Chapter 3: Discourse as Advocacy and Action


“In parturition begins the centrality of the nervous system. The different nervous system, through language and the ways of production, erect various communities of interests and insights, social communities varying in nature and scope. And out of the division and the community arises the ‘universal’ rhetorical situation.”

-Kenneth Burke

“Within the practically limitless range of scenes (or motivating situations) in terms of which human action can be defined and studied, there is one over-all dramatistic distinction as regards the widening or narrowing of circumference. This is the distinction between ‘action’ and ‘sheer motion.’ ‘Action’ is a term for the kind of behavior possible to a typically symbol-using animal (such as man) in contrast with the extrasymbolic or nonsymbolic operations of nature.”

-Kenneth Burke

Introduction

Kenneth Burke’s influence has been significant in various arenas from philosophy to literary criticism, theory, and history. Nowhere is his work more relevant; however, than in the field of rhetoric, a field that understands human behavior as inherently symbolic. Burke primarily views humans as symbol users and in the same regard, symbol misusers. This manipulation of symbols is what separates us from nature and how we manage society, including the formation of our own identity. From this perspective rhetoric is ontological in that the symbols we use to discuss reality and shape our views of others reveals how we operate and function. This functional drama complete with
actors, scenes, and a plot represents something real, but never the less stands in for reality (Smith 276).

In a distinctly human reality symbols are used to produce action as opposed to nature that merely produces movement. Burke explains the difference in his 1968 work *Dramatism*,

> Whatever terministic paradoxes we may encounter en route (and the dramatistic view of terminology leads one to expect them on the grounds that language is primarily a species of action, or expression of attitudes, rather than an instrument of definition), there is the self-evident distinction between symbol and symbolized (in the sense that the word ‘tree’ is categorically distinguishable from the thing tree). Whatever may be the ultimate confusions that result from man’s intrinsic involvement with ‘symbolicity’ as a necessary part of his nature, one can at least begin with this sufficiently clear distinction between a ‘thing’ and its name. (*Dramatism*)

The distinction is generalized between ‘sheer motion’ and ‘action.’ It involves an empirical shaft of circumference in the sense that although man’s ability to speak depends upon the existence of speechless nature, the existence of speechless nature does not depend upon man’s ability to speak. The relation between these two distinct terministic realms can be summed up in three propositions:

1. There can be no action without motion—that is, even the ‘symbolic action’ of pure thought requires corresponding motions of the brain.

2. There can be motion without action. (for instance, the motions of the tides, of sunlight, of growth and decay.)

3. Action is not reducible to terms of motion. For instance, the ‘essence’ or ‘meaning’ of a sentence is not reducible to its sheer physical existence as sounds in the air or marks on the page, although material motions of some sort are necessary for the production, transmission, and reception of the sentence” (*On Symbols*, Burke 54).
Burke looked deeper into the metaphorical maxim that “all the world is stage,” to find a central theme for the actions of persons or symbolic action, which he describes as a literal term. This term is employed not as a metaphor, but as a strategic formula that helps us understand why people “act” the way they do and what the implications of those actions are (On Symbols, Burke 55). Burke’s own actions brought him to explore many academic and intellectual arenas. He was born in Pittsburgh in 1897 and briefly attended two universities, Ohio State University and Columbia University, before dropping out of both to become a writer. Immediately he took on a bohemian lifestyle living and writing in Greenwich Village in New York City. Having become close with a student of Freud in college and then becoming entrenched, like many critics at the time in Marxist theory as it applied to literary criticism, Burke merged the two schools of thought to form his own vision based on drama. His early views of criticism revolved around the way an artist or author influenced an audience. This rhetorical dimension would remain present throughout his work.

His work is an unprecedented attempt to understand, interpret, and change the way we use, manipulate, and misuse symbols always coming back to the rhetorical dimension of our existence. Although he dropped out of school to write he would remain close to the university his entire career both writing and teaching extensively. He began his career as a lecturer of criticism in 1937 and would continue to teach throughout his life teaching at many schools, including the University of Chicago, Harvard University, Northwestern University, and Princeton University. In 1966 he earned an honorary degree from Bennington College and has often been referred to as a “gypsy scholar” (Foss 156). Not so much for his various affiliations with higher institutions, but for his roaming thought that moved from situation to situation and from context to context in an effort to understand our collective communicative reality. The notion of life as a drama or dramatism, through the use of the pentad can be applied to almost any situation as a way to understand the effects that symbols have on our actions. Think about all the different
texts, events, actions, or situations Burke’s pentad can be used to understand was is going on.

