The Rhetoric of "Rocky": Part Two

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IN PART ONE of this essay, we observed that the film *"Rocky"* was an oddity. It combined elements that should have led to cinematic disaster, but in fact, it captured the imagination and pocketbooks of the American public.[1] To explain the rhetorical appeal of "Rocky," we undertook three tasks. First, we argued that film and social processes are interdependent. Second, we noted that a crucial dimension of that interdependence was that film and social processes manifest similar patterns of value change. Third, we created a model of value change that can account for the rhetorical force underlying both film and more general social processes.

The social value model has five dimensions. First, societal values exist in dialectical opposition. Second, symbolic conflict is the dominant form for value change. Third, this symbolic conflict may assume the pattern of either *dialectical transformation,* involving an inversion of power between dominant value systems, or *dialectical synthesis,* demanding a conceptual integration between existing value systems. Fourth, each pattern requires specific psychological conditions within the change agents; dialectical transformation requires only knowledge of the value systems in question, while dialectical synthesis necessitates both knowledge of the existing value systems and an internal capacity to integrate them into a unified whole. Finally, since there is greater identification by an audience in a change process that is cooperative and integrative, a more intensified sense of involvement is found in the pattern of dialectical synthesis than in dialectical transformation.

We will use this model as the basis of our criticism of "Rocky." We begin by considering the pattern of value change in the rhetorical context of the film—namely, the state of mind reflected by the 1976 Presidential campaign. We then examine how the pattern of value change in "Rocky" extends the pattern begun in that campaign. Finally, we offer implications for future studies of value change in rhetorical events.

THE RHETORICAL CONTEXT OF "ROCKY"

Because of its relevance to the contemporary American political scene,

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[1] Janice H. Rushing and Thomas S. Frentz, "The Rhetoric of 'Rocky': A Social Value Model," *Western Journal of Speech Communication,* 42 (1978), 63-72.

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we shall use Fisher's distinction between the moralistic and materialistic myths as our dominant value terms.[2] At the outset of 1972, it was obvious that the American value system was badly fractionated and that massive public disillusionment had formed concerning materialism as the dominant purveyor of social action. For example, if Nixon embodied the values underlying materialism, then Watergate and the first Presidential resignation in history dealt perhaps the severest blow yet experienced to those values for most Americans. A poll conducted by the University of Michigan showed that the number of people who trusted government had slipped to 36 percent in 1974; in 1958, it was 71 percent. Although 1958 was a recession year, 74 percent of the public believed that government benefited all the people; in 1974, the figure had fallen to 25 percent.[3]

Similarly, if McGovern symbolized moralistic values for the American people, his loss in the 1972 election signalled the decline of that myth as well. McGovern was perhaps the last heir to the Democratic politicians of the 1960's—politicians capable of generating optimism, activism, and an entire youthful generation bent on egalitarian reforms. The enormity of his defeat, the continuation of social and racial suppression, the inequality of life-standards, and seemingly incomprehensible environmental problems all took their toll on the de-radicalization of American politics. By mid-1976, ironically the Bicentennial year, both dimensions of American values were badly in need of repair.

Onto this scene came Jimmy Carter—in many ways a political enigma. The born-again Baptist Sunday school teacher from Plains, Georgia was a curious blend of both myths. He was fervently moralistic, stressing that the people believed the country had lost its moral and spiritual underpinnings, and he was fond of promising a government "as decent . . . as compassionate . . . as filled with love as our people are."[4] This moralistic bent was certainly not lost on the press. *Newsweek,* for instance, declared that "He may be the most unabashed public moralist to seek the Presidency since William Jennings Bryan. . . ."[5]

[2] Walter R. Fisher, "Reaffirmation and Subversion of the American Dream," *Quarterly Journal of Speech,* 59 (1973), 160-67.

[3] Surveys conducted by the Survey Research Center and the Center for Political Studies, University of Michigan, as quoted in Thomas B. Farrell, "Campaign '76 as Comedy or Why Aren't These Men Laughing?" a paper presented at the Speech Communication Association Convention, San Francisco, California, December, 1976, p. 4.

