

# Finding a Methodology for Rhetorical Criticism

KATHLEEN M. GERMAN\*

Among the things which seem to frighten students considering rhetorical criticism as a contest event are two overriding concerns. The first, simply not understanding or misunderstanding the nature of the event, can be remedied with added information about the event, sympathetic coaching, and observation of other contestants. The second problem occurs once students locate rhetorical artifacts and begin preparing them for competition. At that point they realize that they need a "methodology."<sup>1</sup>

Furthermore, otherwise excellent coaches may falter when confronted with the need to explain the use of a methodology simply because they may not have a clear understanding of the purpose which the methodology serves in criticism. In fact, many coaches may not know the best means for locating and evaluating methodologies.

The purpose of this article is to answer, at least in part, some frequent questions about choosing the methodology for a rhetorical criticism. First, what is a methodology? Second, how is a methodology used to critique a rhetorical artifact? Third, where do you find a methodology?

## 1. WHAT IS A METHODOLOGY?

Much like different camera lenses are used to provide varied perspectives on the photographer's subject, critical methodologies aid the rhetorical critic in evaluating an artifact. A methodology is a tool which allows the critic to better understand rhetoric and communicate this understanding to others. Although it is not a physical measure, a methodology operates as a concept or series of

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KATHLEEN M. GERMAN is Associate Professor of Communication at Miami University, Oxford OH 45056.

<sup>1</sup>In order to avoid a discussion of whether "methodology" or "method" is the more appropriate term, a decision has been made to use "methodology" in reference to the external critical tool applied to the rhetorical artifact. The debate over whether "methodology" or "method" is the appropriate term is left to others.

<sup>2</sup>Donald C. Bryant, "Rhetoric: Its Function and Scope," Douglas Ehninger, ed., *Contemporary Rhetoric* (Glenview, IL: Scott, Foresman and Company, 1972), p. 26.

*Webmaster's Note: One reference in the bibliography was changed due to an incorrect first initial in the original – the reference is Ralph Smith and Russell Windes' article on innovational movements.*

concepts which enable us to understand the interaction between ideas and people.<sup>2</sup> As one author defines it, "Rhetorical criticism is the description, analysis, interpretation, and evaluation of persuasive uses of language."<sup>3</sup>

In general, the rhetorical critic has a responsibility to increase our understanding of the unique qualities of the rhetorical artifact and offer evaluative judgments based on criteria which are clearly defined for the observer. The role of rhetorical critics in individual events competition is no different: they must explain what criteria are used to examine the artifact, apply those criteria, interpret the results of that application, and render an evaluation of the rhetorical artifact based upon this analysis.

## 2. HOW DO YOU USE A METHODOLOGY TO CRITIQUE RHETORIC?

This question is asked because the critic often starts with the artifact to be examined and determines, after thorough investigation of it, what characteristics most clearly explain its impact on the audience. This investigation should suggest a critical methodology which brings the artifact into sharpest focus. Of course, one may find a method first, then search for an artifact, but it must be remembered that it takes a special union of methodology and artifact to yield the best understanding of both. It is usually easiest for the novice to find the artifact first, then consider possible methodological approaches. This procedure does not entail extensive knowledge of systems of rhetoric and, for this reason, is preferable for novice competitors. Beginning with the artifact and not the method is also preferable because it reduces the likelihood that an artifact will be "force-fit" onto a method that is inappropriate for that discourse.

There are many ways to view the artifact and critics should determine which perspective most closely captures what they want to communicate about it.<sup>4</sup> To aid in this process, a number of questions about the artifact which focus the criticism and narrow the choice of methodologies must be asked. Among these considerations should be the following five questions:

### A. IS THERE A PROMINENT ELEMENT OR SEVERAL ELEMENTS IN THE ARTIFACT WHICH DOMINATE IT?

It may be the character of the rhetor, the words themselves, or a

<sup>3</sup>Karlyn Kohrs Campbell, *Critiques of Contemporary Rhetoric* (Belmont, Ca.: Wadsworth Publishing Company, 1972), p. 12.

<sup>4</sup>Craig R. Smith, *Orientations to Speech Criticism* (Chicago: Science Research Associates, Modules in Speech Communication, 1976).

strong image in the artifact which dominates the effect of the discourse. Or, the artifact may depend on the audience for its impact. Since there are so many facets of any artifact, it must be examined thoroughly, reserving final impressions until the ideas, pattern, rhetor, style, context, and impact of the artifact are fully understood. The critic might choose to examine the moral qualities of the public statements of figures like Mahatma Ghandi, Mother Hale, or David Ben-Gurion, the arguments of atomic scientists on the nuclear energy question, the motivational appeals in presidential campaign commercials, the structure of the Gettysburg Address, the style of the John Birch Society Blue Book, or the unique delivery of preacher-baseball star Billy Sunday. Countless rhetorical artifacts can be examined for their use of logic, speaker credibility, motivational appeals, ideas, structure, expression, and delivery. Each of these elements can be an important factor in the analysis of rhetorical impact, and identification of a dominant element can narrow the range of choices for the critic's method.