Act: Names what took place, in thought or deed. What was done?

Scene: The background of the act, the situation in which it occurred. Where and when was the act performed?

Agent: Names what person or kind of person or people performed the act who did it?

Agency: Names what means or instruments the agent used. How and with what was the act performed?

Purpose: Suggests why the agent performed the act. What motivated the act?

Attitude: Names the state of mind that predisposes the agent to act or that substitutes for an act. What is the agent’s attitude toward the act? (Blakesley 34).

In an effort to understand why events happen or why people react to certain events in specific ways we can apply this pentad to discover hidden motivations. Find a newspaper article that presents the facts about an event as objective information. Apply the pentad to the information presented to reveal motives that exists behind “the facts.” For example the shooting of an unarmed man by a police officer in Ferguson, MO from a pentadic standpoint might look like this.

*Event:* Police shooting of an unarmed Black man in Ferguson, MO.
Act: On August 9th a White police officer, Darren Wilson, shoots and kills an 18-year-old unarmed Black resident, Michael Brown.

Scene: After police officers told Brown and a friend to move out of the street and onto the sidewalk a scuffle broke out that results in Brown being shot 6 times including two to the head. Witnesses say that Brown had his hands up in the air singling surrender while police officers maintain that Wilson was pushed into his squad car.

Agent: Darren Wilson, 28-year-old police officer of six years in Ferguson, MO.

Agency: The armed police officer identified Brown as a possible threat and proceeded to take fatal action. The police department was slow to respond leaving images of Brown in the street. The police department did not disclose information of Wilson’s identity for weeks. The residents of Ferguson protest and mark the on-going dilemma of police brutality. Law enforcement authorities issue a harsh response condemning and even attacking protesters. Barack Obama and the justice department launch a 20th civil rights investigation of the Ferguson, MO police department along with a Grand Jury investigation.

Purpose:

1. To maintain order and protect and serve local residents.

2. Having worked within two disproportionately White departments and serving predominately Black populations the officer may have developed unrealistic notions of who is a victim and who is a criminal.

3. Having a history of family troubles and growing up in a society that promotes violence, perpetuates racism, and celebrates xenophobic tendencies a patterned may have developed that led to the incident.
The terms or symbols used here in this pentad analysis are latent with meaning and draw connotations to much larger trends in this country that we recognize or negate through symbolic consubstantiality. In this heinous event we associate ourselves with the victim or the perpetrator and try to understand the behavior of the shooter through Burke’s notion of identification and consubstantial. Foss writes, "We form selves or identities through various properties or substances, we share substances, including physical objects, occupations, friends, activities, beliefs, and values. As we ally ourselves with various properties or substances, we share substance with whatever or whomever we associate. Burke uses the term ‘consubstantial’ to describe this association. As two entities are united in substance through common idea, attitudes, material possessions, or other properties, they are consubstantial."

This event sits within a larger context of similar events that are quickly either labeled random or purposeful. The initial news feed of the event acts as a way to determine why these events took place and largely shapes our initial interpretation. Burke’s pentad is already at work in uncovering our motives. How is identification and consubstantiation working in this pentadic analysis for you? What is the relationship between the agency, agent, scene, and purpose that pertly determines the nature of the event and the motivations behind it.

Extending Burke

Like Kenneth Burke who dropped out of college and largely taught himself to think Frederick Douglas also taught himself how to think and speak eloquently from much earlier on and due to entirely different circumstances. While Burke made a conscious decision to remove himself from formal education and place himself in the vibrant and culturally rich environment of Greenwich Village in New York City to further his learning, Douglas would have to illegally teach himself how to read and write out of necessity. As a former slave who became the central figure of a divisive abolitionist movement his learning process was a tactical maneuver to empower his own
existence. People were so impressed with Douglas’ Skills as an orator, which displayed his intellectual acumen that they accused the abolitionist movement of hiring a paid British actor to assume the role of a former American slave. Douglas is an individual who holds great power in the face of great oppression and that power is gained from speaking. His spirit would be reflected in 1960’s America civil rights movements and his style and powerful delivery would be continued by King. He attributes his skills largely to the book *The Columbian Orator*, a book on ancient rhetoric, which he acquired illegally, yet out of necessity. Formally furthering a legacy of empowerment through oration began by the ancient Greeks, Douglas utilizes a major tool of democracy, his own voice and story, to change society.

