



Journal Review by Kenny Bellew
Rhetorical Theory with Anne Aronson
Master of Science in Technical Communication
Journal 3 of 5: Timothy A. Borchers
February 2008

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Part I: Key Ideas

In his book, *Rhetorical Theory*, Dr. Borchers describes Kenneth Burke's concept of Dramatism as the study of how language and other symbol systems create the rhetorical worlds in which we live [Borchers, p.144]. In doing so, Borchers illustrates the difference between Burke's and Aristotle's definitions of rhetoric. Aristotle defined rhetoric as the art of persuasion. It was something the rhetor did to the audience. In Burke's view, the audience participates in their own persuasion by identifying with the symbols used by the speaker [Borchers, p.151]. Identification involves a cooperation between speaker (or writer) and audience. (Unless otherwise noted, the following examples are of Borchers' explanations of Kenneth Burke's work regarding Dramatism).

Burke said that each symbol used by the rhetorician had an associated attitude, which is interpreted as a connotation. These words with attitudes are used to create various euphemisms like "pro-life" versus "pro-choice" or "illegal alien" versus "undocumented worker." The creativity of these euphemisms is such that Burke described this rhetoric as the "dancing of an attitude" [Borchers, p. 146].

Burke explains that often our identification with a particular symbol causes guilt, and we develop a variety of ways of dealing with this guilt. One of the key components of symbol-causing-guilt is that we are constantly "goaded by the spirit of hierarchy" and our need for perfection. Burke separates our need for hierarchy and perfection, but at the same time he shows how they intertwine. Hierarchy relates to our need for order in our environment, and perfection conveys our drive to make sure that our work achieves the ultimate height within its

milieu. When we discover defects in these, it causes guilt. This initiates our drive to resolve the source of guilt.

Borchers describes three types of Identification:

1. Relation - The speaker tells the audience how his or her experience parallels that of the audience
2. Antithesis - The speaker creates an us-versus-them scenario
3. Unnoticed - The speaker uses "we" to include the audience in the act

The symbolic world created by the rhetorician is framed using the elements of Burke's Pentad [Borchers, p.153]:

1. Act - What happens or takes place
2. Scene - Context or background of the act
3. Agent - Person or persons who perform the act
4. Agency - Means through which actions takes place
5. Purpose - Reason an action took place

The degree to which elements of the Pentad dominate the discourse is measured as a ratio. Understanding the ratio can help to understand the motivations and aim of the story.

One of the most interesting concepts Borchers covers is "Redemption from Guilt." As stated earlier, Burke identified that humans construct guilt when they experience symbols that disrupt their sense of hierarchy or perfection. To resolve this guilt, Burke identified three types of scapegoats we create [Borchers, p.156]:

1. We perceive the scapegoat is receiving adequate legal justice. For example, the jail sentence was justifiable considering the crime.

2. The scapegoat's fate is inevitable (fatalistic). For example, it is the will of the God.

3. The scapegoat is a "worthy vessel for guilt" because of being too good for this world.

The example given was the story of Jesus. In this case, the vessel is viewed as being caught up in something bigger than themselves. This elevates the item from social order.

Part II: Selected Passage

Regarding Burke's modality of negative symbols, Borchers writes that we define things "in terms of what they are not. Our symbol use, noted Burke, is marked by the 'the paradox of substance: To say what something is, we have to say what it is not. We distinguish, for instance, between a cat and a dog, by noting that a dog is not a cat and that a cat is not a dog'" [Borchers, p.147].

A good example of this is the symbol of marriage. Culturally, we have long identified the symbol of marriage as being between a man and a woman. When proposals to allow gay marriage were introduced, there was resistance within the traditionally-minded and conservatively religious groups. The symbol, to them, also represented what marriage was not, and, to them, it was not a union of same-sex individuals. In fact, many of them viewed this as the opposite of marriage. It was a deterioration of a cherished symbol. According to Burke, this sense of what the symbol was not creates a "moral rule" for what it should be [Borchers, p.147].

It is interesting that often deviations from symbol norm are seen as the opposite of the symbol, when in reality the items are very much related and similar. For example, if asked "What is the opposite of a cat?" Most of us instinctively reply "a dog." However, the two symbols are very much related. A soda bottle is closer to being the opposite to a cat than a dog. Both animals are mammals, domestic pets, have fur and four legs. However, our desire to protect the ideal of the symbol causes us to reject similar symbols as opposites. This is an example of Burke's concept of hierarchy.

Part III: Connections with Other Readings or Events

I was fascinated with Borchers treatment of "Redemption from Guilt" [Borchers, p.155]. Burke says that we naturally seek order in our world, and when this order is disrupted, we can experience guilt. He called the process we use to remove this guilt "terms of order" [Borchers, p.155]. In removing the guilt, we either use the tool of mortification or scapegoating. In other words, if I hear of school shooting, I might feel guilt that my society created the means for this

act to occur. However, I might remove guilt by my acknowledgment that I am completely mortified that something like this can happen. If I were okay with it, something would really be wrong with my moral compass. In being mortified, my moral compass again points north.

Borchers gives the example of the Vietnam Memorial. On one hand, this symbol produces guilt in the American conscience because we allowed ourselves to become embroiled in a war that took the lives of over 50,000 US soldiers and wounded more than 300,000 others. However, as Burke points out, we sometimes find redemption from guilt by using the scapegoat of heroism. The names upon the wall are American heroes who were willing to defend America with the ultimate sacrifice [Borchers, p.157].

This reminded me of an issue of ethics I wrestled with in the past related to military campaigns described in the Bible. On the one hand, I was told that God was holy and would never command humans to do anything evil. However, I needed to reconcile that God commanded Moses and Joshua to begin a conquest of the land of Canaan that included marching orders to commit complete genocide (women and children included) against numerous cities [Number chapter 31; Joshua chapters 10 and 11]. When I asked how genocide could ever be morally justifiable, I was told that these other nations were "like a cancer that would corrupt God's holy people, and the cancer had to be removed." When I questioned the morality of killing people just because they had a different religion, I was told that because it was a direct command from God, the Israelites transcended human morality to accomplish the will of God. In this explanation, all three types of Burke's scapegoating are used. The pagans got what they deserved because they would eventually lead the Israelites astray. It was the will of God, and Moses and Joshua were part of something bigger than themselves.

Herrick mentions of Burke, "the mere desire to name something by its 'proper' name...is intrinsically 'perfectionist'" [Herrick, p.225]. Therefore, I cannot resist defining the above explanation with the technical terminology "bull crap." Instead of settling on the scapegoating

approach, I am going to redeem my guilt by saying I am completely mortified that genocide would be justified for any reason.