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What's the Point?

The 9/11 World Trade Center attacks and the ensuing American "War on Terror" inspired profound depth of feeling in the American collective unconscious. The unthinkable visual unfolding of the attacks, the media reaction, and the swirl of political discourse that followed all provide rhetorical fodder for academics seeking to uncover the immense complexity of this depth of feeling. Douglas Kellner's 2004 essay "9/11, Spectacles of Terror and Media Manipulation: A critique of Jihadist and Bush media politics" and John M. Murphy's 2003 "'Our Mission and our Moment': George W. Bush and September 11th" illustrate two starkly different responses to George Bush's post 9/11 rhetoric; Kellner's approach is ideological while Murphy undertakes a more traditional exploration of genre. These two (obviously) contrasting essays speak to the underlying differences between ideological rhetorical criticism and more traditional studies by forcing us to consider the most basic, fundamental purpose of rhetorical studies: to illuminate.

The historical purpose of rhetorical criticism and the reason for traditional critical methods (like studies of genre or the narrative perspective) is to illuminate previously unseen workings of a text—to uncover the gears of persuasion turning in secret below the words, images, and stories presented to the audience. Edwin Black characterizes this act as "elevating intuitive acts of creation to the status of visible method."[1] Jim Kuypers defines it as allowing a text to "voice its inner workings to the world" so that they might be "intelligible to and

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[1] Black, "*Rhetorical Criticism,*" 9.

approachable by the public."[2] By uncovering these inner workings, rhetorical critics expose the nuances of persuasion and narrative to audiences who are then able to approach texts with autonomy and knowledge—and to make their own judgements about those texts. Conversely, ideological criticism is chiefly concerned with "yielding something of value toward the intelligent resolution of public issues and the constructive conduct of civic life."[3] For ideological critics, this contribution to the "resolution of public issues" cannot take the form of "neutral, disinterested knowledge" and instead manifests as the "rhetorical invention of social knowledge"—a mission quite different from the unprejudiced illuminative endeavor that's historically defined the field of rhetorical criticism.

Kellner's 2004 essay "9/11, Spectacles of Terror and Media Manipulation" is an acute example of ideological criticism more concerned with the "rhetorical invention of social knowledge" than with the illumination of a particular text.[4] Kellner begins by describing the origins of the ideograph "terror" then goes on to describe the immediate post 9/11 television "media spectacle" and the ensuing wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. Instead of choosing to focus on a particular rhetorical text, Kellner surveys the whole of Bush's speeches and press conferences during this time, as well as the media portrayal of Bush and the Iraq/Afghanistan conflict. Among other things, Kellner concludes that Bush's use of "manipulative speechifying" and "Manichean discourse" combined with the media spectacle of television news worked to convince the American people of the existence of an "evil other" and to manipulate public

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[2] Kuypers, "Must We All Be Political Activists?"

3 Ivie, "The social relevance of rhetorical scholarship," 138.

[4]Ivie, "The social relevance of rhetorical scholarship," 138.

opinion in favor of war.[5] Kellner's essay is inarguably biased against Bush. For example, Kellner is prone to gross hyperbole throughout his essay, characterizing contemporary politics as a "deadly game" and certain conservative television political pundits as "dangerous and extremist zealots."[6] While Kellner's conclusions about the role of post 9/11 media and Bush's manipulative rhetoric might be accurate, he does not execute a precise and focused uncovering of the inner workings of particular Bush rhetoric and it's hard to see how these conclusions qualify as "rhetorical criticism." His broad survey does not seek to illuminate and prove the nuances of specific rhetorical persuasive strategies, but rather to expose the grand network of manipulative political discourse that swayed public opinion in favor of war.