[4] Jan Schuetz and Wayne A. Beach point out that Carter created a positive moral impression of his potential supporters and then interjected his own image into their personal views. See "Rhetorical Sensitivity and the Campaign of Jimmy Carter," a paper presented at the Western Speech Communication Association Convention, San Francisco, California, November, 1976.

[5] *Newsweek,* September 13, 1976, p. 23. Newspaper headlines repeatedly emphasized the moral aspects of the entire Democratic campaign. For instance, on July 13, 1976, the *Los Angeles Times* headlined a story on the Democratic Convention, "Democrats Hear Call for Morality."

But Jimmy Carter was more than a moralist. Carter was a wealthy agri-businessman, having turned a financially precarious family business into a five million dollar family fortune.[6] He controlled a political machine that rivaled that of the late John F. Kennedy for sophistication and precision. Carter revelled in hard work and was continuously shown in television ads in a plaid shirt and comfortable old hiking boots walking through the fields of his peanut plantation. Here was a man proud of his image, composed as much from rags-to-riches ingredients as from spiritual constituents.

Thus, Jimmy Carter was a person in which materialism and moralism had been integrated, and as such, he possessed the psychological prerequisites to turn the 1976 Presidential election into a ritual of dialectical synthesis. For example, Carter's platform encompassed not only the concerns of his Democratic party, but also many of the important proposals of the Republican platform as well. Because of this amalgam of positions, many charged that Carter was vague on issues. Moreover, Carter did not attempt to depict Ford as the reincarnation of the Demon from San Clemente. In fact, Ford's own credibility grew during the campaign and primarily the nagging reminder of the pardon prevented an even greater spirit of respect between the candidates.[7] Ford lost the election—just as Rocky lost the fight—but both Ford and Rocky gained a great deal; for many, Ford's courage and effort against insurmountable odds elevated his stature as a person. Finally, because the 1976 election campaign manifested the pattern of dialectical synthesis, it became a powerful vehicle of social change. For, as Edelman puts it, "They [election campaigns] give people a chance to express discontents and enthusiasms, to enjoy a sense of involvement."[8]

While the 1976 campaign reflected the pattern of dialectical synthesis, the election itself did not, in that a winner was declared. As we have pointed out, the campaign was a conflict between competing value systems—moralism and materialism. Such conflict is an essential constituent of this pattern of change. The exigence of the campaign, recognized keenly by Carter, was the need to restore the health of the American Dream. As he said : "It is a time for healing."[9] Just as Carter sought to provide a remedy for the nation's illness, so does "Rocky," but in a way that only film can realize.

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[6] *Newsweek*, September 13, 1976, p. 33.

[7] Following the Republican Convention, Ford started the campaign farther behind than any President in scientific polling history; a Gallup survey showed Carter ahead 50-33, and Harris gave Carter a 61-32 margin, according to *Newsweek*, August 30, 1976, p. 16. By late October, Gallup gave Carter only a 47-41 lead; Harris gave him a 45-42 lead; Associated Press showed Ford ahead for the first time, 49-45, *Newsweek*, November 1, 1976, p. 18.

[8] Murray Edelman, *The Symbolic Uses of Politics* (Urbana: Univ. of Illinois Press, 1964), p. 3.

[9] CBS Convention Coverage, July 15, 1976.

"ROCKY" AS DIALECTICAL SYNTHESIS

Five interrelated dimensions of "Rocky" become apparent when viewed from the perspective of our model of social value.

Value Opposition

First, the film dramatizes value opposition. In the opening scene, a close-up view of a particularly brutal, physical battle between Rocky and some unknown opponent is shown. Subtly present in the background is a painting of a madonna hanging as a reminder of another set of values. At the very outset, then, we experience the materialistic value of competition and winning against the moralistic backdrop of religious love and compassion. This opposition recurs scenically throughout the film.

