

Changing Perspectives on Rhetorical Criticism as a Forensic Event

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The nature of rhetorical criticism as a forensic event has been the subject of a number of national and regional convention programs and a good deal of debate within the individual events community. Essentially, this discussion has proceeded along the lines of the arguments originated in the controversy between classical and contemporary rhetorical theorists in the field of speech communication. Although the National Forensic Association has developed rules for the event which are indicative of the contemporary perspective,¹ there appears to be no end to the discussion—among coaches and on the ballots of students—regarding what should be considered "legitimate" rhetorical criticism.

One of the primary reasons rhetorical criticism is viewed with confusion by many members of the forensic community is the lack of an adequate definition of the theoretical purpose and function of the event. A secondary factor contributing to this perplexing problem is that too many coaches/judges have limited, if any, educational exposure to rhetorical analysis outside the forensic event. Without a basic framework from which to approach criticism, many of our colleagues have difficulty understanding the requirements of rhetorical criticism from a theoretical perspective. Furthermore, this intellectual discomfiture with the event has undoubtedly contributed to the lack of student participation in rhetorical criticism.

This essay, thus, presents a working model of rhetorical criticism as a forensic event. This will be accomplished initially by presenting a general definition of rhetoric, followed by an explanation of a critical perspective for the event. The final section of this essay articulates a specific purpose and function which appears to be

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¹The rules for the N.F.A. event have been expanded to include "any legitimate method" of rhetorical analysis and the notion that criticism "opens up the artifact" under consideration. Thus, the organization has recognized the rhetorical significance of modern suasory forms in addition to oral discourse.

appropriate for the limitations inherent in the act of rhetorical criticism in forensic competition.

DEFINITION OF RHETORIC

In order to understand the nature of the rhetorical-critical act, it is first necessary to define rhetoric itself. This task, of course, is not as simple as it might seem since a dictionary definition is, at best, theoretically naive. It would be presumptuous to suggest that there is a specific definition of rhetoric which would satisfy all scholars in the field. Since, however, the focus of this article is forensics, a definition of rhetoric which is appropriate for the event of rhetorical criticism will be developed. This exercise in rhetorical theory may appear to be superfluous to some, but defining the subject matter of the event will serve as a critical introduction to the later discussion concerning methodology, purpose, and function.

Most of our colleagues are familiar with Aristotle's definition of rhetoric: "the faculty of discovering in the particular case what are the available means of persuasion."² This classical perspective of the art of rhetoric served the field as it was revived during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The scope of rhetoric was limited to the spoken word, since this school of thought descended from the oral tradition of the Greeks. This view holds that rhetoric is an intentional act of oral discourse in which the speaker attempts to instruct, entertain, or persuade the audience.³

Contemporary theorists have broadened both the scope and the function of rhetoric. Instead of limiting its subject matter to formal oral discourse and its theoretical grounds to the discovery of the available means of persuasion, this perspective posits that rhetoric is the method by which humans symbolically structure reality.

At the very core of the new rhetoric is the contention that what people think they know cannot be demonstrated to be factually true. Hence, in the contingent arenas of political, social, moral and religious affairs, man can do no more than hold with uncertainty those ideas which are a unique product of his selective experience.⁴

It is this basic premise that underlies the contemporary perspective. This view of rhetoric as epistemic⁵ assumes that "human needs

²Aristotle, *The Rhetoric of Aristotle*, trans., Lane Cooper (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1960), p. 7.

³For an excellent synopsis of this critical perspective, see Lester A. Thonssen, A. Craig Baird and Waldo W. Braden, *Speech Criticism* (New York: Ronald Press, 1970).

⁴Richard Cherwitz, "Rhetoric as 'A Way of Knowing': An Attenuation of the Epistemological Claims of the 'New Rhetoric,'" *The Southern Speech Communication Journal*, 42 (1977), p. 29.

⁵Scott notes that "it is important to seek to understand rhetoric as of way of knowing not *the* way." Robert L. Scott, "On Viewing Rhetoric as

generate selective perceptions and ultimately organize and structure the basic reality in which people operate."⁶ Language "is a way of sizing up reality."⁷ As the world has become increasingly sophisticated, systems of symbols—in a word, rhetoric—have become the basis for social behavior.

In complex cultures, the symbol system may be the only tool which transcends the limits of culturally diverse life-styles, classes, organizational hierarchies, and unique personalities. Thus, the symbols system may ultimately provide the common factors creating and sustaining the social and political community.⁸

In light of this cultural emphasis on language and other symbolic forms as our method of structuring reality, a different, broader definition of rhetoric has evolved. Even if the term is still to be equated with the concept of "persuasion" rhetoric can no longer be limited in scope to intentional, oral discourse. Although Aristotle may have been brilliant, he did not envision the explosion of persuasive forms witnessed in this century.

