Fifth Edition

RHETORICAL CRITICISM

Exploration and Practice

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WAVELAND PRESS, INC.

Long Grove, Illinois

For information about this book, contact:
Waveland Press, Inc.
4180 IL Route 83, Suite 101
Long Grove, IL 60047-9580
(847) 634-0081
info@waveland.com
www.waveland.com

10-digit ISBN 1-4786-3489-8
13-digit ISBN 978-1-4786-3489-8

Printed in the United States of America

7 6 5 4 3 2 1

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Preface

Rhetorical criticism is not a process confined to a few assignments in a rhetorical or media criticism course. It is an everyday activity we can use to understand our responses to symbols of all kinds and to create symbols of our own that generate the kinds of responses we intend. I hope this book not only provides guidelines for understanding and practicing critical analysis but also conveys the excitement and fun that characterize the process.

I am grateful to a number of people who assisted me in various ways with earlier editions of this book: Bernard J. Armada, Ernest G. Bormann, Kimberly C. Elliott, Richard Enos, Karen A. Foss, Cindy L. Griffin, Sara E. Hayden, Richard L. Johannesen, Laura K. Hahn, D. Lynn O'Brien Hallstein, Kellie Hay, Michelle A. Holling, Gordana Lazić, Xing Lu, Debian L. Marty, Clarke Rountree, Diana Brown Sheridan, Robert Trapp, and William Waters. Their gifts of time, energy, and support have contributed immeasurably to making this book what it is today. This book is also a product of the questions, insights, and essays of criticism of the students in my rhetorical criticism courses at the University of Denver, the University of Oregon, Ohio State University, and the University of Colorado Denver.

This edition of the book has benefited from sage advice from four scholars and colleagues. Karen A. Foss read all of the chapters and provided her usual valuable substantive and stylistic advice. Two of my colleagues at the University of Colorado Denver, Lisa Keränen, and Amy A. Hasinoff, read the chapter on narrative criticism and helped me move into the digital world of storytelling. Barry Brummett helped me sort through the method of homology, which is part of the discussion in the chapter on generic criticism.

I also appreciate the scholars whose essays I have included as samples of the methods for their willingness to share their critical essays; their excellent models of criticism both enrich and clarify the approaches they illustrate. Andrew Gilmore deserves a special note of thanks for his contributions to this edition of the book. He is the author of nine sample essays in the book, in which he applied different methods to the same artifact to help demonstrate what each method reveals and conceals. Little did he know, when he wrote his

first essay of criticism in my rhetorical criticism class in 2014, that he would be recruited to be involved in this project. He tackled each essay with enthusiasm, sophisticated critical skills, and unwavering dedication. Neil Rowe and Carol Rowe, my amazing publishers, provided their usual enthusiastic support, freedom, and just the right amount of prodding to produce this revision. My husband, Anthony J. Radich, himself a superb rhetorical critic, contributed to this project constant good humor, support, and love.

Part 1
Introduction

1

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 result of the symbols we create and the symbols we encounter in the world. We watch movies, television series, and YouTube videos; listen to speeches by political candidates; notice ads on billboards and buses; choose furniture and works of art for our apartments and houses; and talk with friends and family. As we do, we engage in a process of thinking about symbols, discovering how they work, and trying to figure out why they affect us. We choose to communicate in particular ways based on what we have discovered. This process is called *rhetorical criticism*, and this book provides an opportunity for you to develop skills in the process and to explore the theory behind it.

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. The term often is 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 from the leaders of other nations. The term is also used to mean "spin" or deception of the kind we associate with the selling of used cars. In other instances, *rhetoric* is used to mean flowery, ornamental speech laden with metaphors and other figures of speech. Martin Luther King, Jr.'s speech "I Have a Dream" might be considered to be an example of this kind of rhetoric. None of these conceptions is how the term *rhetoric* is used in rhetorical criticism, and none of these definitions is how the term has been defined throughout its long history as a discipline dating back to the fifth century BC. In these contexts, rhetoric is defined as the human use of symbols to communicate. This definition includes three primary dimensions: (1) humans as the creators of rhetoric; (2) symbols as the medium for rhetoric; and (3) communication as the purpose for rhetoric.