Symbolic Conflict

The conflict between moralism and materialism in "Rocky" is triggered by the protagonist's anger. Rocky is angry at his own initial inability to make any form of significant human contact, at his inability to succeed in the fight profession, at having to work for a loan shark in order to survive, and, most directly, at those forces of materialism and wealth that keep Rocky and the millions like him in the slums of south Philadelphia. In short, Rocky is angry at himself and his situation.

Anger often underlies human conflict—whether that conflict be physical and destructive, as in the case of the Watts riots, or more detached and controlled, as is the case with political elections. Throughout the film, we see resentment and hostility building both in Rocky and in his associates. When Rocky is offered the chance to fight Creed, his anger takes specific focus and becomes goal-directed.

Psychological Prerequisites

Neither the awareness of value opposition nor the presence of the conflict is responsible for the audience's reaction to "Rocky." An essential attribute of the film is its evocation of sympathy and support for Rocky as he grows in character. As one critic put it, "Rocky" is a study in self-actualization.[10] The *progressive* nature of that self-actualization process is what is important. After all, Rocky is not a dualing dialectician—the Eric Hoffer of the ring. He is at the outset of the film—most charitably put—a rather ordinary person with a remarkable potential for growth and change.

As the film progresses, we witness a gradual, but certain process of value synthesis within Rocky. Rocky's arduous training program reflects clearly his endorsement of the puritan work ethic, his increasing need to "win" a place for himself, and his unequivocal acceptance of direct, physical competi-

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[10] Nancy L. Street, "'Rocky': The Moral Imperative," a paper presented at the Western Speech Communication Association Convention, Phoenix, Nov., 1977.

tion as the determiner of a person's worth. Rocky exhibits extreme compassion: for Mickey, the fight manager of questionable motives; for Adrian, the painfully shy lover-to-be; for an unidentified man, who cannot pay a debt owed to the loan shark for whom Rocky works; and even for Adrian's brother, whose most redeeming feature seems to be his inability to exploit Rocky. Moreover, Rocky searches with increasing clarity for his own dignity and self-worth—two deep-rooted facets of moralism. The very night before his fight with the champion, Rocky tells Adrian, "If I can go the distance, I'll know for the first time in my life I'm not just another bum from the neighborhood." Rocky's self-actualization is dramatic evidence of his internalization of materialistic and moralistic values.

To be aware of the importance of opposing value systems is one thing; to integrate those systems within oneself is quite another. But that is precisely what occurs within Rocky as the film progresses. For example, in his pre-fight training program, Rocky seems to understand tacitly both the materialistic and the moralistic senses of "purification." Rocky endures the hard work of training and at the same time he experiences the pain of self-sacrifice. (Not only does he rise before dawn and gulp down five raw eggs prior to his daily jogging ritual, but he also tells Adrian that "fooling around" will sap his energy.) The effort of training is clearly materialistic, linked again to the puritan work ethic. But the experiencing of pain through self-sacrifice is moralistic, an experience commonly advocated by spiritual leaders.[11] In the act of training, then, Rocky exhibits materialistic and moralistic values.

Further evidence of Rocky's internal synthesis of values can be found in his ability to avoid most of the weaknesses inherent in each myth as it stands alone.[12] Rocky is *self-interested* but not *self-centered*. The self-absorption of materialism is avoided most clearly in the scene in which Rocky has finally coaxed the timid Adrian into his apartment. As Rocky approaches the woman, the camera emphasizes the difference in their sizes. We are led to expect an ugly scene—perhaps even a rape attempt. But instead of removing Adrian's clothes, Rocky removes her glasses, saying, "I always knew you were pretty." Similarly, although Rocky doggedly goes after the black champion, Apollo Creed, he refuses to hate or even envy his opponent—another

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[11] Martin Luther King, Jr., for instance, believed in the necessity of "self-purification" of those engaging in nonviolent direct action against their oppressors; this involved spiritual preparation for resistance through training sessions, discussions, and role-playing. Suffering and self-denial were considered to be dignified and redemptive. See *Letter From Birmingham City Jail* (Philadelphia: American Friends Service Committee, 1963).

