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ABSTRACT

The focus of the dramatistic approach as a method of rhetorical criticism is the message rather than the speaker, audience, or situation. Using the approach developed by Ernest Bormann, the rhetorical critic examines man's symbolic reality and reacts to it by looking for strategies that are inherent in certain dramas. Conspiracy dramas are popular in America and provide a means for explaining the method. In analyzing a rhetorical vision that has a conspiracy plot line, the one predictable character in the drama is the super-hero. The conspiracy drama employs three predictable modes of action for the super-hero: to piece together the conspiracy, to uncover the secret plans of the villain, and to punish the conspirators. (This method of rhetorical criticism is applied to the Indian movement of the 1960s, which failed to gather the attention gained by other movements during the same time period.) (RB)

RHETORICAL STRATEGY: A DRAMATISTIC INTERPRETATION

John F. Cragan

Events of the last ten years have provided ample support for Douglas Ehninger's observation that "of all the arts, rhetoric is perhaps the most sensitive to the intellectual and social milieu in which it finds itself, and is constantly changing with the times."[1] It seems like ever since Edwin Black put "neo" in front of Aristotle we have been experiencing future shock.[2] New rhetorics, methods, and generic forms have generated a pluralism that makes assimilation and synthesis difficult.[3] It is in this context that I would like to examine one of our critical terms--rhetorical strategy.

A strategy assumes freedom of choice, generally connotes planning, and implies a category system for labeling the various options that exist. What we call a rhetorical strategy depends on our notion of rhetoric, our choice of critical method, and our current list of rhetorical genres.

The adrenalin stirred by our new found pluralism has sent us out looking for the exception and the exceptional as opposed to the rule and the commonplace. Rhetoric is discovery. Thus, the labeling of strategies is ongoing. Yet our rate of discovery is making redundancy difficult to find. With the rejection of the well-understood neo-Aristotelian system, it was recommended that we classify rhetorics by situation.[4] Our focus did not shift from the speaker to the situation but instead to a swirl of message, ideology, and situation.

Our shorthand for this change in emphasis was to attach ambiguous generic meaning to the phrase: "the rhetoric of." A cursory examination of

our scholarship indicates that we have the rhetoric of: Black Power,[5] Black Revolution,[6] and Radical Black Nationalism.[7] We have the rhetoric of: Agitation,[8] Confrontation,[9] Abolition,[10] Women's Liberation,[11] and the Civil Rights Movement.[12] We also have the rhetoric of: Christian Socialism,[13] the True Believer,[14] the Death of God Theology,[15] the Radical Right,[16] and the Medieval Rhetoric of Letter-Writing.[17]

Along with each "rhetoric of" we tend to discover a set of rhetorical strategies that adhere to the rhetoric. For example, Arthur L. Smith indicates that there are four special rhetorical strategies of revolutionary rhetoric: villification, objectification, legitimation, and mythication.[18] John Bowers and Donovan Ochs present nine strategies that exist in the rhetoric of agitation: petition of the establishment; promulgation; solidification; polarization; non-violent resistance; escalation/confrontation; guerrilla and Gandhi; guerrilla; and revolution.[19] In his study of radical rhetoric, James Klumpp discovered a strategy he labeled: "polar-rejective identification."[20]

An exhaustive list of the rhetorical strategies we have uncovered in the last ten years would probably reveal two things. First, in the sixties we tended to stress the differences as opposed to the similarities of rhetorics. Second, without a paradigm or even a method, knowing a rhetorical strategy when we see it is no simple matter. As Thomas Kuhn explains:

> In the absence of a paradigm or some candidate for paradigm, all of the facts that could possibly pertain to the development of a given science are likely to seem equally relevant. As a result, early fact-gathering is a far more nearly random activity than the one that subsequent scientific development makes familiar. Furthermore, in the absence of a reason for seeking some particular form of more recondite information, early fact-gathering is usually restricted to the wealth of data that lie readily at hand.[21]

Of course we should not abandon the task of identifying strategies that are unique to a given rhetoric. However, we need to be about the building of a macro-theory so that we can make larger, more synthetic statements about rhetoric.[22] This theory-building should also be rhetorical in origin and not borrowed from other disciplines.[23] Although at one level of analysis it may be useful to sort out rhetoric as it adheres to such things as the four political positions, it may also be helpful to classify rhetoric by means of our own schemata.

Ernest Bormann, has set forth a method of criticism that can be useful.[24] The approach is dramatistic in nature. The details of the method were worked out in small group studies conducted by Bales at Harvard and from similar small group studies directed by Bormann at the University of Minnesota.[25] The focus of the approach is not on the speaker, the audience, or the situation but on the message. The method allows a critic to describe the rhetorical dramas that form a community's social reality and analyze the meanings, emotions, and motives that are contained in these rhetorical visions.

