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ComS 168

Basic Essay Questions

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*I. Rhetoric and its social consequences*

**3. How do the characteristics of message producers affect the perception and interpretation of symbolic behavior?**

In remembering how much we focused on whether our president was Muslim-born or not, it is evident that especially within the American society we are very focused on characteristics and appearance. Instead of even focusing on the president’s discourse, we were more focused on (and as is the case with many a politician, musician, actor, etc.) his origin and the defining physiognomies of his person. A portion of the population refused the President’s rhetoric based on his face value appearance, not able to see past.

This also reminds me of when I wore a burqa to school – carrying on my normal school schedule – to gauge the reaction of my peers. I was kicked out by second period by a vice principal who said that my dress violated the school dress code. I did my research and had cleared my social experiment with the principal (who unfortunately wasn’t in at the moment I was brought in) and found that the administration was incorrect to send me home, particularly because the garb was one that was religious in nature. My social experiment reflected the fact that my microcosm of a school society was not able to acknowledge my person because of my physical character and outward appearance.

Lastly, another example which speaks to this question comes from a friend who works in real estate. She mentioned once to me that those who have the money to purchase a house (especially out right) aren’t necessarily always those dressed up to tour an open house; wherein, those who have poor credit and are unable to even consider purchasing said house have a tendency to dress up and reflect a more together outward appearance.

These examples boil down to the timeless adage, “It’s not what is on the outside but what is on the inside that’s truly counts.” Arguably that which we likely would purport is something we hold but do not truly practice. After all, if one’s professor showed up one day looking like a bum, hair unkempt with bags under their eyes obviously hung over from the night before, their physical visage would likely influence how we perceive and interpret any lecture that followed.

**4. How do characteristics of message recipients influence responses to symbolic behavior?**

As discussed in class, we have to assume that the universal characteristics of said audience are on the lesser end of the spectrum than one might hope. According to the U.S. Department of Education, the “average” American reads at the 7th and 8th grade level. Therefore, understanding the education level at which the greater portion of potential message recipients in America are at only serves the rhetor, in that they know that responses to symbolic behavior will be better received if said messages cater to the level of understanding with which a 7th and 8th grader might comprehend. With these universal characteristics in mind, as the rhetor we can take into consideration the generalizability of our audience as measured by their communal characteristics, and speak to them on their level. The characteristics that entreat more of a communal (pathos) response can also be linked to whether the message recipients share what Hart & Daughton (2005) call ‘Ultimate Terms’ – words that have special and evocative power for a society (p. 155); hand-in-hand with lexicons, or words that are unique to a group of individuals and that have special rhetorical power (Daughton & Hart, 2005, p. 152). Some of those symbols which characterize American society include equal justice and freedom, to name a few. These communal values characterize what a vast majority of American’s hold to be true, which serves as an important starting point with which to begin constructing discourse. In knowing the characteristics of said message recipients, one can better influence desirable responses to symbolic behaviors.

**5. What roles do media play in the process of symbolic exchange?**

The media is, for better or worse, a gatekeeper for symbolic exchange. Given the power and influence that the media holds, they also generate said symbols and at times have a sole hand in perpetuating any message which supports their interests and not necessarily communal goals and interests. In relation to question 3, the executives who run and direct the top media networks are largely older white males; a specific demographic with a large amount of power that is seldom kept in check or critically observed. In the Status of Women in the Media report (2013) as published by the Women’s Media Center, they observe and detail the persistent gender disparities that still occur in a range of media businesses and institutions, that they note, rank among the greatest influencers in American society (p. 4). Simply put, media companies purport objectivity under the guise of doing what is for the greater good of society. However, more often than not the symbols that they exchange over their networks are subjective and suit their capitalist interests, and ultimately, their own pocketbooks. As media also has to do with how we consume it I believe it is also important to note the powerful influence that our smart devices have on everyday life. The exchange of symbols is so much more instant and immediate that the delay that may have once occurred no longer needs to be factored into the sender receiver model as before. That noise and gap due to the lack of and lesser technology no longer presents that same hurdle; wherein, the media can disseminate messages on various mediums as efficiently as possible.