#### B. IS THE RHETORIC AN EXPRESSION OF ITS CULTURAL MILIEU?

Perhaps the rhetoric reveals something about the way we live or the way others have lived. It may express a point of view which enriches our understanding of humankind and/or rhetoric itself. William Grayson contrasted the North with the South in his pro-slavery poem, "The Hireling and the Slave" and, in the process, provided for history a justification of the Southern way of life. Petra Kelly offers us understanding of the Green Movement in Europe; the 1984 presidential campaign teaches us something about our political expectations; Slim Goodbody provides a model for children in a health-conscious society; and the Olympic spirit exemplified by Mary Lou Retton and Edwin Moses reveals how we view sports. Each of these examples is an expression of its culture. Campaigns, movements, and the media all reflect social concerns and, as such, are rhetorical manifestations of culture.

#### C. IS THERE AN INTERACTION OF ELEMENTS IN THIS ARTIFACT WHICH ACCOUNTS FOR ITS UNIQUE CHARACTER?

The nature of communication depends upon combinations of audience, rhetor, and message. The manner in which this occurs is of unending interest to the critic, particularly because it may reveal something about the nature of communication. The "rainbow coalition" of the 1984 Democratic Convention, the "silent majority"

of the Vietnam era, and the Northern "copperheads" of the 1860's all feature an interaction of values, ideas, and personalities captured in a single expression. To understand the power of rhetorical slogans, the critic can analyze the interaction of elements examining how each element affects the process of meaning creation. Countless rhetorical artifacts function in this manner including dramatic works such as the pre-Civil War productions of the stage play "Uncle Tom's Cabin," music like the hymns of John Wesley, poetry such as feminist writings of the mid-60's, popular literature such as Upton Sinclair's *The Jungle*, films such as "The China Syndrome," and, of course, more traditional discourse. This focus provides the critic with salient dramas, fantasies, and myths as they are expressed in popular rhetoric.

D. WHEN COMPARED TO OTHER ARTIFACTS, DOES THIS RHETORIC REVEAL UNIQUE CHARACTERISTICS IT POSSESSES OR WHICH CHARACTERIZE A GROUP OF SIMILAR ARTIFACTS?

Rhetoric also may have unique characteristics which are not seen until contrasted with other rhetorical artifacts. The striking features of categories may not be readily apparent until they are seen together. For this reason, the critic may explore the rhetorical characteristics of Joan Baez's songs by discovering their common denominators or by comparing them with the music of other songwriters. Ronald Reagan's recent "State of the Union" message is compared to previous state of the union messages for consistent and unique characteristics. Popular television offers rich opportunity for comparison including evangelists such as Robert Schuller and Jimmie Swaggart as well as the advocacy advertising of multinational corporations. In each of these cases, the critic discovers common denominators of the group or unique characteristics of the individual artifact through comparison.

Critics may not find comparisons which best illustrate the function of the rhetorical artifact which is examined until they search outside of the realm of strictly rhetorical comparisons for other ways of illuminating the rhetoric. The organizational pattern/argumentative structure of a speaker might resemble the repetition of the fugue in music or the campaigner seeking a party office may resemble the courting ritual.<sup>5</sup> Persuasion can often be compared to personification as expressed in leading film characters or novels. One function of analog criticism can be to compare two

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<sup>5</sup>Hermann G. Stelzner, "Humphrey and Kennedy Court West Virginia, May 3, 1960," *Southern Speech Communication Journal* 37 (1971) pp. 21-33.

apparently unlike forms to yield an understanding of the rhetoric examined.

E. DOES THE RHETORICAL THEORY OF THE HISTORICAL PERIOD LEND UNDERSTANDING TO THE RHETORICAL ARTIFACT?

Occasionally, it is profitable to examine the rhetorical artifact by discovering the theory or practices which influenced the rhetorician. This is especially true when the conventions of message or audience understanding of rhetorical conventions differ from our own and shape the message of the rhetor. While contemporary rhetorical theory has much diversity to offer, it may not be able to account for previous rhetorical choices especially if those choices were made according to dictates of rhetorical wisdom quite different from our own. For example, the writings of Cicero on rhetoric can aid in our appreciation of his orations much the same as an understanding of the concept of *topoi* sheds light on Greek and Roman courtroom arguments. In the same manner, it is difficult to fully appreciate the expansiveness of eighteenth century rhetoric without relying upon the stylists of that period. One source for appropriate methodologies exists in the rhetorical theorists of the historical period.