Thus, a broad definition of rhetoric would seem to be representative of the contemporary approach to the subject within the field of speech communication. Forensics, an activity with unique roots in the discipline of rhetoric, should adopt a definition which is compatible with its academic grounding. Such a definition must extend the limits of the classical perspective so it becomes inclusive, rather than exclusive, of modern forms of rhetoric: "rhetoric may be the art of persuasion, that is, it may be seen from one angle as a practical capacity to find means to ends on specific occasions; but rhetoric must also be seen more broadly as a human potentiality to understand the human condition."⁹

Although there is room for disagreement, Burke offers a definition of rhetoric which fits these criteria. Rhetoric is "rooted in an essential function of language itself, a function that is wholly realistic, and is continually born anew; the use of language as a symbolic means of inducing cooperation in beings that by nature respond to symbols."¹⁰ Burke further expands the scope of rhetoric, positing that the field consists of all that has meaning, since the "naming" of something involves symbolic choices. "Wherever

Epistemic: Ten Years Later," *Central States Speech Journal*, 27 (1976), p. 259.

⁶James W. Chesebro, "Political Communication," *The Quarterly Journal of Speech*, 62 (1973), p. 298.

⁷Kenneth Burke, *The Philosophy of Literary Form: Studies in Symbolic Action* (New York: Vintage Press, 1957), p. 5.

⁸Chesebro, pp. 298-299.

⁹Scott, p. 266.

¹⁰Kenneth Burke, *A Rhetoric of Motives* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1969), p. 43.

there is persuasion, there is rhetoric. And wherever there is 'meaning,' there is persuasion."¹¹

The differences between defining rhetoric as the study of the available means of persuasion for oral discourse and referring to it as a symbolic means of inducing cooperation are obvious. Rhetoric becomes a broad field which has as its central focus the study of the development of meaning as opposed to a narrow discipline involved with the development of oral persuasion/influence. In brief, rhetoric is now viewed by many scholars as a form of reality construction.

The point to be made at this juncture regarding criticism is rather simple, yet it is filled with tremendous implications for the student, coach, and scholar: It is not *what* we study, but rather *how* we study it, which now defines rhetorical criticism from other analytical forms. This conceptualization enlarges the scope of the subject matter for critical consideration. As the Committee on the Advancement and Refinement of Rhetorical Criticism at the "Wingspread Conference" noted in its report: "Rhetorical Criticism may be applied to any human act, process, product, or artifact which, in the critic's view, may formulate, sustain or modify attention, perceptions, attitudes, or behavior."¹²

Since the conferees greatly enlarged the subject matter available for rhetorical analysis, the importance of methodology as a somewhat limiting factor has become crucial. Critics are rhetorical not because they examine something called "rhetoric;" rather, a critic is rhetorical because of the types of questions asked and the methods of analysis chosen. In the past, rhetorical critics studied and analyzed speeches. Students of rhetorical criticism may continue to analyze oral discourse, yet they should now feel free to explore different, more contemporary suatory formats. While rhetorical criticism was once defined by its subject matter and its methodology, it is now primarily defined in terms of its methodological approach to critical analysis, excluding subject matter as a limiting consideration.

THE CRITICAL PERSPECTIVE

The shift in the concept of rhetorical criticism from subject and method limitations to methodological considerations alone as its defining factor leads to a critical perspective which is different

¹¹Burke, *Rhetoric*, p. 172.

¹²Thomas O. Sloan, Richard B. Gregg, Thomas R. Nilsen, Irving J. Rein, Herbert W. Simons, Herman G. Stelzner and Donald W. Zacharias, "The Report of the Committee on the Advancement and Refinement of Rhetorical Criticism," in Lloyd F. Bitzer and Edwin Black, eds., *The Prospect of Rhetoric* (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice Hall, 1971), p. 220.