*II. The conduct of inquiry about rhetoric*

**8. What are the assumptions and limitations of the methodological perspectives and modes of inquiry employed?**

The field of rhetoric is an ever changing one; wherein, the bank of models and methods which a rhetor may draw from to construct their own piece or analyze another rhetor’s work are fluid, interchangeable and open to interpretation. One might utilize a general method such as the rational world paradigm with which to test the verifiability of a piece, or more specifically, look to a piece from a feminist rhetorical criticism perspective in order to highlight the more specific facets – all to test whether the reasons purported are good or bad. As Daughton & Hart posit (2005), “… (rhetoric) a special sort of human activity; it takes a special kind of practice to understand it; and by understanding it, one acquires a special perspective on the world itself” (p. 6). However, at its very core rhetoric is an art and therefore open to interpretation. There is no inherently right or wrong answer, but more so good or bad reasons with which to base an argument; and the discourse that may resonate with one person doesn’t necessarily always ring true for another. In identifying general models and procedures with which to construct and view rhetoric, we create a space where methods employed are largely acknowledged and accepted as appropriate models we can utilize in order to effectively practice and gain that special perspective about rhetoric that Daughton & Hart mention.

Given this background and now to boil it down, there are assumptions and limitations to these methods. One tends to assume that the model or method one chooses to analyze or construct a piece with speaks to said piece and works given the context. More often than not what ends up happening is that one will critically examine and dissect presupposed works of rhetoric, assuming that those methods and models are concrete and hold up, rather than more critically analyzing those procedures used to come to any conclusions about the piece. This also often limits the ability to really look more deeply at a piece because one is more focused on whether the rhetor adhered to the “standard” methodological perspectives. An opaque way in which to possibly best expound upon this idea is to bring up the concept of rhetorical presence. While more often a characteristic of narratives, rhetorical presence defines the vividness which a rhetorical piece employs in order to bring to life the ideas advanced (Daughton & Hart, 2005, p. 90). This vividness is probably one of the more effective, less assuming and least limiting modes of inquiry employed because it is such a fluid concept, offering some structure and the most understanding of rhetoric as an art form.

**10. What are the pragmatic values of the knowledge derived from scholarly inquiry [about rhetoric]?**

First and foremost, scholarly inquiry about rhetoric instills the ability for one to be able to develop their critical consumer skills. We are able to develop more of a bag of tricks and skill set with which to analyze rhetorical works for their varied facets that might even get lost if merely glanced at or taken for face value. It is pragmatic in that it allows one to build that critical lens in order to really look hard and discerning at a piece; allowing one to develop those critical probes that help reveal how a message functioned and how the authors perceived the rhetorical circumstances (Daughton & Hart, 2005, p. 85). Scholarly inquiry of rhetoric also forms a foundation and understanding about public discourse; wherein the function of said discourse is the identification, promulgation and adjudication of values which constitute and sustain social groups (Graff & Winn, n.d., p. 47). Discourse is key in that it also constitutes the flow of language (symbols) within the public sphere about societal issues and concerns. More elaborately put, the pragmatic value of scholarly inquiry resides in the fact that adherence to values is reinforced through public argumentation which also deploys and tests said values (Graff & Winn, n.d., p. 47). If there is not healthy public discourse about values, whether good or bad, a society can become stagnant or too malleable in its beliefs. It is therefore useful to inform and educate students about the value of rhetoric, and criticism thereof, because rhetorical criticism serves to – document social trends; provide general understanding; and it enables one to isolate a phenomenon for special study, describes aspects of said phenomenon and evaluate it (Daughton & Hart, 2005, pp. 23-25).

**11. What can be done to produce more reliable and useful knowledge about human communication?**

With less restrictive communication channels and more of a variety of influences, we as a society can produce more reliable and useful knowledge about human communication. An example of this can be documented on the culturally influential MTV network and their website; wherein, no matter the country Katy Perry and all of her pop cohorts show up on the home page, regardless of whatever local sensation actually has more sway. I personally witnessed this while living in India where Justin Bieber was so pervasive that young men would walk up and down the Ghats blasting his music on their cell phones. The reality is that what he represented symbolically as a person and his music did not really resonate with the Hindu culture, just that the communication channels which perpetuated his image for capital gain were able to reach far enough into their culture. From a young age we are all more or less influenced by Disney and the morals they present as being the most wholesome and true. I feel that their influence limits our ability to develop an understanding of the many depths and facets of human communication; especially when considering that that which Disney promulgates speaks more specifically to a certain generation and demographic. I feel it is important to first get beyond what limits our society and its ability to develop more wholesome and natural communication in order to even analyze whether the knowledge being shared and disseminated is useful. That said, research and studies which can weed out a lot of the aforementioned noise to get to the heart of sender receiver human communication (preferably in-person) could produce a valuable study. Speaking to this course and its objectives, analyzing rhetorical works across demographic, social and generational boundaries also produces useful (if not always reliable) information about humans and how and why we communicate.