Humans as the Creators of Rhetoric

Rhetoric involves symbols created and used by humans. Some people debate whether or not symbol use is a characteristic that distinguishes humans from all other species of animals, pointing to research with chimpanzees and gorillas in which these animals have been taught to communicate using signs. As far as we know, humans are the only animals who create a substantial part of their reality through the use of symbols. Every symbolic choice we make results in seeing the world one way rather than another. When we change the symbols we use to frame an event, our experience of the event is altered. Thus, rhetoric is traditionally limited to the human rhetor as the originator or creator of messages. *Rhetor* is a term you will be encountering frequently in this book. A rhetor is the creator of a message—the speaker, musician, painter, website designer, blogger, filmmaker, or writer, for example—who generates symbols for audiences.

Symbols as the Medium for Rhetoric

A second primary concept in the definition of rhetoric is that rhetoric involves symbols rather than signs. A *symbol* is something that stands for or represents something else by virtue of relationship, association, or convention. Symbols are distinguished from *signs* by the degree of direct connection to the object represented. Smoke is a sign that fire is present, which means that there is a direct relationship between the fire and the smoke. Similarly, the changing color of the leaves in autumn is a sign that winter is coming; the color is a direct indicator of a drop in temperature. A symbol, by contrast, is a human construction connected only indirectly to its referent. The word *cup*, for example, has no natural relationship to an open container for beverages. It is a symbol invented by someone who wanted to refer to this kind of object; it could have been called a *fish*, for example. The selection of the word *cup* to refer to a particular kind of container is arbitrary.

The following example illustrates the distinction between a symbol and a sign. Imagine someone who does not exercise regularly agreeing to play 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. The man is using symbols 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 signs directly connected to his physical condition. Thus, they are not rhetorical. Only his conscious use of symbols to communicate a particular condition is rhetorical.

The intertwining of signs and symbols is typical of human communication. For instance, a tree standing in a forest is not a symbol. It does not stand for something else; it simply is a tree. The tree could become a symbol, however, if someone chooses it to communicate an idea. It could be used in environmental advocacy efforts as a symbol of the destruction of redwood forests, for example, or as a symbol of Jesus's birth when it is used as a Christmas tree.

Humans use all sorts of nonrhetorical objects in rhetorical ways, turning them into symbols in the process.

Although rhetoric often involves the deliberate and conscious choice of symbols to communicate with others, actions not deliberately constructed by rhetors also can be interpreted symbolically. Humans often choose to interpret something rhetorically that the rhetor did not intend to be symbolic. Someone can choose to give an action or an object symbolic value, even though it was not intended as part of the message. In such cases, the meaning received is often quite different from what the creator of the message intends. When the United States deliberately deploys an aircraft carrier off the coast of North Korea, it has performed a rhetorical action to warn Pyongyang not to continue with its testing of nuclear weapons. Both sides read the message symbolically, and there is no doubt about the meaning. If a U.S. reconnaissance plane accidentally strays over North Korea without the purpose of communicating anything to North Korea, however, the pilot is not engaged in rhetorical action. In this case, however, the North Koreans can choose to interpret the event symbolically and take retaliatory action against the United States. Any action, whether intended to communicate or not, can be interpreted rhetorically by those who experience or encounter it.

The variety of forms that symbols can assume is broad. Rhetoric is not limited to written and spoken discourse; in fact, speaking and writing make up only a small part of our rhetorical environment. Rhetoric, then, includes nondiscursive or nonverbal symbols as well as discursive or verbal ones. Speeches, essays, conversations, poetry, novels, stories, comic books, graphic novels, websites, blogs, fanzines, television programs, films and videos, video games, art, architecture, plays, music, dance, advertisements, furniture, automobiles, and dress are all forms of rhetoric.