from that of the traditional approach. The classical critic possessed, "A dispassionate, objective attitude toward the object of investigation . . . which enable[d] him to view facts and arrive at judgments with a minimum of emotional disposition."¹³ While Thonssen, Baird and Braden's admonitions regarding overt emotionalism constitute sound advice, it should be noted that such calls for objectivity cannot be answered due to the limitations inherent in the human condition. As Swanson has argued, "understanding the nature of rhetorical criticism must proceed from the assumption that individuals, including rhetorical critics as well as social scientists, work with the experience of objects rather than with objects themselves, unfiltered by experience."¹⁴ While Swanson's statement appears to be similar in nature to Plato's "cave allegory,"¹⁵ Chesebro and Hamsher make the transition to contemporary social theory, noting that, "The critic, historian or not, is controlled or influenced by his or her immediate culture; critics offer rhetorical assertions about what they selectively perceive something to be, and what relative value and role they believe an event fulfills within a society."¹⁶

From this perspective, the critic does not create the ultimate interpretation of a phenomenon. Since meaning is relative (because it is created rhetorically) and the critic is culturally bound, the rhetorical critic presents arguments and analysis supporting an interpretation of the subject under consideration; good criticism is then based upon sound arguments and the effective application of an appropriate method of analysis. The critic, realizing the relativity of judgments, focuses upon experience itself, setting aside comparisons with the "objective world."¹⁷

This perspective regarding criticism-as-argument is evident in the "critic-as-artist" paradigm. "The 'critic-artist' is a rhetor who, by taking audience into account, phrases his insights, analyses, and judgments in a way that orders or reorders the rhetorical event."¹⁸ In this model there is a tacit acknowledgement on the part

¹³Thonssen, Baird and Braden, p. 22.

¹⁴David L. Swanson, "A Reflective View of the Epistemology of Critical Inquiry," *Communication Monographs*, 44 (1977), p. 212.

¹⁵In Plato's famous "Allegory of the Cave," humans were viewed as experiencing merely the "shadows" of reality until the philosopher brings them out into the "light" of day, where they may discern the Truth. Plato, *The Republic of Plato*, trans., Allan Bloom (New York: Basic Books, 1968), pp. 193-196.

¹⁶James W. Chesebro and Caroline D. Hamsher, "Contemporary Rhetorical Theory and Criticism: Dimensions of the New Rhetoric," *Communication Monographs*, 42 (1975), p. 316.

¹⁷Swanson, p. 210. Swanson refers to this as the "reflexive attitude."

¹⁸Sloan, et al., p. 223.

of the audience and speaker that there is an element of persuasion involved in the presentation of a rhetorical criticism. Since the critic forms perceptions of phenomena based upon personal insight and methodological order, the audience should not accept an analysis as being filled with "objective truth." By the same token, there is a requirement on the speaker that "mind and experience must be drawn on creatively to form coherent views of the phenomena of discourse."¹⁹ This paradigm "fits" the critical perspective acknowledging that, since reality is socially constructed, rhetorical critics must persuade the audience to accept their interpretation of an event.

The key to understanding this perspective may be in the use of rhetorical methodologies. For example, a student who chooses a method derived from Aristotle would be led, by the types of questions asked, to a different set of conclusions than a student who chooses a method derived from Burke. An analysis of the rhetoric of social movements from a classical perspective would entail the analysis of speeches which were indicative of the persuasive intentions of the movement. An analysis of the identical social upheaval from a contemporary perspective might choose to concentrate upon the rhetorical form of the movement—the stages which social crusades move through.²⁰ In each case, students may choose to analyze the identical event from different methodological perspectives. These perspectives may lead the students to different conclusions, yet the students may still perform legitimate, credible acts of rhetorical criticism. In each case, the critics would order an event based upon their methodological perspectives and argue for the validity of their conclusions regarding the rhetorical nature of the subject matter.

This critical perspective may have been foreshadowed in the classical approach articulated by Thonssen, Baird and Braden, when they noted that, "a rhetorical judgment embraces all the knowledge in the critic's possession; it draws upon his total resources."²¹ Implicit here is an understanding that criticism is more than the application of a methodology to an event—it is not a science, rather, it is an art. A rhetorical criticism represents the nexus at which theory joins practice.

¹⁹Robert L. Scott and Bernard L. Brock, *Methods of Rhetorical Criticism: A Twentieth Century Perspective* (New York: Harper and Row, 1972), p. 125.

²⁰For a discussion of the form of social movements, see Leland M. Griffin, "A Dramatistic Theory of the Rhetoric of Movements," in William Rueckert, ed., *Critical Responses to Kenneth Burke* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1969), p. 461.

²¹Thonssen, Baird and Braden, p. 12.

While the method of analysis in rhetorical criticism must be grounded in rhetorical theory, the critic-as-artist model still allows for some additional creativity. Any method of rhetorical analysis, singularly or in combination with other methods, may be used to aid the critic in the attempt to "open up the artifact" under scrutiny. This is a departure from the more traditional approach to criticism in which critics employ a single methodology in their endeavor.