A rhetorical vision is a blend of discursive material and fantasy themes that are woven together to form a drama that is credible and compelling. The contrasting rhetorical dramas of the abolitionists and the pro-slavers in the 1800's provide examples of what Bormann means by rhetorical vision. The northern abolitionists dramatized their view of sourthern whites in a vision of a vicious slave-holders sadistically beating the black man and lustily raping the black women. Uncle Tom's Cabin, is probably the best statement of this drama. The southern white conversely depicted slavery in the aure of beautiful white mansions filled with delicate southern belles, gallant men, and happy slaves. Gone With the Wind, is one of the more popular statements of this drama.[26]

The rhetorical critic may examine man's symbolic reality and react to it in much the same way as a film critic would respond to a motion picture. As we collect public rhetoric in the form of rhetorical dramas, certain redundancies will become apparent. We can label these strategies and note which dramas tend to contain what symbol choices.

In using Bormann's approach we should not be looking for strategies that adhere in certain kinds of people, or ideologies, or situations. We should look for strategies that are inherent to certain dramas. Conspiracy dramas are quite popular in America and provide a good example for explaining the method.

In analyzing a rhetorical vision that has a conspiracy plot line one predictable character contained in the drama is the "super-hero." A hero of such stature that he can defeat the conspiracy is usually a man who has dedicated his life to the careful study of the villain and over the years has developed the ability to spot the few available signs of the evil one--signs that the average person would easily overlook.

In religious dramas that are conspiratorial, the super-hero is usually a priest who has spent his life chasing the devil and knows the sacred rite of exorcism. In the Dracula series the super-hero is generally a college professor who has read the ancient documents on the habits of vampires. In the crime and quasi-political mysteries it is the likes of Sherlock Holmes that carry the day. In science fiction dramas the hero might be a scientist who understands the mystery of bio-chemical structures. In the domestic scene of the Cold War drama, the character sketch of the Communist sets the stage for the appearance of such super-heroes as J. Edgar Hoover and Joseph McCarthy. In the Watergate conspiracy Judge John Sirica and Senator Sam Ervin acquired super-hero status.

The scenario of a conspiracy drama contains three predictable action lines or motives for the super-hero: (1) to piece together the conspiracy; (2) to undercover the secret plans or the secret hideouts of the villain; and (3) to punish the conspirator. One of the more dramatic aspects of conspiracy rhetoric is the uncovering of the secret hideout and the revealing of the secret documents.

Within the vision of the criminal conspiracy, the FBI raided the Mafia headquarters. When the Black Panthers' "plan" became known, police raided their headquarters. When the military industrial complex conspiracy became a viable drama for some college students, the college president's office was raided by students in search of the "secret documents." In another drama, the radical revolutionary became the leading villain in a plot to overthrow the establishment. Within this drama, the "Plumbers" were ordered out by the White House to plug the establishment's pipeline so that important secrets would not drip down to the "underground." This same conspiracy drama sent CREEP off to find the "secret documents" in the national offices of the Democratic Party that would prove the "Cuban connection."

A critic can describe a rhetorical vision such as the ones I have referred to and then make judgments about the quality of the drama based on an archetype or by comparing it to similar or competing dramas. Finally, he may attempt to predict the behavior of people who are caught up in a rhetorical vision.

The role of a rhetorical critic is not analogous to the football coach who writes a book on winning football strategies. To be sure, as forensic coaches and as speech teachers, we explain manipulative communication theories and the strategies that flow from them. However, the role of a rhetorical critic is to make judgments about our symbolic social reality. While his

comments might be reducable to a "how-to-do-it" book, it is not his purpose. Thus, although a critic may seek to predict, he does not seek to control.

Our confusion on this point is partly due to the fact that Aristotle created a manipulative theory to help rhetors create persuasive speeches. He did not create a theory of rhetorical criticism. We just assumed that his advice to the speaker would work as a system for criticizing rhetoric. As long as our focus as critics was on the speaker and his speech, the assumption seemed valid. However, our focus has shifted. Today it would be like using a theory of acting to criticize the whole play. In short, a theory of rhetorical criticism is not a mirror image of a persuasive theory for a speaker. Thus, what are called rhetorical strategies for a speaker are not necessarily what a critic calls a rhetorical strategy. We have strategies for developing persuasive messages; we have strategies that adhere to ideologies; and we have strategies that are inherent to situations. I propose that we examine the strategies that are contained in rhetorical visions.