**Marx to Burke**

Burke explains in *Rhetoric of Motives* why we identify with one another and how we can evoke this identification in our audience by creating an identity, character, or personae. He utilizes and extends Aristotle’s rhetorical cornerstone of ethos into the realm of construction by discussing how a character can be created that had previously been unrealized. He said that people project an image onto others that they admire and make sense of the world through this identification. On the opposite side people become alienated from a speaker or message when they do not identify with them or it, when they are divided by the message. Thus a relationship develops between identification and alienation that can be used to create rhetorical appeals or describe their impact (Smith 284-85). Communication scholar Craig R. Smith states that

Alienation (division) is seen in dialectical tension with identification (unity). For every “them,” there is an “us.” A speaker can divide an audience from “them” using strategies of alienation: “they” are different in substance (race), “they” are different in values (ideology), “they” are different in habits (culture, religion)… However, this kind of dialectic can also be quite dangerous. Very sophisticated, and perhaps dangerous speakers can make “them” the scapegoat, what Burke calls the “vessel” of
our unwanted evils or “troubles”. Using the rhetoric of the “negative,” speakers can symbolically or actually call for the sacrificing of the “scapegoats” in order to solve “our problems” or to purge “our guilt,” thereby purifying “our cult.” Burke emphasized, “the negative helps radically to define elements to be victimized.” (286)

This rhetoric of alienation has had devastating effects throughout history, but more importantly, it helps us understand why things happened the way that they did, a rhetorical endeavor, and not merely that they happened, which might be a historically objective or journalistic endeavor. While we can identify large moments throughout history were this type of rhetoric has been deployed such as in the Ten Commandments with the “thou shall not” use of the negative and Adolf Hitler’s general scapegoating of entire populations, this type of rhetorical trope (positive and negative) is used everyday in much smaller ways. On the other side this same trope can be used as a form of empowerment when used as a rebuttal against social injustices such as the rhetoric of the Black Panthers and Malcolm X. Audiences are drawn to these consubstantial strategies that show that the audience and the speaker are formed out of the same substance.

Likewise Karl Marx saw the world through the lens of material substance and he saw identity as becoming falsely attached to this material. He sought to identify the human with that of the collective in order to free this being from these forces of alienation, what Burke would later call division. There was a dialectical tension for Marx that existed between the individual and the material greed of other individuals. Marx has stated that “In unity there is strength alone we accomplish very little” (Smith 268). He thought that material forces including capitol, wealth, labor, production, products, and land were what drove the history of humanity.

To Marx the human was the animal that had been appropriated by things and the only way to win back this being was to return to a thingless human, a society without material ownership. He called this outlook *historical materialism* and it is the driving force behind history, which is determined by changes in the relationship between production and consumption. Consumption is often a product of ideologies that have
been rhetorically imposed. These controlling ideologies are often hidden according to Marx and create an illusion of false desires, needs, and consciousness (Smith 267). Consequently we are separated, divided, or alienated from our own identity through these forces. Marx’s Communism outlined in his *The Communist Manifesto*, which he wrote with Fredrich Engels in 1848, was designed as a dialectical response to capitalist liberalism that would free humans from alienation. In it he declares that “the proletarians have nothing to lose but their chains” and that the “Workers of all lands” should unite. Deploying rhetorical positives throughout *The Communist Manifesto* referring to “workers” as the proletariat, Marx would follow-up with the use of the negative in *Das Kapital* referring to the proletariats’ counterpart the “bourgeoisie” (Smith 269). Burke who closely studied Marx extends his ideas to a broader conception of a rhetorical situation. While Burke thought of humans as the symbol-using animal as well as the symbol-misusing animal, Marx saw humans as inherently genuine or free but also thoroughly corrupted by material and rhetorical alienation.

Marx to Burk to King

Marx, Burke, and King all use this idea of alienation to understand the human condition. In his speeches on civil rights, King states that the laws of segregation had literally divided us from ourselves and from each other. Therefore, one should not feel guilty for identifying with a higher law and abandoning a corrupt aspect of society (Smith 284). It is again a dialectical argument concerning two forms of law, one that should be obeyed by protestors and one that should be honored and adopted by the powers that uphold the unjust laws. He makes room for concessions to be made on both sides by accommodating both points of view. It is a form of rhetoric that is radically defiant yet inclusive, even of the oppressor.