This liberalizing perspective can only add positively to the forensic event by permitting students to examine contemporary subject matter which they may consider to be of greater relevance to their lives (such as music, advertising, movies) using different analytical tools. While a methodology must be clearly articulated, it is possible to perform enlightening criticism through a combination of rhetorical formats. For example, it would be naive to use a rhetorical method to analyze a song without also noting, in musical terms, concepts such as beat, tone, and melody. It is incumbent upon the rhetorical critic to use both rhetorical and non-rhetorical methods of analysis in whatever combinations appear to present the most effective analysis of the subject under consideration.

THE PURPOSE AND FUNCTION OF RHETORICAL CRITICISM IN FORENSICS

If the rhetorical critic is virtually unlimited in the choice of subject matter, and if the methodologies, while grounded in rhetorical theory, may be creative, what is the definition of rhetorical criticism as a forensic event? While the contest rules of the National Forensic Association "fit" the perspective articulated above, additional clarification could be provided in the following definitional statement:

Rhetorical Criticism is a persuasive event involving the description, analysis, interpretation and evaluation of phenomena through the use of methodologies grounded in rhetorical theory.

This definition clearly articulates the nature of the forensic event as it has developed from the contemporary perspective. First, it does not limit the subject matter for consideration by the student-critic. As noted previously, this is not only in keeping with the current state of affairs within the field of rhetoric, it is also beneficial to increased student participation in the event. Rhetoric, through the study of contemporary suatory forms, can be made to "come alive" for our students. This would expose many more contestants to the study of rhetoric. Second, the definition acknowledges the importance of theoretical grounding for the methodologies employed in rhetorical analysis. This is both theoretically sound and pedagogically desirable.

Third, inclusion of the notion that rhetorical criticism is, in part, a persuasive event serves as an admission that the critic actually argues for a specific interpretation of a phenomenon. The event then embodies certain aspects of both exposition and persuasion, since the contestant must not only explicate the method and the inner-workings of the rhetorical act, but also serve as an advocate for an interpretation of that act.

Finally, the definition presents the four stages of rhetorical criticism (description, analysis, interpretation and evaluation),²² including the necessity for some form of rhetorical evaluation. Good criticism should have an evaluative component. This position is articulated by many rhetorical scholars, all of whom essentially echo the position of Scott and Brock: "In some way or another, implicitly or explicitly, [the critic] says that the rhetoric, product or process, is well done or ill."²³

In making a rhetorical evaluation, the critic should not be limited by the classical perspective, with its emphasis upon ascertaining the effect of the rhetoric. Each methodology inevitably leads the critic toward certain categories of evaluations: some are concerned with ethics; others with motive or purpose; still other methods focus upon formal consistency, genre or style. The key for the critic is to make the appropriate evaluations which are natural outgrowths of the kinds of questions asked by the rhetorical method of analysis.

Having articulated a theoretical position, several conclusions can be drawn regarding the purpose(s) of the forensic event of rhetorical criticism. Apart from the development of general speaking skills, such as organization and delivery (which are common to a number of events), the specific goals of rhetorical criticism are: 1) to instruct students in rhetorical theory and criticism; 2) to develop an understanding of the relationship among theory, criticism, and practice; 3) to pursue detailed rhetorical study of phenomena. Furthermore, ancillary purposes for the event may be to develop a greater understanding of analysis and criticism as important tools for democratic citizenship and/or to encourage students to understand their own value systems. Since criticism is both creative and reflexive, and since critics must make evaluations, rhetorical criticism can help students to gain perspective regarding their own value hierarchies. The necessity of making judgments in a rational, persuasive manner enables the students to ask questions of

²²Karlyn Kohrs Campbell, *Critiques of Contemporary Rhetoric* (Belmont: Wadsworth Publishing Co., 1972), p. 12.