While this list of questions by no means exhausts the possibilities, it is a starting place for analysis. The critic should also realize that more than one question can be asked of the artifact. For example, a critique of the recent television docu-drama, "Robert F. Kennedy: A Man and His Times," should discover an overriding theme: Robert Kennedy is portrayed in heroic terms. Perhaps, too, the drama reveals something about the cultural values of our political myths, such as the ability of one person to change history, and personal attributes like the importance of perseverance in the face of great odds and the support of family members in times of crisis. The drama could also be seen as a process of character development in which the camera angles, carefully edited speech texts, and development of protagonist and antagonist work together to create a new Kennedy myth. Finally, when compared to other recent docu-dramas, such as "The Atlanta Child Murders," unique characteristics of televised rhetoric may be revealed. Through such comparisons, one may realize that television is becoming a potent force in creating popular history or that American heroes and villains are depicted with increasing impact through the media. Whatever the approach, a critic should choose the perspective which gives the reader new insight into the forces of rhetoric.

### 3. WHERE DOES ONE FIND A METHODOLOGY?

The process of criticism is a creative one in which the critic expresses sometimes unique criteria for evaluating discourse. Despite the individual nature of criticism, broad categories or systems of critical thought have evolved over the centuries.<sup>6</sup> Rhetorical systems including methodologies have developed in response to the questions asked by critics. These systems focus on the elements suggested in each of the preceding questions. While these suggestions for methodologies are limited, they do cover a broad range of potential critical perspectives. (See the selected bibliography which follows this article for suggested sources of methodologies of each type.)

#### A. TRADITIONAL CRITICISM

If several elements dominate the rhetorical artifact, then the traditional approach, frequently called neo-Aristotelian criticism, may offer appropriate methodologies for the critic's use. Traditional criticism is based on the early Greek and Roman critics and orators. This approach to discourse has persisted into the twentieth century, and assumes that rhetoric functions as a means for discovering rational, truthful appeals to audiences. The critic focuses on logical, ethical, and motivational elements through which the rhetor operates to achieve persuasion. These three proofs are often referred to as logos, ethos, and pathos. Each of them can be divided into subcategories such as the components of ethos (speaker credibility) which usually include trustworthiness, intelligence, and dynamism.<sup>7</sup> The enthymeme is central to the use of logical appeals in rhetoric, and motivational appeals includes a vast array of human emotions such as loyalty, hatred, friendship, reverence, and greed.

Discourse also is examined for other intrinsic qualities such as ideas, organization, use of language, and delivery. The primary focus of the neo-Aristotelian critic is on the internal elements of the discourse. When external characteristics are examined, they tend to be viewed as effects of the discourse. Since this mode of criticism has enjoyed such persistence, a wide range of sources of explaining methodologies exist from ancient through contemporary sources.

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<sup>6</sup>Douglas Ehninger, "On Systems of Rhetoric," *Philosophy and Rhetoric* 1 (1968), pp. 131-144.

<sup>7</sup>James C. McCroskey and Thomas J. Young, "Ethos and Credibility: The Construct and Its Measurement After Three Decades," *Central States Speech Journal* 32 (1981), pp. 24-34.

## B. SITUATIONAL CRITICISM

If the rhetorical artifact seems to arise from the situation or the culture, the external characteristics of the rhetorical situation offer a second source of methodologies. Perhaps most frequently used in competition is Lloyd Bitzer's "rhetorical situation." This approach focuses on the interaction of audience, exigences, and contingencies in creating the opportunity for a rhetorical response which is appropriate to the situation. Various scholars have expanded on the idea of the rhetorical situation. Among them, Bruce Gronbeck and Edwin Black suggest that rhetorical timing is a critical factor framing the appropriate rhetorical response to any situation.

Another approach to the external influences on rhetoric is examination of the culture which produces it. Differences in cultural expectations or conventions can account for mis-communication as in the negotiations between agents of the Federal government and Indian tribes in the early history of this country or the explosion of racial violence in the mid-sixties. An examination of cultural differences also explains other successes and failures in international communication. For example, the Vietnam peace talks, the arms limitation agreements between the Soviet Union and the U.S., the Arab-Israeli conflicts, and the Lebanon hostage crisis can each be viewed as a confrontation of cultures. The rhetoric which surrounds these situations evidences the clash of cultures and the lack of mutual understanding of such cultural distinctions. In addition to international communication, intercultural communication occurs among whites and blacks, men and women, and even old and young. The assumptions which influence senders and receivers of such messages are evident in their linguistic transactions.