By accepting that the system one upholds is corrupt due to a higher form of law on an inherently benevolent ethos of the human you can begin to change in the face of equal sacrifice. One’s ability to change is based on the level of one’s sacrifice for that change (Smith 279). King follows Marx and Burke’s attention to history as being based on material control including substance, identity, and bodies. It is a dialectical battle
between various material forces. King had a profound understanding of the materiality of history and saw this gruesome material battle up close and still declared that, “If you allow me to live just a few years in the second half of the twentieth century, I will be happy” (King 474).

Burke saw a misuse of symbols as much as the use of symbols and did not follow in Marx’s sanguine notion of humanity, while King saw the human as inherently good and ultimately one that appealed to a higher power of righteousness. This vision has surprisingly more in common with Marx than with Burke. While Marx stated that religion was the opiate of the masses he attached an essentially messianic understanding of humanity to the human. Humans had been corrupted by a false consciousness and thus denied freedom due to this attachment. King’s human had also been corrupted by a historical materialism of a different kind that had stripped the freedom of people in large, small, overt, and hidden ways.

“We will always be willing to talk and seek fair compromise, but we are ready to suffer when necessary and even risk our lives to become witness to the truth as we see it. I realize that this approach will mean suffering and sacrifice. It may mean going to jail. If such is the case the resister must be willing to fill the jailhouses of the South. It may even mean physical death. But if physical death is the price that a man must pay to free his children and his white brethren from a permanent death of the spirit, then nothing could be more redemptive. This is the type of soul force that I am convinced will triumph over physical force of the oppressor.”

-Martin Luther King, Jr.

“No need to worry, I expect retaliation in a hurry
I see death around the corner, any day
Trying to keep it together, no one lives forever anyway
Strugglin and strivin, my destiny’s to die
Keep my finger on the trigger, no mercy about my daddy
Madder than a motherfucker, they never should have had me
I guess I seen too many murders, the doctors can’t help me
Got me stressin’ with my pistol in my sheets, it ain’t healthy
Am I paranoid? Tell me the truth.”

-Tupac Shakur

“Among the reasons my father had decided to risk and dedicate his life to help disseminate this philosophy among his people was that he had seen four of his six brothers die by violence, three of them killed by white men, including one by lynching. What my father could not know then was that of the remaining three, including himself, only one, my Uncle Jim, would die in bed, of natural causes. Northern white police were later to shoot my Uncle Oscar. And my father was finally himself to die by the white man’s hands. It has always been my belief that I, too, will die by violence.”

-Malcolm X

Through Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.’s final speech “I’ve Been to the Mountaintop” we can explore various rhetorical perspectives from a standpoint of social justice and equality. Under King’s leadership, rhetorical prowess, and rigorous ethical and moral embodiment more people of all backgrounds participated in the pursuit of human civil rights in this country than ever before. As we have noted this drive to change a democratic society through the power of rhetoric stems back to the ancient Greeks and has roots in many different perspectives.

While King was somewhat thrust into the limelight via a movement that needed and groomed an environment ready for his presence, he took on the rhetorical need of the time with unprecedented zeal. It is easy to forget that he was a person, an identity that was shaped by historical forces, and while he had his faults his life’s work was an extension and a negotiation of these faults. As a marker of inclusivity and a contemporary
national holiday his identity has taken on various symbolic connotations. At the end of
the day, he was dedicated to change, an inherently dangerous endeavor. Like many Black
men and women before and after him and like many people that risked their own safety
for the prophetic well being of others in the future he ultimately knew he would pay the
price for his symbolic actions, with his own life.

On April 3, 1968 King ruminated on the history of humankind including the civil
rights movement and his own place within this uplifting narrative of struggle. He states in
this final address that he is simply fulfilling the plan of a higher power and that this
power has allowed him “to go up to the mountain.” He continues, “And I’ve looked over,
and I’ve seen the Promise Land.” He concludes this somber speech with a prophetic
vision that includes his own destiny and that of the nation. “I may not get there with you.
But I want you to know tonight we as a people will get to the Promised Land” (King
480). King saw his own demise as a result of his rhetorical actions and possibly even
before that from his cultural location. His vision is prophetic it is before his time yet
necessary at the same time. This sentiment can be seen from an entirely different person
in the form of a drastically different message. The lyrics of Tupac note a similar vision of
reality and the hope for a future the rhetor may never see.