²³Scott and Brock, p. 9. For a quick summary of the concept of evaluation in rhetorical criticism see Stephen E. Lucas, "The Schism in Rhetorical Scholarship," *The Quarterly Journal of Speech*, 67 (1981), pp. 1-20.

themselves. In justifying a critical evaluation, the students ultimately examine how and why they have come upon the defended position. As Wander and Jenkins conclude, "Values live in human beings; consequently, each honest effort at criticism plumbs the depths of the critic's understanding of his or herself."²⁴

The question at this juncture is rather pragmatic in nature: What should be the expectations of the coach/judge concerning the essence of rhetorical criticism in forensic competition? The answer lies in a brief examination of the two distinct functions of rhetorical criticism within the field of rhetoric. Basically, criticism serves both a theory-building and a pragmatic function in rhetorical study.²⁵ Contributions to theory are made by critical efforts which result in "the discovery of forms that permit and evoke participation, of processes that transcend argumentative controversies and immediate situations, of transformations that restructure perceptions and create new perspectives, or syntheses of substantive-stylistic stratagems that form genres or rhetoric, and of archetypal forms of interaction."²⁶ This is a laudable goal for scholarly contributions to the field of rhetoric, yet it is one that may not be attainable in a ten minute speech.

The expectations of many judges regarding the mandatory inclusion of the theory-building function within a speech often result in shoddy attempts by students to "add" to rhetorical theory. Comments such as, "We can see from the application of this methodology that theory XYZ is accurate," do a disservice to this function of rhetorical criticism. This is not to say that an occasional, insightful argument is not possible; it is, however, highly improbable given the constraints inherent in the forensic event.

The other function of criticism is both practical and intellectually defensible. The pragmatic role may be defined as the illumination of phenomena in terms of its rhetorical significance. The judge should expect that the student, using a rhetorical methodology, should concentrate upon the examination and the evaluation of the subject material under consideration, explaining the "how" and "why" and evaluating the phenomenon from a rhetorical perspective. In this manner, the contestant can enlighten the audience regarding the rhetorical content of the event while avoiding commentary concerning the actual process of criticism. Intellectually, both critic and judge gain from achieving a greater understanding

²⁴Phillip Wander and Steven Jenkins, "Rhetoric, Society, and the Critical Response," *The Quarterly Journal of Speech*, 58 (1972), p. 441.

²⁵Karlyn Kohrs Campbell, "Criticism: Ephemeral and Enduring," *The Speech Teacher*, 23 (1974), p. 12.

²⁶Campbell, "Criticism," p. 12.

of the event and the importance of rhetoric to society in general.

Concentration upon the pragmatic function of rhetorical criticism should not be viewed as sanctioning ragged efforts in the application of theory to practice. A student still must apply an appropriate, clearly delineated rhetorical methodology to some artifact. The analysis should do more than merely "pigeon-hole" elements of the persuasive process, since good criticism involves both analysis and synthesis. The removal of the mandatory "contribution to theory" component from the expectations of judges places the emphasis upon the "opening-up of the artifact," an important critical function which is still difficult to perform adequately in ten minutes.

Concentration upon this function does not mean that speeches will be devoid of theory, nor does it mean that students will not attempt to make valuable contributions to theory-building. The key is to remove the expectation that the speech should prove something about theory, instead placing judicial emphasis on the pragmatic aspects of rhetorical criticism. Judges should continue to make helpful comments regarding the appropriate use and application of methodologies. Indeed, these criteria are actually enhanced by the emphasis upon the pragmatic function of criticism. In this light, the purpose and function of rhetorical criticism in forensics becomes unified. Some sample questions, designed to reflect this unification, which might be used by judges in order to evaluate the event include: "What have we learned about the rhetorical nature of the phenomenon under consideration?" "Is the method appropriate for this critical inquiry?" "Is the method correctly and accurately applied?" "Has the analysis shed new light on the topic?" "Is the critical evaluation a natural outgrowth of the methodology?" "Is the speaker persuasive in presenting the conclusions?"

In order to fulfill this pragmatic function of rhetorical criticism, a student must first gain significant knowledge concerning the subject of the critical inquiry. Next, an appropriate method of analysis must be selected. The methodology must then be used in order to explain the rhetorical significance of the subject, interpreting both method and artifact. Finally, an evaluation, either implicit or explicit, must be made concerning the scrutinized material. These basic steps should be the focus of the expectations of both contestants and judges regarding the event of rhetorical criticism.

The roots of intercollegiate forensics are planted firmly in the field of rhetoric. Thus, rhetorical criticism is one of the most important speaking events, since it may be used to educate students in the scholarly intricacies of the academic parent. Having

broadened the scope and direction of the event to include non-traditional rhetorical forms, the National Forensic Association has made an attempt to make rhetorical criticism more relevant to students and closer to the types of criticism found in the journals of the professional organizations. This essay has explained some of the theoretical groundings for the event rules and has advocated a perspective regarding the expectations of students and judges. In order to improve this important intellectual experience for students in forensics, the forensic community must broaden its definitions and reshape its perspectives and expectations regarding the purpose and function of rhetorical criticism.