Communication as the Purpose of Rhetoric

A third component of the definition of rhetoric is that its purpose is communication. Symbols are used for communicating with others or oneself. For many people, the term *rhetoric* is synonymous with *communication*. The choice of whether to use the term *rhetoric* or the term *communication* to describe the process of exchanging meaning is largely a personal one, often stemming from the tradition of inquiry in which a scholar is grounded. Individuals trained in social scientific perspectives on symbol use often prefer the term *communication*, while those who study symbol use from more humanistic perspectives tend to use the term *rhetoric*.

Rhetoric functions in a variety of ways to allow humans to communicate with one another. 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 perspectives and invite others to enter our worlds so they can understand us and our perspectives better.[1] Sometimes, we use rhetoric simply as a means of self-discovery or to come to self-knowledge. We may articulate thoughts or feelings out loud to ourselves or in a journal and, in doing so, come to know ourselves better and perhaps make different choices in our lives.

Another communicative function that rhetoric performs is that it constructs reality. Reality is not fixed but 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. This does not mean that things do not really exist—that this book, for example, is simply a figment of your imagination. Rather, the symbols through which our realities are filtered affect our view of the book and how we are motivated to act toward it. The frameworks and labels we choose to apply to what we encounter influence our perceptions and interpretations of what we experience and thus the kinds of worlds in which we live. Is someone an *alcoholic* or *morally depraved*? Is a child *misbehaved* or *suffering from ADD*? Is an unexpected situation a *struggle* or an *adventure*? Is a coworker's behavior *irritating* or *eccentric*? The choices we make in terms of how to approach these situations are critical in determining the nature and outcome of the experiences we have regarding them.

Rhetorical Criticism

The process you will be using for engaging in the study of rhetoric is rhetorical criticism. It is a qualitative research method that is designed for the systematic investigation and explanation of symbolic acts and artifacts for the purpose of understanding rhetorical processes. This definition includes three primary dimensions: (1) systematic analysis as the act of criticism; (2) acts and artifacts as the objects of analysis in criticism; and (3) understanding rhetorical processes as the purpose of criticism.

Systematic Analysis as the Act of Criticism

We are responding to symbols continually, and as we encounter symbols, we try to figure out how they are working and why they affect us as they do. We tend to respond to these symbols—like movies or songs—by saying "I like it" or "I don't like it." The process of rhetorical criticism involves engaging in this natural process in a more conscious, systematic, and focused way. Through the study and practice of rhetorical criticism, we can understand and explain why we like or don't like something by investigating the symbols themselves—we can begin to make statements about messages rather than statements about our feelings. We engage in more disciplined and mindful interpretations of the symbols around us. Rhetorical criticism, then, enables us to become more sophisticated and discriminating in explaining, investigating, and understanding symbols and our responses to them.

Acts and Artifacts as the Objects of Criticism

The objects of study in rhetorical criticism are symbolic acts and artifacts. An *act* is executed in the presence of a 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, analysis of it is difficult, so 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,

posted on a website, recorded on video, or preserved on canvas, it becomes a rhetorical artifact that is accessible to a wider audience than the one that witnessed the rhetorical act. Both acts and artifacts are objects of rhetorical criticism. But because most critics use the tangible product as the basis for criticism—a speech text, a building, a Facebook page, a blog, a sculpture, or a recorded song, for example—the term *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 your investigation but to provide a consistent and convenient way to talk about the object of criticism.[2]

Understanding Rhetorical Processes as the Purpose of Criticism

The process of rhetorical criticism often begins with an interest in understanding particular symbols and how they operate. A critic may be interested in a particular kind of symbol use or a particular rhetorical artifact—the Holocaust Museum in Washington DC or Adele's music, for example—and engages in criticism to deepen appreciation and understanding of that artifact. Critics of popular culture such as restaurant, television, theatre, film, and music critics are these kinds of critics—they tend to be most interested in understanding the particular experience of the restaurant or film they are reviewing. But criticism undertaken primarily 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 or artifact 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.