## C. SOCIOLOGICAL CRITICISM

The current era of criticism has given rise to diverse approaches to criticism which can be characterized as sociological systems. If there is an interaction of elements in the rhetorical artifact which accounts for its unique character, then a sociological approach is justified.<sup>8</sup> Such systems focus on language as a response to social situations in which communication is a means of action as well as a record of thoughts, attitudes, and values. In this view, rhetoric is an interactional phenomenon. In recent years, this function of rhetoric has received a great deal of attention. At least four approaches to

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<sup>8</sup>Douglas Ehninger, "Introduction," *Contemporary Rhetoric* (Glenview, IL: Scott, Foresman and Company, 1972), pp. 2-4.

sociological criticism exist, including movement studies or agitation criticism, dramatism, reality construction, and fantasy theme analysis.

1. Movement/Agitation Criticism: Since the agitation of the Vietnam era, critics have become interested in the language and action which accompanies social movements. Since Leland Griffin's landmark article in 1952, numerous movement study approaches have been suggested.<sup>9</sup> Among them, John Waite Bowers and Donovan Ochs have presented a model for characterizing the escalation of confrontations between agitation and establishment groups. Their view of rhetoric goes beyond spoken language to include the rationale of instrumental, symbolic behavior in a spiraling stimulus-response pattern typical of confrontations.<sup>10</sup> Other rhetoricians and sociologists have also investigated and posited reasons for human verbal and physical action in movements and agitations. Such sociological systems account in varied ways for the rhetoric produced to create, sustain, and diminish the effects of social movements.<sup>11</sup>

2. Dramatistic Criticism: Another perspective on rhetoric (often characterized as sociological), espoused originally by Kenneth Burke, uses the theme of dramatic interaction to capture the essence of rhetoric. Kenneth Burke's complex and continuously evolving approach to rhetoric depends upon his view of humans as naturally symbol producing and using animals. Rhetoric is a means of bridging the essential estrangement in nature and society. It is the symbolic means of inducing cooperation in beings who by nature respond to symbols. Any understanding of Burke must take into account the five factors which together comprise the so-called "pentad." Burke proposed that action, agent(s), agency, scene, and purpose work together in varying combinations or "ratios" in rhetorical transactions. The ratios of the pentad provide clues to the rhetorical interaction for the critic. In addition to the pentad as a tool for critical investigation, Burke provides special uses of terms such as "identification" and "consubstantiality" to reveal how the natural chasm between individuals is bridged through rhetoric. Numerous students of Burke, including Marie Hochmuth Nichols, Hugh Dalziel Duncan, and Barry Brummett,

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<sup>9</sup>Leland Griffin, "The Rhetoric of Historical Movements." *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 38 (1952), pp. 184-88.

<sup>10</sup>John Waite Bowers and Donovan Ochs. *The Rhetoric of Agitation and Control* (Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley, 1971).

<sup>11</sup>Robert Scott and Bernard L. Brock. *Methods of Rhetorical Criticism: A Twentieth Century Perspective* (New York: Harper and Row, 1972), pp. 126-127.

provide insight and explanations of the implications of dramatic criticism.

3. Reality Construction: In addition to movement studies and dramatism, a number of other critics focus specifically on rhetoric as the means by which we create and sustain the social reality necessary to form relatively enduring governments and social institutions. Language is a primary force calculated to reinforce or bolster such relationships and maintain a stable social reality. Particularly in political rhetoric, the conventions of the process of election are assumed in the language and posturing of the candidates. General introductions to the process of reality construction include works by Doris Graber and Combs and Mansfield.

4. Fantasy Theme Analysis: Finally, the sociological perspective can be found in the sharing of fantasies by people from small groups to entire nations. The evolution of these fantasies or rhetorical visions are the focus of rhetorical critics. Ernest Bormann made popular the identification of fantasy themes which are chained out in groups of human beings through communication. Fantasy theme analysis, as it is most often referred to, seeks to understand human action and motivation by examining the language which engages individuals in group visions.

Another form of widely rhetorical chaining of shared visions involves social images. Many sociologists and political scientists use image creation to explain the force of ideas and personalities on audiences in elections, political upheavals, and even popular social fads. Kenneth Boulding argues that images of ourselves and others are the fundamental driving forces behind all human behavior from individual interactions to international encounters. Like dramatic criticism and fantasy theme analysis, the evaluation of images assumes a sociological bias characteristic of much contemporary rhetorical theory.