[12] Fisher notes that each myth has weaknesses, and thus is susceptible to rhetorical subversion. The weaknesses of the materialistic myth relevant to this study are that it is suspect for those who are troubled by its real-life manifestations of avarice, resentment, envy, and vindictiveness; it is compassionless and self-centered; it encourages manipulation and leads to exploitation. Relevant weaknesses of the moralistic myth are that its advocates often appear self-righteous, "holier-than-thou," scolding, and unrealistic, pp. 161-62.

proclivity of the materialistic orientation. Though he pursues what he wants persistently, Rocky avoids the pitfalls of manipulation, exploitation, and lack of compassion so often associated with materialistic values.

Neither does Rocky resemble anything like a self-righteous, holier-than-thou scold; the film is not a melodramatic morality play with Rocky as Virtue and Apollo as Vice. Rather, Rocky is portrayed with all his faults—he does legwork for a loan shark, he does get angry at Adrian's brother Pauli, he undermines Mickey's self-respect before he restores it. He learns through a series of painful failures how to *be* a man of dignity; that is, his character is transformed in the film. "Rocky" is more like a parable than a sermon; as the audience progressively identifies with a quite human hero, it experiences vicariously a crucial blending of freedoms which are usually antithetical in both conception and practice: the freedom *to do* and the freedom *to be*.[13] As before, we are not claiming that Rocky was consciously aware of the integration process that was occurring. We are claiming, however, that such a process did occur and that there is ample evidence in the film to substantiate the claim.

Resolution Through Dialectical Synthesis

Because Rocky had integrated an antithetical set of values, he had the potential to define the impending fight as dialectical synthesis. But to understand fully the rhetorical impact of the fight sequence, we need to examine the pre-fight orientations of the champion, Apollo Creed, as well as Rocky.

We have already hinted at Rocky's pre-fight choices. For Rocky, the fight would be—if he had his way—an enactment of integration. As such, it would not be a pre-arranged "circus" in which the outcome was already determined, but an event in which he and champion Creed would "competitively cooperate" to forge a synthesis of values. For many in the audience, the experiential impact of the fight stemmed from the creative energy entailed in enacting dialectical synthesis.

But the choice of form for the fight is not Rocky's to make—at least not without a struggle. An adversary (the antithesis to a thesis) always has a say in the choice of patterns, and Creed is no exception. Blatantly modeled after Mohammed Ali, Apollo Creed manifests, in caricature, the myth of materialism. When Creed (rhymes with greed) hits upon the idea of getting an unknown Italian to fight him on the Bicentennial ("Who discovered America—an Italian—right"), he exchanges these words with his promoter:

Promoter: "Apollo, I like it—it's very American."
Creed: "It's very smart."

[13] Fisher notes: "Where the materialistic myth involves a concept of freedom that emphasizes the freedom *to do* as one pleases [freedom from controls], the moralistic myth tends toward the idea of freedom that stresses the freedom *to be* as one conceives himself," p. 162.

As a symbol of materialism, Apollo Creed merely reflects the predominance of that myth. Because he desires no change at all, but rather a "show" of power and superiority, he approaches the fight with a set of predetermined rules—rules he naively thinks that Rocky shares. Of course, there is always the possibility that an inversion could occur—that Creed, the materialistic champion, would lose to his challenger. But that probability is very unlikely, particularly if Creed can choose his opponent.

Hence we can see in the pre-fight drama a difference between Rocky and Creed in regard to the patterns they each would enact in the impending conflict. A clear example of the pre-fight contrast occurs when Apollo's manager happens to watch Rocky on television pounding a side of beef in a meat locker:

Manager: "Hey, take a look at this guy you're gonna fight. He means business!"

Creed: "Yeah, I mean business, too."

The play on the word *business* is important. For the manager (who, by his growing realization of what is happening, reflects Rocky's consciousness), *business* means seriousness, effort, uncertainty of outcome. For Apollo, *business* is money from a show. For Creed, the fight would serve to increase his celebrity status and his pocketbook. For Rocky, the fight would be a chance not only to prove himself "not just another bum from the neighborhood," but also would serve as an arena in which an integrated set of values would be created through their combat.

