him,” “She drives me out of *my* mind,” “He’s gone mad over her,” “I’m just wild about Harry”) or as magic (“She cast her spell over me,” “The magic is gone,” “I was entranced by him,” “She is *bewitching*”).¹ Because we communicate about love using a vocabulary connected with madness and magic, we conceive of and experience love as a condition in which we are slightly out of control and in an abnormal state of some sort. The labels we use for love, then, suggest particular ways of believing about, acting toward, and knowing love. The labels focus our attention on certain features, exhibit an evaluation or attitude toward those features, and thus encourage us to experience the concept in a particular way. Labels affect our experience of empirical phenomena, as well. To call a police officer a pig rather than, for example, a security officer, suggests that we will view, interact with, and experience that individual in a particular way.

As its definition suggests, the scope of rhetoric is broad. Rhetoric is not limited to written and spoken discourse; indeed, speaking and writing make up only a small part of our total rhetorical environment. Symbols assume a variety of forms; any message, regardless of the form it takes or the channel of communication it uses, is rhetoric and is appropriate to study in rhetorical criticism. Rhetoric includes, then, non-discursive or nonverbal symbols as well as discursive or verbal ones. Speeches, essays, conversations, poetry, novels, stories, television programs, films, **art**, architecture, plays, music, dance, advertisements, furniture, public demonstrations, and dress are all forms of rhetoric.

Rhetorical Criticism

Rhetorical criticism is the process of systematically investigating and explaining symbolic acts and artifacts for the purpose of understanding

rhetorical processes. This definition includes three primary dimensions: (1) systematic analysis; (2) symbols as the objects of analysis; and (3) a purpose of understanding rhetorical processes.

Systematic Analysis. We all respond to symbols constantly, and as we encounter symbols, we try to figure out how they are working and why they have the impacts on us **they** do. The process of rhetorical criticism simply involves engaging in this natural process in a more systematic and focused way. Through the study and practice of rhetorical criticism, we can become more sophisticated and discriminating in explaining, investigating, and understanding symbols and our responses to them.

Symbolic Acts and Artifacts. The objects of study in rhetorical criticism are symbolic acts and artifacts. An act is executed in the presence of the rhetor’s intended audience—a speech or a musical performance presented to a live audience, for example. Because an act tends to be fleeting and ephemeral, making its analysis difficult, many rhetorical critics prefer to study the artifact of an act—the **text**, trace, or tangible evidence of the act. When a rhetorical act is transcribed and printed, recorded *on* film, or preserved on canvas, it becomes a rhetorical artifact’ which then is accessible to a wider audience than the one that witnessed the rhetorical act. Both acts and artifacts are objects of rhetorical criticism. But since most critics use the tangible product as the basis for criticism—a speech text, a building, a sculpture, a recorded song, for example—the term rhetorical artifact will be used in this book to refer to the object of study. The use of the term is not meant to exclude acts from the critic’s investigation but rather to provide a consistent and convenient way to talk about the object of criticism.²

Understanding Rhetorical Processes. One reason to engage in criticism is to understand particular symbols and how they operate. A critic is interested in a particular kind of symbol use or a particular rhetorical artifact—the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington, D.C., for example—and engages in criticism to **deepen** the appreciation and understanding of that artifact. But criticism undertaken only to comment on a particular artifact tends not to be “enduring; its importance and its functions are immediate and **ephemeral**.”³ Once the historical situation has been forgotten or the rhetor is no longer the center of the public’s attention, such criticism no longer serves a useful purpose if it has been devoted exclusively to an understanding of a particular artifact.

The critic, then, does not study a rhetorical artifact for its qualities alone. Instead, the critic is interested in discovering what the artifact

teaches about the nature of rhetoric. The critic moves beyond the particularities of the artifact under study to discover what it suggests about symbolic processes in general. Rhetorical criticism provides an initial general understanding of some aspect of rhetoric **on the** basis of the necessarily limited evidence available in the artifact.

The critic **engages in rhetorical criticism** to make a contribution to **rhetorical theory**.⁴ (**Theory means a tentative answer to a question posed by someone seeking to understand the world.**) A theory is a set of general clues, generalizations, or principles that explain a process or phenomenon and thus help to answer the question asked. We are all theorists in our everyday **lives**, developing explanations for what is happening in our worlds based on our experiences and observations. If a friend never returns your phone calls, for example, you might come to the conclusion-or develop the theory-that the friendship is over. You have asked yourself a question about the state of the friendship, collected some evidence (made phone calls and observed that they were not returned), and reached a tentative conclusion (that the other person no longer wishes to be your friend).

In rhetorical **criticism**, the theorizing that is done deals with explanations about how rhetoric works. The critic asks a question about a rhetorical process or phenomenon and how it works, analyzes an artifact or artifacts that might offer some general clues about that process, and provides a tentative answer to the question. This answer does not **have to** be fancy, formal, or complicated. It simply involves identifying some of the **basic** concepts involved in a **rhetorical phenomenon or process** and how they work. Theorizing, then, is a process of stepping back from the myriad details of a phenomenon or process to take a broader view of it and to draw some conclusions about what it suggests for some aspect of rhetoric. The outcome should be a better **understanding** of rhetoric.

But **the** process of rhetorical criticism does not end with a contribution to **theory**. Its final outcome is a **contribution to the improvement of our abilities as communicators and consumers of symbols**. **Rhetorical critics implicitly** suggest how more effective symbol use may be accomplished.

In suggesting some theoretical principles about how rhetoric operates, the critic is providing principles or guidelines for those of us who **want to communicate in more** self-reflective ways and to construct and employ rhetorical structures that best accomplish our goals.⁵ As a result of our study of these principles, we should be more-skilled, discriminating, and sophisticated in **our** efforts to communicate-in talk with our friends and family, in the design of persuasive messages for political and advertising campaigns, and in the decoration of our homes, for example.

Knowledge **of the** operation of rhetoric also can help make us **more** sophisticated audience members for **messages**. When we understand the

various options available to rhetors in the construction of messages and how they work together to create the effects they produce, we are able to question the choices made in the construction of rhetorical artifacts because we **see** possibilities other than those selected. We are less inclined to accept existing rhetorical practices and to respond uncritically to the messages we encounter. As a result, our participation in the shaping of our culture is less reactive and more proactive.

Notes

⁴George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980), p. 49.

⁵This distinction is suggested by Kathleen G. Campbell, "Enactment as a Rhetorical Strategy/Form in Rhetorical Acts and Artifacts," Diss. University of Denver 1988, pp. 25-29.

⁶Karlyn Kohrs Campbell, "Criticism: Ephemeral and Enduring," *Speech Teacher*, 23 (January 1974), p. 11.

⁷More elaborate discussions of rhetorical criticism as theory building can be found in: Roderick P. Hart, "Forum: Theory-Building and Rhetorical Criticism: An Informal Statement of Opinion," *Central States Speech Journal*, 27 (Spring 1976), 70-77; Richard B. Gregg, "The Criticism of Symbolic Inducement: A Critical-Theoretical Connection," in *Speech Communication in the 20th Century*, ed. Thomas W. Benson (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1985), pp. 42-43; and Campbell, "Criticism," pp. 11-14.

⁸Discussions of rhetorical criticism to increase the effectiveness of communication can be found in: Robert Cathcart, *Post Communication: Criticism and Evaluation* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1966), pp. 3, 6-7. 12; and Edwin Black, *Rhetorical Criticism: A Study in Method* [Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1978], p. 9.