In describing, interpreting, and evaluating a rhetorical vision, the term "rhetorical strategy" is the critic's term for labeling important symbol choices. Since in most cases a rhetorical drama is created by the chaining-out of fantasies that are created and repeated by many spokesmen through many mediums it is not important or many times even possible for the critic to determine if the people caught up in the rhetoric perceive the symbol moves the critic has labeled or even if the spokesmen for a rhetorical vision have the same meta-language as the critic. The important relationship is between the message, the critic, and the critic's audience.

From this perspective, I would like to comment on some rhetoric and attempt to explicate my notion of criticism with specific reference to strategy.

The rhetoric we might collect under the label "The Movement" seems to be a product of the sixties that we have in clearer focus from the perspective of the seventies. The Movement drama contains a set of rhetorical heroes and villains, a dramatic situation, and a scenario that is now so familiar that any third rate rhetor can recreate a version of the drama for the "cause" of his choice.[27]

In examining the piece of rhetorical footage that has been labeled, "The Tail of Broken Treaties," I am tempted to look at the credits to see if the motion picture was made in Italy. I say this not to ridicule or demean native Americans, nor do I intend to be flippant. The Movement dramas of the sixties were gripped with tension and suspense. The dramatic division between the counter-culture and the establishment, between blacks and white, between hawks and doves, between gays and straights, and between men and women was credible both to the participants caught up in the dramas and the spectators who watched. Yet, the Indian version of the Movement drama seems curiously out of sync, almost comical at times, despite the fact that the here-and-now reality of the Indian situation should have produced the best drama.

One explanation for the failure could be the timing. By 1972, the novelty of such dramas had worn thin. We now have "All in the Family," "Sanford and Son," and "Maude." The TV networks might have a difficult time producing another successful sequel. The same thing may have happened to the Indian Movement. By 1972, we had a basis of comparison and compared to other Movement dramas, the Indian version did not measure up.

Although lateness and redundancy are important factors, the real issue was the Indians' lack of sophistication and experience in creating a compelling Movement drama. Ironically, this is in part true because of cultural

differences. In terms of cultural pluralism in the United States, the aboriginal peoples of North America are not a sub-culture but a distinctly different culture.

Edward Spicer, (an anthropologist) in speaking about the native Americans in the southwest, states:

> At the end of 430 years, it was clear that, despite intensification of communication among all the peoples of the region, through the adoption of common language and a great deal of cultural borrowing and interchange, most of the conquered people had retained their own sense of identity. Moreover, there was little or no ground for predicting that even by the end of half a millennium of contact the native peoples would have ceased to exist as identifiable ethnic groups.[28]

In 1952, over sixty percent of the Navaho (the largest Indian tribe in the United States) did not speak English.[29] Thus, Carl Degler concluded that one mistake white Americans make is their refusal "to recognize that the Indians are not like other minorities and particularly not like the blacks with whom they have so often been mistakenly compared."[30]

Most of the major spokesmen of the Indian Movement are urban Indians. They are removed from their own culture and yet not assimilated into another. Richard Oakes (the leader of the group that occupied Alcatraz Island) explains: "They had grown up between two worlds--the world of their elders, which was dead to them and the contemporary world where they could live with reconstructed Indian identities not yet born."[31]

Oakes' own rhetoric reflects the language and cultural differences that appear in Italian-made western movies. In describing the occupation of Alcatraz he stated:

> Again, we came from Sausalito, and again we came at night, dispelling the myth that Indians don't attack after dark. . . . They set up a blockade. They sailed around in circles like the Indians did around wagon trains in movies and in pictures.[32]

The Wall Street Journal's observation on the BIA Occupation indicates that the Indian spokesmen did not create a convincing rhetorical scene that was credible to white Americans.

> As much as anything else, that occupation seemed to be an exercise in play-acting--an effort by a relative handful of militants, claiming to speak for the broader Indian community, to occupy center stage within the 'Red Power' movement.[33]

Russell Means proclaimed that: "two hundred Indians had taken a vow to fight to the death."[34] The Indians told reporters that this would be "'another Wounded Knee'--the famous 1890 battle in which an Army regiment massacred 250 to 300 Sioux Indians, most of them women and children."[35] However, the rhetorical elements needed to produce a confrontation were not there.

In the first place a downtown office building (even if it is the BIA) in Washington, D.C. is not the best place to create a dramatic situation for confrontation between white and red Americans. Movement dramas place Black Panthers in urban ghettoes; student revolutionaries on college campuses, and Indians in spacious western settings. To see native Americans dressed in traditional costumes on Pennsylvania Avenue looked ridiculous instead of ominous. Ironically, Means stated: "We've been likened to the blacks but we watched them during the 60's and we noted their mistakes . . . . . The Indian is not going to make the same mistakes. He's not going to destroy his commity."[36] However, it was not until Wounded Knee was occupied that the Indian drama became authentic to spectator and participant.

