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Public Speaking

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**Critique of Charles Marsh’s Speech on Dietrich Bonhoeffer**

**Intro**

When Mr. Marsh very first took the stage, he spent a few seconds bantering with the man who introduced him, with whom he was apparently friends. He followed with a story about sitting behind John Denver on a flight, which seemed unrelated to the topic of his speech. Then he employed one of the techniques we’ve discussed in class, asking the audience, “how many of you have heard of the person, Dietrich Bonhoeffer?” as a means of engaging the audience. He came into his speech with his credibility already somewhat established (he’s written a book on Bonhoeffer), but he reiterated his credentials by telling the audience how he was awarded a position named after Dietrich Bonhoeffer at the University of Berlin. He did not state his main points, instead launching straight into the story of Bonhoeffer’s life, starting around Christmas of 1933.

Mr. Marsh did a decent job with his intro. He piqued the audience’s interest by asking if they’d heard of Bonhoeffer, but not until he told a quick story unrelated to his speech. He pointed to the topic by saying, “I look forward to introducing you to Bonhoeffer and his time, and having a conversation about his legacy and promise for our own struggles and our own conflict in America in 2015.” He did a good job of paving the way – he established his credibility by mentioning the position he was awarded at the University of Berlin and also quickly established a rapport with the audience by joking about students being forced to come see him speak for their classes. He did not, however, preview his main points, and did not make it clear when he was transitioning out of his intro and into his first main point. So, of the four p’s that make a good intro, he accomplished roughly two and a half.

**Organization**

Broadly speaking, the speech was organized into a series of vignettes drawn from both Mr. Marsh’s own life and Bonhoeffer’s. He progressed chronologically through these vignettes, meaning that the organizational pattern he used was the Chronological pattern. He began by explaining the situation in 1933, when Adolf Hitler rose to power. He continued by talking about his own time in Berlin, during which he began researching Bonhoeffer’s life, and from there spent about five minutes on several short stories about Bonhoeffer; one about Bonhoeffer’s correspondence with Mahatma Gandhi, one about how Bonhoeffer’s father had bought him a fancy sports car at the same time that Bonhoeffer himself was launching an illegal anti-Nazi seminary, and one about the trips that Bonhoeffer took to North Africa to learn about and admire Islamic culture. Then, after explaining how he himself had come to write a biography on Bonhoeffer, Mr. Marsh continued his speech by spending a long block of time on Bonhoeffer’s childhood and the path he took to his particular brand of humanist theology. Finally, Mr. Marsh spent the last fifteen to twenty minutes of his speech reading a passage out of his book on Mr. Bonhoeffer about the six months the Bonhoeffer spent in America in 1930.

Certain elements of Mr. Marsh’s organization were strong, while others were lacking. His transitions, for one, were smooth. Specifically, the way he used the story of his own time in Berlin was clever; he used it almost as hub, a point that he kept returning to and then jumping off of in different directions. He did this by repeatedly explaining how he had found documents related to one time or another in Bonhoeffer’s life, then speaking about each of those different times. However, I was less impressed by his internal summaries, or rather, the lack thereof, because he didn’t use them at all. While his use of the chronological pattern meant that his speech was fairly easy to follow even without internal summaries, it still would have benefitted from having at least a few, because they would have helped the audience keep track of his narrative. This is especially true because he didn’t progress in a straight line chronologically through Bonhoeffer’s life, instead starting in media res and then moving back in time to Bonhoeffer’s childhood, then moving forward in time again. Internal summaries would also have helped make it clear when he was transitioning between main points.

**Support**

Of the three building blocks of support, Mr. Marsh heavily favored one – stories. From the end of his intro forward, Mr. Marsh’s speech was made up almost completely of stories. The bulk of his speech was comprised of two specific stories, one about Bonhoeffer’s childhood and early adult life, and one about the six months Bonhoeffer spent in America in 1930. He interspersed quotes throughout his speech, though he used them much more sparingly than he did stories. For example, he quoted Bonhoeffer as having written that during his time in America he had, “awakened to fresh spiritual and moral energy” as a way of explaining the how Bonhoeffer was changed by the experience. He used no statistics.

Although Mr. Marsh’s support was skewed heavily towards stories, I felt the story-heavy approach worked well for the specific type of speech he gave. Since his speech was, at a conceptual level, the story of Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s life, using mostly stories made sense. He used a fair amount of quotes, though his speech could have benefitted from the inclusion of quotes from someone other than Bonhoeffer himself, perhaps on the impact that Bonhoeffer made during his life or on his legacy. The lack of statistics in Mr. Marsh’s speech was contrary to the structure that we’ve learned in class about how to support points, but I’m not sure where he could have logically worked statistics in because his speech was about the life and views of one specific man.

**Delivery**

Mr. Marsh delivered his speech using presentational techniques that were generally consistent with those we’ve learned about in class. He spoke clearly and with good volume (the mic that was supposed to be provided for this event wasn’t working, so he had to project his voice for those in the back of the room). He made eye contact around the room. He did spend a good portion of his speech reading from his book, which pulled his eyes away from the audience for long stretches of time, but even as he read, he looked up regularly. He stood straight and gesticulated with his hands in a way that seemed natural and unforced. For the most part, he stood directly behind the podium, though he walked off to the left (stage right) of it and stood there for about fifteen seconds during one story, before returning to the podium for the rest of his speech. He used no visual aids – no writing on the board, no PowerPoint, no videos – and did not pass anything around the room. He did have a problem with filler words. His speech was littered with ums and uhs, though he generally seemed well-prepared and well-informed on his topic.

On the whole, Mr. Marsh did a good job with his delivery. His posture was good, his delivery confident. He allowed his hands to move naturally and used them to emphasize the points he was making. He made good eye contact throughout his speech, with the exception of the last 10 minutes, during which he read an excerpt from his book. His biggest problem was the amount of ums and uhs – they were frequent enough to be distracting, and the amount of filler words made him come across as less confident and prepared than he otherwise would have. Still, for the most part, Mr. Marsh’s delivery accomplished what it needed to: it didn’t distract or detract from the content of his speech.

**Conclusion**

Mr. Marsh did not employ the three-S technique when constructing his conclusion. Instead, his conclusion contained a quick overview of the last years of Mr. Bonhoeffer’s life, followed by the statement that upon reflection, Mr. Bonhoeffer observed that his time in America, among the black churches of the American South, informed his worldview and lead him to the activism that would define his legacy.

Mr. Marsh’s conclusion had major problems. He did not make it clear when he was transitioning into a conclusion, so I was unsure until he was just about to stop speaking whether he was in the midst of his conclusion or just moving on to the next main point of his speech. Because he didn’t summarize the main points, I couldn’t quite remember the path we’d taken to the end of his speech. And while I appreciated the fact that he reiterated the importance of Bonhoeffer’s time in America, because it helped explain the importance of a story he told earlier, he didn’t do it in a way that qualified as stopping in style. He didn’t end with a quote, stat, joke, or the like. Instead, his conclusion ended with a declarative statement on the fact that Bonhoeffer found his views changed by his time in America. In all, Mr. Marsh’s conclusion could have used work. He didn’t make it clear when his conclusion began; he didn’t summarize his main points, and he didn’t stop in style.