The synthesis is most dramatically determined, however, in the fight itself. Rocky wins the choice of pattern near the end of the first round with a left field punch that almost decapitates the champion. Apollo's manager, who seemed to sense all along that this fight would be different, will not let Creed miss the choice that has just been made for him. After the first round, the manager whispers urgently into the dazed champion's ear: "He doesn't know it's a damn show! He thinks it's a damn fight! Finish this bum and let's go home!"

Begrudgingly, Creed accepts—as he must—the form of the fight that has been imposed upon him. Rounds 2 through 15 exemplify well conflict through dialectical synthesis. The concept neatly explains that rare bond of respect that grows between the fighters as the rounds pass. Though each man systematically reduces the other to a bloody pulp (after all, who ever said that dialectical synthesis would be easy?), there is a poignant realization of their joint effort in their closing exchange at the final bell:

Creed: "Ain't gonna be no rematch! Ain't gonna be no rematch!"

Rocky: "Don't want none!"

Just as ancient dialecticians acknowledged the products of their loving intellectual combat, so too do these combatants salute each other in mutual respect and acknowledgment of what they have created.

As we might expect from a conflict of dialectical synthesis, no one loses. Both win. Creed maintains his title—if by the narrowest of margins—and by so doing, the integrity of the materialistic myth is preserved. But Rocky wins, too, and for some, his victory is much more significant. He wins his self-respect, his worth, and his freedom. Most significantly, though, Rocky wins for us—albeit in ill-defined form—a broadened perspective on social values. For many Americans, Rocky, along with Carter, provided a renewal of hope.

Audience Role

As already noted, experiencing value change through dialectical synthesis creates strong identification between the audience and the change agents. Such was the case with "Rocky." Few who saw the film did not become engrossed in the fight sequence between Creed and Rocky. Reactions varied from states of anxiety and tension to acts of standing, screaming, and pantomiming what Rocky should do in order to knock Creed out. Curiously enough, the visceral reaction to the fight was, for many persons, a reality independent of whether they "liked" the film or not.

What could be the cause of this degree of involvement by the film audience? Several reasons seem insufficient. For one, the fact that the sequence was a physical prizefight seems inadequate to explain the intensity of its effect. There have been numerous such scenes in, for example, films like "Requiem for a Heavyweight," "Somebody Up There Likes Me," "The Joe Louis Story," and so on. Many of the fight sequences in these films contain as much drama, uncertainty, and physical brutality as the sequence in "Rocky." Neither could the technically superb choreography account fully for the effect of the sequence. For if it could, then the same persons who stood and cheered in "Rocky" would stand and cheer for film documentaries of fights—where the techniques do not have to be staged.

We argue that American audiences knew—tacitly, of course—that more was at stake in that fight sequence than the identity of the next Heavyweight Boxing Champion. Audiences experienced in "Rocky" the creation of an integrated set of values that merged materialism and moralism, while reaffirming the central worth of both value orientations. And for many, it could well have been their participation in the generative process of dialectical synthesis that gave the fight its magnetic appeal.

IMPLICATIONS

Like any heuristic concept, the model of social change presented here is not a cookie cutter; it cannot replace the creative insights of the intelligent critic. We hope that future study in rhetorical criticism would explore at least two avenues suggested by the model. First, the model needs to be conceptually and methodologically refined. Second, since values—their forma-

tion, affirmation, and subversion—have always occupied a dominant place in rhetorical messages, perhaps the model could be extended to other rhetorical arenas than political acts and films. Insofar as the model alerts critics to how values function rhetorically, we may gain insight into the overall process of social change.

