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Critical/Cultural Scholarship and the Responsibility for Building Theory: Enduring Criticism Revisited

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Communication journals appeal to an audience with an interest in communication and communication theory. Consequently, critical/cultural scholars should contribute to the body of theory in our field. This engagement with theory enables our discipline to produce "enduring criticism" that offers insight long after the fascination with particular artifacts has passed.

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Like many scholars that have a critical orientation, I am fascinated by popular culture. There are so many provocative and complicated texts in the form of movies, television shows, books, magazines, stickers, graffiti, fashion, and internet content that either reveal something intriguing about our culture or are doing something interesting from a rhetorical perspective. In response to the varied rhetorical forms of popular culture, there are also a wide array of popular media outlets that provide ongoing conversations about these artifacts and the implications that they may have for the larger culture. Magazines like *Entertainment Weekly* and *Rolling Stone*, along with websites like Slate and Salon, often feature articles that go beyond simple criticism of a film or album to make a more nuanced argument about the artifact within a larger cultural context. In many cases, I have found that there are examples of insightful popular criticism that very closely approximate critical rhetorical

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analyses. However, what makes this kind of popular criticism different from the scholarship that appears in communication journals is the obligation that scholars have to locate their work within a larger theoretical conversation and to contribute to that conversation in meaningful ways. Popular critics write about artifacts, but communication scholars use a particular artifact to illuminate something about rhetoric and communication. Critical rhetorical scholars have a responsibility to contribute to the body of rhetorical theory, and the quality of this contribution should be one of the primary criteria in publication decisions for our journals.

Academic journals are decidedly different than popular outlets in several ways. Perhaps the biggest difference between popular press outlets and scholarly journals is the notion of "research." In popular outlets, research often consists of backing up facts or providing context for a particular text. On the other hand, academic research is subject to much greater research expectations. Scholars must locate their work within a larger academic conversation in order to ensure that the work is not replicating other research and that it is relevant to the discipline of communication. Framing the contribution of an essay within a larger scholarly conversation helps the audience to understand what traditions the author is drawing from, what assumptions underlie the critical perspective, and what the essay seeks to add to the field. Scholars, after all, have spent years learning methods and theories of critical analysis and this education should be brought to bear in their work so that others may glean new insights. Popular criticism, on the other hand, often just requires a keen interest in a particular kind of text, but isn't necessarily the product of rigorous academic training. The process of describing the larger scholarly dialogue framing an essay demands extensive research and an author must carefully consider the theories they are drawing from and what theoretical tools are being refined. Popular press outlets don't have this kind of expectation nor would including this kind of context enhance the articles they publish. However, this is a crucial element for academic journal articles since it helps the audience understand the importance of the research in ways that extend beyond a fascination with the artifact.

Many critics begin a project when they encounter a curious artifact. However, the appeal of a single artifact is usually limited to those who share similar interests. The addition of theory building helps make our individual research interests more relevant to scholars beyond those who share a similar taste for certain kinds of texts. When perusing popular press articles, I may well skip over an essay about horror movies or *The Real Housewives* since I am not particularly interested in these topics. Academic articles, however, may focus on artifacts that are not particularly appealing to me in and of themselves, but which often yield theoretical insights that are incredibly interesting and perhaps relevant to my work or to the work of my students. The goal of critical rhetoric, like other forms of rhetorical criticism, should be to generate theoretical tools that will enable other scholars to better understand the way rhetoric works. The artifact under examination should serve to illustrate theory and allow the author to draw conclusions about the nature of rhetoric and communication. If scholars choose not to utilize or contribute to theory, their work will only be valuable to the select few who share an interest in the particular artifact under examination.

The expectation of criticism that is the product of extensive research and engagement with a larger theoretical conversation is also an important consideration for those of us called upon to demonstrate the value of our research or our position as educators. In an era when university professors are constantly under attack from those wishing to slash budgets or mass-produce education, we would be wise to mark our research as something distinctly different than the popular criticism created by journalists and entertainment critics. Academic journals have a distinctly different audience than the popular press, so the articles being published should reflect the education and research expectations of that audience. It is important that the product of our research be the result of scholarly experience, peer review, and be valuable to our field.