I see no changes. All I see is racist faces. Misplaced hate makes disgrace
to races we under. I wonder what it takes to make this one a better
place…Let’s erase the wasted. Take the evil out the people, they’ll be
acting right. Cause both black and white are smokin’ crack tonight. And
only time we chill is when we kill each other. It takes skill to be real, time
to heal each other. And although it seems heaven sent, we ain’t ready to
see a black president. (Tupac, Changes)

In a song titled “Changes” Tupac speaks on record about what is at stake when we speak
out against injustices from a standpoint that reflects our own identity and experiences.
Like King he recognizes the costs that come with attempting to change the future through
radical symbolic action. He does not fall into the either/or rhetoric described by Burke’s
use of the negative as positive, but rather follows in King’s dialectical appeal to a more righteous path despite the oppressive leanings of his time. On this particular track he speaks on the war on drugs as a societal problem, Black and white relations, treatment of Blacks by the police, and the Black Panther party. What would Tupac’s lyrics speak of if he were alive today? How would his message change if he were alive to see a Black president? Would he conclude that we are ready? Likewise what would King’s message say? In the final year of his life as he prepared to launch the Poor People’s Campaign he stated

The time has come for a return to mass nonviolent protest. Accordingly, we are planning a series of such demonstrations this spring and summer, to begin in Washington, D.C. They will have Negro and white participation, and they will seek to benefit the poor of both races. (King, 348).

Both King and Tupac were public figures that issued a radical and often contradictory rhetoric, especially at the end of both of their lives they wrestled with the issues of change. As rhetors they spoke of change from a personal and a societal standpoint. Today they are both considered American cultural artifacts that contribute highly to American Public Discourse. Can we separate their messages from their identities? I believe we can and we do everyday as our understanding of them and their messages morph and change according to our own realities. In a Burkean sense we identify with parts of their lives and rhetoric while also becoming divided. Within the American cultural system they both can mean several things, some of them contradictory. As Barry Brummett states concerning King

He stands for racial harmony and understanding but also for a turbulent and violent period of our nation’s history. For white Americans, he is a promise that they can get along with blacks, as well as a reminder of what have done to prevent such getting along. For African Americans, he is a moral exemplar of nonviolent civil disobedience, as well as a reminder—
through his own violent death—of the frustrations that may make violence seem justifiable. (27)

Many if not most cultural artifacts are contradictory in very similar ways as the ways we receive messages change over time and from audience to audience. Thus the messy landscape of American Public Discourse continues to evolve. Think about the above passage by Brummet on the reception of King and how it might also be applicable many years later to the reception of Tupac.

King’s Time

Leading up to King’s final address, he had begin to change his approach to activism in major ways:

May 31, 1967: At an SCLC staff retreat King calls for a radical redistribution of economic and political power.

December 4, 1967: Launches the Poor People’s Campaign

March 18, 1968: Speaks to striking sanitation workers in Memphis

March 28, 1968: Leads Memphis march that is disrupted by violence

April 3, 1968: Delivers final address at Bishop Charles J. Mason Temple in Memphis

April 4, 1968: Is assassinated at Loraine Hotel.

King’s final speech is somber in tone and seems to anticipate his death. Like the songs of Tupac that would come later his last speech is full of meaning, history, and paints a clear vision of a personal morose future. As King speaks of great moments he seems to be
downtrodden that more was not done to help humanity and perhaps himself. He seems to be “there” as slaves marched out of Egypt and towards the Promised Land, but has to eavesdrop on the great discussions of the Greeks. He displays an alienated and divided vision of the past, which both includes and excludes him. He seems to mention the “developments” in Rome and the “cultural and aesthetic life of man” during the Renaissance as problematic in some way. King seems to note them as footnotes in history. While his namesake merely tacks thesis on a wall to avoid guilt perhaps, Lincoln merely comes to a righteous conclusion, finally. He eventually notes “fear” as if he knows it well and concludes that the moment in which he inhabits would be the ideal. Here he seems to mark these moments, as well as his own, within western history as both empowering and oppressive.

References and Further Reading


King, Martin Luther. “I’ve Been to the Mountaintop.” Eds. Lucas, Stephen E. and Martin