Our analysis of "Rocky" also implies that "underdogs" must come to understand the total value structure of the society from which they are alienated if they are to achieve dignity within it. (For how can one change what one does not know?) Ideally, subordinates proceed through unfocused alienation to increased psychological awareness (i.e., through either dialectical transformation or synthesis) of the dominant value structures that exist in tension. And if the "common people" seek *cultural* as well as personal change, they must educate representatives of the power elite to the necessity of change through some sort of symbolic confrontation. That is, because the persons endorsing the dominant value system in a society very rarely re-distribute power or re-orient their values voluntarily, the subordinates have an obligation to make them aware of the maladies within the existing system.[14] As we have shown in "Rocky," often this educational process can make the power elite aware of the situation and, occasionally, can dictate the options of individual and social action. Rocky, it will be recalled, defined for Apollo Creed quite clearly and dramatically the pattern that their conflict was to take.

Nor should the humanistic potential of the dialectical synthesis pattern be underestimated. For when this pattern can be enacted, when at least one of the combatants has experienced this pattern internally, then symbolic conflict does not have to be competitive, such that when one wins, the other must lose. It is equally true, as we have noted throughout, that dialectical synthesis is the exception and not the rule. The rule is dialectical transformation, a situation in which there must be a winner and loser (the loser usually being the underdog). The implication of the film, of course, is that a viable, though difficult, alternative does exist.

Herbert W. Simons notes the prominence of the "system-as-organism" metaphor—the idea that protestors are "pathological," "unhealthy," a "disease." These aspects of the metaphor surely stress the dialectical transformation pattern where subordinates are conceived as losers—losers that are dangerous to the system. But he counters that even the organic metaphor does not demand that the sole function of the system (enforced by those in power) should be to maintain homeostasis:

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[14] Martin Luther King, Jr., for instance, stressed that it is the job of the nonviolent resister to educate the majority not only to the societal problem, but also to the intentions of the mass movement to exercise "power under discipline," in *Stride Toward Freedom* (New York: Harper and Row, 1958), pp. 211-19. J. Robert Cox notes that many liberals believed that it was their duty to educate the majority as to the evils of the Vietnam War, in "Perspectives on Rhetorical Criticism of Movements: Antiwar Dissent, 1964-1970," *Western Speech*, 38 (1974), 254-68.

> Besides maintaining basic life functions, the 'healthy' system or organism changes, grows, adapts to problems. Single-minded preoccupation with preserving life functions is indeed a sign of an aged and withered organism, one not contributing very much and not likely to survive for very long.[15]

Indeed, those in control may *adjust* to the challenger's demands rather than totally *capitulate*.[16] Dialectical synthesis at once preserves the social order (after all, Creed *did* retain his championship), while at the same time allows the challengers to achieve their own measure of victory and success. "Rocky" promotes the possibility of a social order one step beyond peaceful coexistence—that of mutual transcendence through cooperative action.[17]

Finally, there is a haunting worrisomeness about "Rocky." It could be rooted in a gnawing discomfort that some astute political observers find in Jimmy Carter as well. For how permanent *are* the consequences of the dialectical synthesis process or, for that matter, *any* primarily symbolic ritual of conflict? What becomes of the American voter two years after Carter takes office? What becomes of Rocky and Adrian two years after their "moment"? One can rather easily imagine Rocky, still in the Philadelphia slums, stumbling up to someone in a bar and slurring, "You shoulda seen me in there with Creed—I was really somethin'!"

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[15] Herbert W. Simons, "Persuasion in Social Conflicts: A Critique of Prevailing Conceptions and a Framework for Future Research," *Speech Monographs,* 29 (1972), 238.

[16] For a description of various strategies that control may employ, including adjustment and capitulation, see: John Waite Bowers and Donovan J. Ochs, *The Rhetoric of Agitation and Control* (Reading, Massachusetts: Addison-Wesley, 1971), pp. 39-56.

[17] Although we have focused on dialectical synthesis as a method of value integration, the method need not be restricted to conflicts in value. For example, one of the more imaginative applications of the method occurs in "Close Encounters of the Third Kind," where music is the medium, dialectical synthesis is the method, and initial communicative contact between ontologically different beings is the goal.