

from  
Foss, Sonja J. Rhetorical Criticism:  
Exploration + Practice, Waveland Pr. 2004.

# 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 results of the symbols we create and the symbols we encounter in the world. We watch movies and television, we listen to speeches by political candidates, we read advertisements on billboards and buses, we choose furniture and works of art for our apartments and houses, and we 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 commonly 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. In other instances, *rhetoric* is used to mean flowery, ornamental speech laden with metaphors and other figures of speech. Neither of these conceptions is how rhetoric is used in rhetorical criticism, and neither is how the term has been defined throughout its long history as a discipline dating back to the fifth century B.C. 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 in one way rather than in another, and in contrast to animals, human experience is different because of the symbols we use to frame it. Thus, *rhetoric* is limited to human rhetors as the originators or creators of messages.

### **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 because 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. A *cup* could have been labeled a *fish*, for example, and the selection of the word *cup* to refer to a particular kind of container is arbitrary.

The distinction between a symbol and a sign can be seen in a tennis match involving 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. The man is using symbols 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 signs directly connected to his physical shape. They thus are not rhetorical. Only his conscious use of symbols to communicate a particular condition is rhetorical.

That signs and symbols often intertwine 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 it is used by someone 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 cut for use 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 sender of the message did not intend to be symbolic. In this case, someone chooses to give an action or an object symbolic value, even though the sender does not see it in symbolic terms. Often, in such cases, the meaning received is quite different from what the creator of the message intends. When the United States deploys an aircraft carrier off the coast of North Korea to warn its government not to continue with the development of nuclear weapons, the United States has performed a rhetorical action that is designed to be read symbolically by both sides, and there is no doubt about the meaning of the message. If a United States 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 taken as symbolic by those who experience or encounter those actions.

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, television programs, films, 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 with 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 select 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. 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 or diary 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 tells us what reality is. 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 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 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 these messages rather than statements about our feelings. 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, 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, posted on a Web site, recorded on film, or preserved on canvas, it becomes a rhetorical artifact that 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 because 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 *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.<sup>1</sup>

### **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, D.C., or Eminem'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 CD 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."<sup>2</sup> Once the historical situation has been forgotten or the rhetor—the creator of the 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 don't 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.<sup>3</sup> *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 phone calls or e-mail messages, 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 sent e-mail messages 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 a contribution to the 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.<sup>4</sup> 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 families, in the decoration of our homes and offices, in the choices we make about our dress, and in our efforts to present our ideas at school or at work.

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 function together to create the effects they produce, we are able to question the choices others make in the construction of acts and

artifacts. 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

- <sup>1</sup> This 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.
- <sup>2</sup> Karlyn Kohrs Campbell, "Criticism: Ephemeral and Enduring," *Speech Teacher*, 23 (January 1974), p. 11.
- <sup>3</sup> 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), pp. 42-43; and Campbell, "Criticism," pp. 11-14.
- <sup>4</sup> 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), pp. 3, 6-7, 12; and Edwin Black, *Rhetorical Criticism: A Study in Method* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1978), p. 9.