In recent years, critical scholars whose work I have reviewed for this journal and others have often made submitted work that explicitly claims to be a ''rhetorical analysis,'' but then fail to provide any examples from a rhetorical artifact to support the claims being made about it. Once, when I expressed a desire to see more examples of the rhetoric that lead to the conclusions being offered in my review, I was chided by the author for the request in the comments s/he made to the reviewers with the explanation that because this is critical/cultural work, no such evidence of the rhetoric being examined is required in the essay. Perhaps this is an issue of terminology, but when scholars lay out the purpose of an essay as engaging in ''rhetorical analysis,'' that purpose creates an expectation for the conventions associated with this methodology and a template for my evaluation of its possibility for publication (Brummett 364). In line with that purpose, I expect to see an examination of a rhetorical artifact, an analysis supported by evidence from the artifact, and conclusions that contribute to the ongoing conversations about the nature of rhetorical processes. While I appreciate that critical/cultural work often has an expansive view of rhetorical artifacts, perhaps encompassing a large, amorphous set of rhetorical examples, a purpose framed in the language of rhetorical criticism implies an engagement with rhetoric and the conventions of rhetorical analysis. I suspect the resistance that I have encountered in regard to meeting what I consider the standards of rhetorical scholarship is likely a product of scholars whose arguments need more work. Indeed, there are notable scholars located in critical/cultural traditions, many of whom are participating in this conversation, who are conducting outstanding scholarship that provides us with useful tools to help understand increasing complex rhetorical texts. Their work should serve as the exemplar for others in this tradition because these authors are helping to push the canon of rhetorical scholarship and develop new idioms for critical/cultural analyses (Gunn, ''Publishing Peccadilloes'' 374). There is no question that the canon of rhetorical scholarship is evolving in exciting ways to include increasing complex cultural moments and critics who base their work in challenging critical perspectives. What unites these new kinds of criticism with the work of our predecessors is that they contribute to an ongoing theoretical conversation about the presence, function, or importance of rhetorical.

I understand the argument that the requirements of academic scholarship might flatten a topic and zap it of its spirit in the process of making it more scholarly.

However, this is not a reason to lower the expectations of critical scholarship. Instead, it is a justification for scholars who both conduct research and who write popular criticism to seek different venues for their work. Popular press outlets and academic journals have different standards, different audiences, and different time lines. The peer review process often means that what began as an ''of the moment'' artifact has become a cultural remnant by the time the essay is finally published. Our journals aren't timely since the review process and print schedule make immediacy impossible. Instead, scholars who are reacting to the newest edge in popular culture would be better served by submitting their work to popular press and alternative media outlets that can publish work more quickly and encourage pieces that may appeal to a more limited audience that share an interest in a unique artifact. In fact, many scholars use more immediate forums such as blogs and podcasts to share insights about their particular interests and the process of writing that reach their audiences far quicker than a journal article.[1] Communication journals, on the other hand, are for audiences beyond the fans of popular culture, they are for fans of communication.

The peer review process for essays primarily concerned about an interesting artifact would also be especially burdensome for editors. When an essay makes a contribution to rhetorical theory, an editor can assign it to a wide range of rhetorical scholars who may or may not be familiar with the artifact that drives the study because the essay is grounded in a wider engagement with rhetorical work. If an essay is primarily concerned with an artifact, however, the editor would need to locate reviewers who share a familiarity with the author. So, an essay on *Veronica Mars* would need to reach reviewers who have seen the show in order to know if the arguments being advanced are sound. I am not sure that any communication journal editor could meet the demands of this level of specificity.

Communication scholars have been discussing the role and responsibility of critics for decades. It has been almost forty years since Karlyn Kohrs Campell urged us to draw a distinction between social criticism and criticism whose ''. . . contributions are enduring because rhetorical theory deals with symbolic processes that are inherent in the human condition and recur in different times, in different places, and in response to different issues'' (12). Insights generated by enduring criticism will far outlast the movie or television show that spawned them, and may help move the conversations about rhetoric in productive ways. Articles in our journals have to say something explicit about communication, not just examine a curious artifact, in order to appeal to an audience seeking insight about communication. In other words, ''. . . criticism has long-range cultural implications and is frequently motivated, at least in part, by a desire to understand symbolic processes with important social consequences'' (Campbell 13). An essay that is built on theory, contributes to a theoretical conversation, and has insight into an artifact via a theoretical lens will be interesting to scholars long after the buzz about a particular artifact has faded. In this way, critics can be part of an enduring conversation in our discipline instead of a moment in time.

Note

[1] See, for example, *The Blogora*, the blog community of the Rhetoric Society of America; Joshua Gunn's blog, *The Rosewater Chronicles*; Robert Hariman and John Lucaites's continuing conversation of images on *No Caption Needed*; Virginia McCarver's blog on feminist rhetoric, *Rotten With Perfection*; the political rhetoric blog, *Oratorical Animal*; Maxwell Schnurer's reflections on rhetoric in his blog, *Life of Refinement*; Darrel Wanzer's *Delinking Rhetoric* blog; and the weekly *Critical Lede* podcast that reviews published work in communication and performance studies.

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