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Rhetorical Criticism as Synecdoche for Agency

I have been a rhetorical critic from the time I made the decision to participate as a scholar in the communication discipline. I have never really considered using any other method to answer the questions I want to ask about rhetoric or communication. The reason, I believe, is that the act of rhetorical criticism serves for me as synecdoche for agency in general.

I am defining *agency* in a standard way here—as the capacity to exert “some degree of control over the social relations in which one is enmeshed”¹ or, more rhetorically, to exert “influence through symbolic action.”² I am aware of the discussion about the impact of postmodernism on rhetorical agency, and my view is that agency is located neither exclusively with an agent nor determined by struc-

ture but lies in the interplay between the two.³ I see rhetoric playing a critical role in this intermediate view of agency because it is the mechanism that enables the agent to engage but also to develop creative responses to structural or material conditions in a negotiation between self and structure.

The essence of the argument I want to make about rhetorical criticism and agency is that the process of rhetorical criticism mimics the process of agency. In both processes the agent/critic selects something on which to focus or engages a perceived structure of some kind. The agent/critic then interprets that structure in particular ways and shares that interpretation with others. The result is a world of the agent's/critic's own creation. I turn now to an explanation of each of these three steps.

Selecting an Artifact/Engaging Structure

My first agentic choice occurs in the initial step of rhetorical criticism—selecting a text or engaging an artifact to analyze. This is a process not of encountering artifacts but of attending to artifacts, so infinite possibilities are available to me. I make choices about where to focus my attention, directing my attention to some artifacts and ignoring those not selected. As I interact with a selected artifact and continue to select it, I reify it and stabilize it, making it part of my world. Because I am the one who calls an artifact into being with my act of attention and who bestows meaning on it with my act of interpretation, I attribute no inherent power to the artifact, for to do so would cede my agency to the artifact. I retain agency, then, as I attend, select, and focus to choose an artifact to analyze.

The first step of criticism, the selection of an artifact, is parallel to the first step of the agentic process, which begins with engagement with the structural environment. Agency is “always agency toward something,”⁴ and that something is a perceived structure. As I perceive something, I construct it, and I sustain it with my attention. I am reminded, in this step of criticism, to consider my starting points in the general process of enactment of agency. I cannot attend to and engage with everything in the world, so I am always choosing. Some conditions, in other words, are not more “real” than others and cannot require my attention to them. Just because some people have chosen to create a war in Iraq and continue to attend to it, holding it in their worlds, does not mean it must capture my attention. I always have the choice of asking what other possibilities are available, and when I look for more options to which to attend, I see them. I am encouraged, then, to reflect on whether I want the ideas, constructions, objects, or conditions on which I am focusing because what I choose constitutes the building blocks of my world.

Analyzing an Artifact/Interpreting Structure

The second step of criticism offers a second agentic choice. I can choose how to interpret an artifact on which I focus, and my choices are limited only by my imagination and the dictates of criterial adequacy for presenting my analysis to others. The unlimited possibilities available at this step are most evident at the moment when I initiate the coding of an artifact. Probably my favorite part of the process, this is when I have no idea what my interpretation will be or what schema I will formulate to explain an artifact, and I stand poised at the artifact's edge, eager to jump in.

Although critics have virtually infinite responses available for interpreting an artifact, they do not always take advantage of that freedom. The option is always available to choose scripted or conventional interpretations. Such interpretations may be scripted by method, for example, when critics choose a critical method and apply it to their artifacts. Others choose scripted interpretations when they know the results they want to accomplish with their criticism before they begin the analysis or believe an artifact itself requires a particular response. In such scripted interpretations, critics are not surprised by what they discover because they already know that, for example, an artifact exemplifies oppression, encourages consumption, or inhibits social justice. Although a scripted response is legitimate in some situations and with some artifacts, it tends to illustrate and reinforce existing theories and understandings rather than encourage the development of new ones. It also restricts agency; to tell a new story using a conventional script is difficult because the script encourages making the same choices that were made in the past. In contrast, innovating in response to an artifact challenges received patterns of understanding and action. Such innovation contributes to the development of theory that has the capacity to challenge assumptions, to reconsider what is taken for granted, and to generate new options.

The process of analyzing an artifact is a reminder to me that a major part of agency involves interpretation of the structural conditions to which I attend. I have infinite responses available to any given structure I perceive. My exigence is not a structure but my interpretation of that structure, making structure dependent on my interpretive choices. Because structure is not something real and immutable outside of me, changing the structural world happens when I change my analysis, change my interpretation, change my mind.