In contrast to critics of popular culture, rhetorical critics do not study an artifact for its qualities and features alone. Rhetorical critics are interested in discovering what an artifact teaches about the nature of rhetoric—in other words, critics engage in rhetorical criticism to make a contribution to rhetorical theory.[4] *Theory* is a tentative answer to a question we pose as we seek to understand the world. It is a set of general clues, generalizations, or principles that explains a process or phenomenon and thus helps to answer the question we 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 calls, emails, or texts, 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 calls and sent emails and texts and observed that they were not returned), and reached a tentative conclusion or claim (that the other person no longer wishes to be your friend).

In rhetorical criticism, the theorizing that critics do deals with explanations about how rhetoric works. A critic asks a question about a rhetorical process or phenomenon and how it works 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 explaining how they work. Admittedly, the theory that results is based on limited evidence—in many cases, one artifact. But

even the study of one artifact allows you to step back from the details of a particular artifact to take a broader view of it and to draw some conclusions about what it suggests concerning some process of rhetoric.

The process of rhetorical criticism does not end with a contribution to theory. Theories about rhetorical criticism enable us to develop a cumulative body of research and thus to improve our practice of communication. The final outcome of rhetorical criticism is an improvement of our abilities as communicators. As a rhetorical critic, you implicitly suggest how more effective symbol use may be accomplished. In suggesting some theoretical principles about how rhetoric operates, you provide principles or guidelines for those of us who want to communicate in more self-reflective ways and to construct messages 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 our talk with our friends and families, in the decoration of our homes and offices, in our online behavior, in the choices we make about the clothing we wear, and in our efforts to present our ideas at school or at work.

Knowing how rhetoric operates 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 create the effects they do, we are able to question the choices others make in their use of symbols. We are less inclined to accept existing rhetorical practices and to respond uncritically to the messages we encounter. As a result, we become more engaged and active participants in shaping the nature of the worlds in which we live.

Notes

[1] This function for rhetoric was suggested by Sonja K. Foss and Cindy L. Griffin in their theory of invitational rhetoric: Sonja K. Foss and Cindy L. Griffin, "Beyond Persuasion: A Proposal for an Invitational Rhetoric," *Communication Monographs* 62 (March 1995): 2–18. Also see Sonja K. Foss and Karen A. Foss, *Inviting Transformation: Presentational Speaking for a Changing World*, 3rd ed. (Long Grove, IL: Waveland, 2012).

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

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

[4] More 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), 42–43; and Campbell, "Criticism," 11–14.

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

2

Doing Rhetorical Criticism

The definitions of the terms *rhetoric* and *rhetorical criticism* in chapter 1 have provided a starting place for understanding rhetorical criticism. Knowledge about what rhetorical criticism *is* does not automatically translate into the ability to *do* criticism, however. This chapter is designed to provide you with an overview of the actual process of producing an essay of criticism.

Because this textbook is a first experience with rhetorical criticism for many of you, you probably will feel more comfortable initially practicing rhetorical criticism using specific methods. Using these methods enables you to begin to develop your critical skills and to learn the language and basic procedures of criticism. This chapter, then, provides you with information about how to do criticism when your starting point is a formal method of criticism. A variety of these methods are presented in chapters 3 through 11. Chapter 12 offers a different way of doing criticism—generative criticism—an approach you probably will want to try as your skills as a critic grow. Using this approach, you will create a method or framework for analyzing an artifact from the data of the artifact itself.

Your starting place, however, in most of the chapters is with a method of criticism—either one you have chosen or one selected for you by your professor. When you begin with a particular method, the process of rhetorical criticism involves four steps and possibly five or six, depending on your preferences or your professor's assignment: (1) selecting an artifact; (2) analyzing the artifact; (3) formulating a research question; (4) reviewing relevant literature (optional); (5) writing the essay; and (6) applying the analysis in activism (optional).

Selecting an Artifact

Your first step is to find an artifact to analyze that is appropriate for the method you will be applying. The artifact is the data for the study—the rhetorical act or artifact you are going to analyze. It may be any instance of symbol use that is of interest to you and seems capable of generating insights about