When the scene is not correct for the drama, the characters are not believable. The Washington Post reported:

> While tribal drums reverberated through the long halls of the building, the Indians prepared again to battle the white man. There was much joking but also anger and disbelief that this could be happening. It seemed out of the story books. There was much talk of Chief Big Foot and Wounded Knee.[37]

Sitting in an office building, the Indians did not project the dramatic persona of a villainous revolutionary that was needed for a good confrontation scene. Ramparts reports that during the occupation: "Seventh graders from the Fields School, a private school in Washington, visited the scene as part of a class project on Indians."[38] Reverend Karl McIntire, a conservative radio preacher, led two hundred of his followers to see the Indians "like a fifth grade class" that was viewing "zoo animals."[39]

Set in an urban scene, the Indian was not a threatening villain to the white establishment, particularly to Washingtonians who have had few experiences with Indians. Racial confrontation between red and white America is not an urban phenomenon, or at least not a visible phenomenon for most Americans. Once the scene was restaged in South Dakota, which was a red-white setting that had experienced racial conflicts, the rhetorical drama became more credible.

The Indian version of the Movement drama also lacked a vivid villain. There was no Indian label for the establishment villain and no common set of adjectives to describe him. The Women's Movement used the label, "Male Chauvinist Pig," the Gay Movement used the label, "Ugly Straight," and the Black Movement used "Honky" and "Whitey."

Each villain, although generally a persona of the established power structure, was nonetheless unique and discernible. It is difficult to picture the villain in the Indian Movement and thus a great deal of power of the drama was lost.

The Indian drama appears to borrow too heavily from a black analogy. Its terms for the villain were "Honky" or "Whitey." The establishment Indian was a "Red Apple." In general, their choice of key rhetorical labels lacked creativity and were trite and sometimes humorous, such as the slogan scribbled on a wall, "Custer had it coming and so do some others."[40]

One element of the Movement drama that was successfully reproduced by the Indians was the discovery of the "secret documents." In the Movement rhetorical vision heroes are oppressed by a conspiracy villain. Thus, the Pentagon Papers "exposed" the military conspiracy. The recent FBI reports "exposed" the cop conspiracy against black leaders. One could predict that the BIA files would "expose" the bureau's conspiracy against Indians.

Newsweek reports:

> Although the FBI mounted a nationwide search for the 7,000 cubic feet of paper the Indians carried off, the documents began to turn up instead in Anderson's column. According to Anderson, the printed excerpts showed that 'the government has violated treaties, sided with the land and timber barons to exploit water, timber, and mineral rights belonging to the Indians.[41]

The here-and-now fact that the U.S. government had cheated the Indians out of land, timber, and mineral rights has not been a well-kept secret. Yet, the release of these facts in the context of a conspiracy, especially by the likes of Jack Anderson, did much to heighten the excitement and interest of Americans. For some unexplainable reason, we Americans seem to have an insatiable appetite for conspiracy dramas.

The Trail of Broken Treaties was generally a rhetorical failure. The rhetoric was a hodge-podge of different and conflicting fantasies that did not flow from a common rhetorical vision. What might have started out to be a dramatic recreation of the Civil Rights Marches of the early 1960's turned into a pathetic reproduction of the confrontation scene in the Movement dramas of the late 1960's.

FOOTNOTES

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[1]Douglas Ehninger, "Campbell, Blair, and Whately Revisited," Southern Speech Journal, (Spring, 1963), in Readings in Rhetoric, ed. Lionel Crocker and Paul A. Carmack, (Springfield: Charles C. Thomas, 1965), p. 373.

[2]Edwin Black, Rhetorical Criticism: A Study in Method (New York: Macmillan, 1965). Black was not the only or the first critic of Aristotelian criticism but his rhetorical strategy of using the phrase "neo-Aristotelian" was most effective. For an example of another attack on the traditional approach, see Albert J. Croft, "The Functions of Rhetorical Criticism," The Quarterly Journal of Speech, 42 (1956), 283-291.

[3]Robert L. Scott and Bernard L. Brock, in their book, Methods of Rhetorical Criticism, A Twentieth-Century Perspective (New York: Harper and Row, 1972), provide an insightful analysis and organization of our current pluralism.

[4]Edwin Black suggests that "It is possible for us to construct an accurate and exhaustive topology of rhetorical situation" (p. 133). Also see Lloyd F. Bitzer, "The Rhetorical Situation," Philosophy and Rhetoric, 1 (1968), 1-14.