Sharing Criticism/Interacting with Other Agents

As a rhetorical critic, I interact with other critics and with readers. This interaction takes the form of sharing my analyses with others and inviting

them to consider my interpretation of an artifact. I have choices in this process as well. I can ignore other analyses, label others' analyses *wrong* or *incorrect*, or try to discover what is useful for me from those analyses. My preference is for the latter. I do not believe that any interpretation of an artifact can be wrong—instead, interpretations are simply less or more useful to me. Because I do not find a particular analysis useful because of where I am in my thinking or interests does not mean it is not useful for others. Thus those analyses I find useful, I include in my world; those I do not remain available for others to use if they make sense to them.

The enactment of agency involves interaction with others, just as rhetorical critics interact with others. The process of sharing my work as a rhetorical critic reminds me that there is no need to insist that my interpretation of the world prevail over others. When I go through a buffet line, selecting foods I want to eat, I do not have to lobby the manager of the restaurant to remove all of the foods from the buffet I do not like; I simply choose those that I prefer and let others choose foods in line with their preferences. The same is true for my choices as an agent in interaction with others. I respect the preferences of others, trusting that they are making decisions that are best for their lives and do not try to dissuade them from their particular agentic choices.

Outcomes of Rhetorical Criticism/Agency

Agency is an important construct for me because I believe it is the means through which rhetors use symbols to construct the world. Choice is the basic mechanism by which the world is made manifest,⁵ and my agency is enacted through my choices. The choices I make as a critic/agent function epistemically to create my world—and I mean my literal, material world as well as my symbolic one. With Butler, I adhere to the notion that the structural world not only “bears cultural constructions” but is itself a construction.⁶ Agency, then, is always functioning and is always efficacious in that it is always accomplishing world creation.

Rhetorical criticism is not simply a process of explicating artifacts and contributing to rhetorical theory. It functions as synecdoche for agency that reminds me that I always have choices and am always choosing as I move through my day. It also suggests to me how much power and responsibility I have as an agent. Rhetorical criticism admonishes me to select with care the artifacts or structures on which I focus, to choose interpretations carefully but imaginatively, and to engage in respectful interactions with others, knowing that my choices at all of these junctures are creating the world in which I live.

Notes

¹William H. Sewell, Jr. “A Theory of Structure: Duality, Agency, and Transformation.” *American Journal of Sociology* 98 (1992), 20.

²Karlyn Kohrs Campbell. “Agency: Promiscuous and Protean.” *Communication and Critique/Cultural Studies* 2 (2005), 2.

³Among those who hold such an intermediate view of agency are Maureen A. Mahoney and Barbara Yngvesson, “The Construction of Subjectivity and the Paradox of Resistance: Reintegrating Feminist Anthropology and Psychology,” *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 18 (1992), 50; Catherine Egle Waggoner and D. Lynn O’Brien Hallstein, “Feminist Ideologies Meet Fashionable Bodies: Managing the Agency/Constraint Conundrum,” *Text and Performance Quarterly* 21 (2001), 31, 40; John Louis Lucaites and Celeste Michelle Condit, “Epilogue: Contributions from Rhetorical Theory,” *Contemporary Rhetorical Theory: A Reader*, ed. John Louis Lucaites, Celeste Michelle Condit, and Sally Caudill (New York: Guilford, 1999), 610, 612; and Judith Butler, *The Psychic Life of Power: Theories in Subjection* (Stanford: Stanford UP, 1997), 2.

⁴Mustafa Emirbayer and Ann Mische. “What Is Agency?” *American Journal of Sociology* 103 (1998), 975.

⁵Among the sources that articulate this idea in various ways are Peter L. Berger and Thomas Luckmann, *The Social Construction of Reality: A Treatise in the Sociology of Knowledge* (Garden City, NY: Anchor/Doubleday, 1966); Benjamin Lee Whorf, *Language, Thought & Reality: Selected Writings of Benjamin Lee Whorf*, ed. John B. Carroll (Cambridge: MIT, 1956); Jonathan Potter, *Representing Reality: Discourse, Rhetoric and Social Construction* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 1996); Fred Alan Wolf, *Taking the Quantum Leap: The New Physics for Nonscientists* (New York: Harper & Row, 1981); Amit Goswami, Richard E. Reed, and Maggie Goswami, *The Self-Aware Universe: How Consciousness Creates the Material World* (New York: Jeremy P. Tarcher/Penguin Putnam, 1993); Robert Sapolsky, “Sick of Poverty,” *Scientific American* Dec. 2005: 92–99; and Martin E. P. Seligman, *Authentic Happiness* (New York: Free, 2002), esp. chapter 4.

⁶Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of Sex* (New York: Routledge, 1993), 28.