Murphy's 2003 essay "'Our Mission and our Moment'" provides a contrasting example of rhetorical criticism used to explore post 9/11 discourse. Murphy's approach is a more traditional study that functions to illuminate Bush's rhetoric by exploring its place in the genre of war rhetoric. Murphy focuses on Bush's September 20 address to congress, wherein he describes the 9/11 attacks and those responsible. Murphy shows how Bush's speech fits into the genre of presidential war rhetoric by relating specific examples, such Bush's use of associative logic to show ordinary Americans as heroes—a tactic also use by Ronald Reagan.[7] Murphy uses this textual analysis to claim that Bush overwhelmingly employs epideictic rhetoric and that this tactic, along with a masterful use of visual imagery, positioned Bush as the "voice of America."[8] Murphy executes a precise, thorough, and essentially neutral examination of Bush's

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[5] Kellner, "9/11, Spectacles of Terror and Media Manipulation," 54.

[6] Kellner, "9/11, Spectacles of Terror and Media Manipulation," 43, 49.

[7] Murphy, "'Our Mission and our Moment,'" 619.

[8] Murphy, "'Our Mission and our Moment,'" 620.

war rhetoric—he fully illuminates Bush's September 20 speech to congress to expose epideictic rhetoric lurking out of sight and to explain Bush's hidden rhetorical mechanics.

Although both Kellner and Murphy use rhetorical examples in their essays, their interaction with these examples is very different. Kellner conducts a broad survey of Bush's post 9/11 rhetoric and uses specific examples to illustrate larger points about Bush's manipulative Manichean methods of speaking and the effect this had on public opinion. In his exploration, Kellner assumes the role of "partisan political actor" and ignores the traditional goal of precise and specific textual illumination.[9] His bias is transparent and ever-present. Conversely, Murphy thoroughly and impartially unpacks Bush's September 20th congressional address and uses this exploration to meticulously uncover the gears of Manichean and epideictic rhetoric lurking therein. Murphy employs the traditional rhetorical purpose of impartially illuminating a specific text. Murphy illuminates Bush's rhetoric—shining a light on the truth of his discourse—while Kellner illustrates, painting a picture of the cause and effect of Bush's post 9/11 war rhetoric and the media spectacle it inspired.

If the fundamental purpose of rhetorical criticism is illumination, ideological studies that fail to thoroughly and effective illuminate texts fall into a different category. They are social criticisms based on rhetorical artifacts. Social criticism is certainly necessary and important, however not all academic work must be social criticism. For example, cancer researchers don't publish their findings with simultaneous advocations for policy change or conclusions about the social impact of their work; they present their highly skilled, technical research to the public and leave it to activists, journalists, and policy makers to apply and disseminate the knowledge they've created and to determine "appropriate courses of action." In addition, the tradition of

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[9] Kuypers, "Must We All Be Political Activists?"

social criticism has a different legacy and pedagogy than rhetorical criticism—it belongs in different departments and contexts.

Far from being a pointless "devotion to abstract knowledge," the illuminative purpose of rhetorical criticism is vitally important.[10] Social criticism feeds on the "abstract knowledge" of illumination—an academy unconcerned with uncovering these illuminate truths sorely limits the food of social critics. For example, Murphy's illuminative essay could be interpreted by an effective social critic and contextualized to show the grand scheme of deceptive war rhetoric (as Kellner tried to do in his essay). In addition to being a perverse destabilization of definition and a lessening of the metaphorical food of social criticism, the ideological turn in rhetorical criticism represents an arguably more destructive trend consuming the whole of academia. In becoming concerned with overt social evaluation, ideological rhetorical critics like Kellner further the importation of social critics from the independent citizenry to the academy. This is a dangerous path because, as Kuypers describes, "Critical rhetoricians, while advocating change, do not assume personal responsibility for the changes enacted."[11] As social criticism becomes a default function of academia, the responsibility and autonomy of our critics is lost at a time when—as Murphy and Kellner illuminate and illustrate, respectively—the need for social criticism is great.

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[10] Ivie, "The social relevance of rhetorical scholarship," 138.

[11] Kuypers, "Must We All Be Political Activists?"

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