[5]Robert L. Scott and Wayne Brockriede, The Rhetoric of Black Power (New York: Harper & Row Publishers, 1969).

[6]Arthur L. Smith, Rhetoric of Black Revolution (Boston: Allyn and Bacon, Inc., 1969).

[7]Karlyn Kohrs Campbell, "The Rhetoric of Radical Black Nationalism: A Case Study In Self-Conscious Criticism," The Central States Speech Journal, 22 (1971), 151-160.

[8]John Waite Bowers and Donovan J. Ochs, The Rhetoric of Agitation and Control (Reading: Addison-Wesley Publishing Company, Inc., 1971).

[9]Robert L. Scott and Donald K. Smith, "The Rhetoric of Confrontation," Quarterly Journal of Speech, 50 (1969), 277-284.

[10] Ernest G. Bormann, ed. Forerunners of Black Power (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1971).

[11]Karlyn Kohrs Campbell, "The Rhetoric of Women's Liberation," Quarterly Journal of Speech, 59 (1973), 74-86.

[12]Haig Bosmajian and Hamida Bosmajian, The Rhetoric of the Civil Rights Movement (New York: Random House, 1969).

[13]Paul Boase, The Rhetoric of Christian Socialism (New York: Random House, 1969).

[14]Roderick P. Hart, "The Rhetoric of the True Believer," Speech Monographs, 38 (1971), 249-261.

[15]Roger J. Howe, "The Rhetoric of the Death of God Theology," The Southern Speech Communication Journal, 37 (1971), 150-162.

[16]Dale G. Leathers, "Fundamentalism of the Radical Right," The Southern Speech Journal, 33 (1968), 245-258.

[17]Peter E. Kane, "Dictamen: The Medieval Rhetoric of Letter-Writing," The Central States Speech Journal, 21 (1970), 224-230.

[18]Smith, The Rhetoric of Black Revolution, p. 27. Also see, James W. Chesebro, "Rhetorical Strategies of Radicals," Today's Speech, 20 (1972), 37-48.

[19]Bowers and Ochs, p. 17.

[20]James F. Klumpp, "Challenge of Radical Rhetoric: Radicalization at Columbia," Western Speech, 37 (1973), 148.

[21]Thomas S. Kuhn, The Structure of Scientific Revolutions (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1970), p. 15. Also see, Scott and Brock, pp. 13-14.

[22]Herbert W. Simons, "Requirements, Problems, and Strategies: A Theory of Persuasion for Social Movements," Quarterly Journal of Speech, 56 (1970), 2.

[23]Robert S. Cathcart, "New Approaches to the Study of Movements: Defining Movements Rhetorically," Western Speech, 36 (1972), 86.

[24]See, Ernest G. Bormann, "Fantasy and Rhetorical Vision: The Rhetorical Criticism of Social Reality," The Quarterly Journal of Speech, 58 (1972), 396-407, and Ernest G. Bormann, "The Eagleton Affair: A Fantasy Theme Analysis," The Quarterly Journal of Speech, 59 (1973), 143-159, Also see, John F. Cragan, "The Cold War Rhetorical Vision, 1946-1972," Diss. University of Minnesota, 1972.

[25]Bormann, "Fantasy and Rhetorical Vision: The Rhetorical Criticism of Social Reality," 396-398.

[26]Ernest G. Bormann, "Fantasy and the Rhetoric of Motives," unpublished paper, University of Minnesota, 1970, p. 2

[27]By 1968, Robrrt L. Scott and Donald K. Smith had perceived the nature and form of the drama. See, Scott and Smith, 277-284.

[28]Carl N. Degler, "Indians and Other Americans," Commentary, November, 1972 p. 71.

[29]Ibid.

[30]Ibid.

[31]"The Only Good Indian," Ramparts, December, 1972, p. 36.

[32]Richard Oakes, "Alcatraz Is Not An Island," Ramparts, December, 1972, p.39.

[33]The Wall Street Journal, 16 November 1972, p. 26, col. 1.

[34]New York Times, 7 November 1972, p. 36.

[35]Washington Post, 5 November 1972, p. A 10.

[36]The Times Reporter, 12 November 1972, p. 1, Dover-New Philadelphia, Ohio.

[37]Washington Post, 5 November 1972, p. A 10.

[38]Eugene Meyer, "Bury My Heart On The Potomac," Ramparts, January, 1973, p. 12.

[39]Ibid., p. 10.

[40]"Drums Along the Potomac," Newsweek, 20 November 1972, p. 37.

[41]Newsweek, 12 February 1973, p. 46.