#### D. GENRE OR ANALOG CRITICISM

If the rhetorical artifact chosen appears to have characteristics of similar types of discourse or if it is distinct from other forms of discourse, genre criticism might be the course of a methodology. Genre criticism attempts to identify types of rhetoric through the common characteristics or functions of the members of that group. Apologia, state of the union messages, Bunker Hill orations, election day sermons, gallows speeches, Rose Garden speaking, press conferences, forensic, deliberative, and ceremonial speaking are examples of genres which have been identified. The characteristics of these categories offer potential criteria for evaluating an

artifact. The critic may discover that the genre explains the form and substance of the artifact or that the artifact provides additional insight into the functioning of the genre. That is, the determination of rhetorical type should also illuminate some of the functions or potential functions of the discourse. Once the critic can prove that the artifact belongs to a certain group or genre, he or she may reveal additional qualities of the rhetoric. For example, understanding that a recent presidential press conference is typical of that genre identifies it by category. However, the important revelation is that rhetoric of this category is usually dependent upon media coverage during prime time and it is effective only when carefully controlled questions and answers are included.

Analog criticism also establishes common characteristics, however it sets up two objects or constructs for comparison. This comparison is intended to reveal something useful about one or both of the artifacts. President Reagan's 1984 presidential campaign film might be compared to a collage constructed by an artist or his speech responding to the Korean airliner incident could contain the elements of a nineteenth century melodrama. In each case, two apparently unlike ideas provide creative insight for the critic. The striking qualities of the comparison are the unique properties of this critical approach. The critic often uses foils which are not in the traditional scope of criticism to complete the comparison with the rhetorical artifact. This possibility opens up unlimited methodological resources for the critic. It also behooves the critic to remember the tests of good methodologies. It is important to avoid the tendency to simply use a method. Rather, the method should help to explain how the rhetoric works to achieve its results. In the example of the presidential response to the KAL 007 incident, the melodrama not only asks the reader to look for villains, heroes, and crisis situations but also explains that the contrast of good and evil heightens the suspense and encourages the audience to choose sides in the dispute.

#### E. HISTORICALLY RELEVANT THEORY

Re-creation of the rhetorical ideas which molded the speaker's views and forms of adaptation to the rhetorical process enhances our understanding of the choices made by the rhetorician. Ideas which shaped the speaker's understanding of the world might also yield the rationale for the rhetorical artifact. The assumption that rhetoric does not spring untainted from the rhetor undergirds this form of criticism. The rhetorician is a human being living in a world of expectations shaped at least partially by the current

theory of the day. If ancient theory differs markedly from present day theory, then it is difficult for contemporary audiences to appreciate the rhetoric itself unless they understand the thinking of the historical period. Few would argue that Greek rhetoric at the height of the democracy was distinct from that produced by the Second Sophistic in ancient Rome and that both periods of ancient rhetoric are distinct from speaking in the 1980's. An explanation for the differences in rhetorical forms can be found through investigation of the theories of rhetoric prevalent in each historical period. Political institutions, educational institutions, and the heritage of the past, including the thinking of rhetorical scholars, influences the production of the rhetoric. Critics can achieve a different, and possibly better understanding of such rhetoric if they reconstruct these influences on the rhetorician. The tendency to reject all "out-dated" rhetorical theory may not be wise unless present day critics are also willing to assume that the theorists of the age did not influence the production of its rhetoric. This appears to be a foolhardy assumption or at least one which limits the potential for understanding rhetoric as a product of its times.

#### 4. FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

Once a critic has found what is considered to be a potential methodology, several important questions must be answered before the methodology can be used to analyze the rhetorical artifact. First, are the criteria for evaluating the artifact clear? If the theory is too complex or confusing, then it is not an appropriate choice for competition. Second, can the methodology be communicated to others without losing its meaning? Unfortunately, the rules of competition specify time limits for rhetorical criticism and these time limits may not allow the critic to fully expand the methodology. In this case it may be appropriate to select aspects of the methodology for use or find a methodology which can be explained in the time allotted. Because distortions of complex systems of thought are not acceptable, a critic should be careful when using only selected aspects of the methodology. Third, does the methodology fit the artifact? The critic must be able to justify its use; that is, the critic should be able to defend its appropriateness for the rhetorical artifact. Finally, assuming, of course, that the methodology is clear, efficient, and appropriate, the most important question is, does the methodology reveal something new about the artifact? The use of the methodology ought to increase our understanding of the rhetorical artifact since that is the purpose of rhetorical criticism.

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