BOOK REVIEW ESSAY:
RHETORICAL CRITICISM
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Many useful books have been written on rhetorical criticism, and book reviews have been written for most of them. Rather than attempt to duplicate the efforts of specific reviews currently available, this essay provides an overview to resources available in this area. Thus, it is designed for beginning coaches and students of rhetorical criticism (rather than for advanced readers), to provide guidance on the question of where to turn for additional material in the areas that interest them. Accordingly, this essay will focus on books devoted primarily to exploring the nature or theory of rhetorical criticism, and it will exclude critical applications and books which are primarily collections of speeches. It is designed to briefly describe available resources, not to evaluate or criticize them.

Classification of the books on rhetorical criticism is not easy, given the fact that no organizing scheme has been accepted by the field. This essay will begin with the more traditional (and, generally, earlier) approaches, and end with more pluralistic and (again,

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generally more recent) approaches. The order of the works in between is neither wholly topical nor chronological, but partakes of each approach. A bibliography of the books discussed, along with some of the specific reviews available on them, is appended to the end of this essay.

In 1948, Lester Thonssen and A. Craig Baird collaborated on the first textbook published in this area, *Speech Criticism*. Over twenty years later, with the assistance of Waldo W. Braden, they revised this classic work while retaining its fundamental approach. They survey rhetorical theory and selected critics (ancient, intermediate, and modern). Their approach is now considered traditional and includes such considerations as verification of the authenticity of texts, reconstruction of the speech setting, and investigation of the speaker and the speaker's background. Evaluation consisted of consideration of the arguments, appeals to emotions, speakers's credibility, organization, style, delivery, and audience response. Their approach is painstaking, thorough, and—while including speaker and audience—it clearly had as its focus analysis of the message from the standpoint of classical rhetorical theory.

Anthony Hillbruner's *Critical Dimensions* has many similarities in its approach, dividing criticism into extrinsic factors (e.g., audience, occasion, biography, effects) and intrinsic factors (e.g., ideas, organization, delivery). Carroll C. Arnold's book *Criticism of Oral Rhetoric* argues explicitly that oral (as opposed to verbal) discourse merits separate and sustained inquiry, and adopts a fundamentally traditional approach, informed by Bitzer's notion of the rhetorical situation. In the wake of the Developmental Conference on Rhetoric, which argued that the scope of rhetoric be broadened to include persuasive aspects of non-speech artifacts, this is an unusual approach. Arnold also includes sample speeches and criticisms. Robert S. Cathcart's *Post-Communication*, now in its second edition, includes treatment of argument, organization, style, and delivery. The most recent book included in this area, published in 1983 by James R. Andrews, *The Practice of Rhetorical Criticism*, examines the nature of criticism, context and audience, the speaker, and the text (see also his earlier work, *A Choice of Worlds*). It is one of three books which begin with introductory chapters by the author and then conclude with sample speeches and illustrative rhetorical criticism, a very useful pedagogical

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approach (the earliest textbook with this approach is Karlyn Kohrs Campbell's *Critiques of Contemporary Rhetoric*, discussed below, and the second is Arnold's text, previously mentioned). It is unique in that it provides several sample criticisms of a single speech, which illustrates how one artifact can be viewed from a variety of approaches, as well as an exchange between two of these competing authors. I hasten to add that this rough classification is not intended to imply that these books are merely "rehashes" of Thonssen, Baird, and Braden, or that they are limited to just those topics in *Speech Criticism*, only that they share, in large measure, a generally traditional orientation.

Three books on rhetorical criticism are collections of lectures which are also largely traditional in perspective: Donald C. Bryant's *Rhetorical Dimensions in Criticism*, Marie Hochmuth's *Rhetoric and Criticism*, and *Understanding Discourse*, by Karl R. Wallace. The traditional critic can find a variety of interesting insights and observations from these resources. William A. Linsley's edited work *Speech Criticism* is divided into two sections: the former reprints essays on the nature of rhetorical criticism while the latter includes sample speeches.

A book which stands alone in this field is Edwin Black's *Rhetorical Criticism: A Study in Method*, which, focusing in large part on fifteen essays from *A History and Criticism of American Public Address*, discourses on the limitations of the neo-Aristotelian approach to criticism (traditional approach). Black offers an alternative portraying speeches as falling on a continuum from calm deliberation to extreme demagogury. This is essentially a generic approach, classifying and criticizing rhetorical artifacts according to situation. This book, and certain other forces less clearly identifiable, served as a stimulus for rhetorical criticism to experiment with a variety of alternatives to the traditional approach.

Some texts foster a more pluralistic approach. Thomas R. Nilsen edited a work *Essays on Rhetorical Criticism*, reprinting (with some revisions as well as additions) an issue of *Western Speech*. A more systematic approach is Robert L. Scott and Bernard L. Brock's *Method of Rhetorical Criticism*, recently revised as Brock and Scott. The latest version includes sections on traditional, experiential, new rhetorics, and movement and genre studies. This book contains both theoretical essays and applications of those approaches. Campbell's work (*Critiques of Contemporary Rhetoric*) contains chapters on rhetoric, language, and criticism; the process of rhetorical criticism; three systems of rhetorical criticism (tradi-
Several books have appeared which are devoted to a particular, non-traditional, approach. In 1976 the Speech Communication Research Board and the University of Kansas co-sponsored a conference on "Significant Form in Rhetorical Criticism," which resulted later in the publication of *Form and Genre*, a book devoted to exploring, both theoretically and in practice, generic rhetorical criticism. John F. Cragan and Donald S. Shields edited *Applied Communication Research*, a volume dealing with Ernest Bormann's fantasy theme or rhetorical vision method, collecting together both published and unpublished essays on this approach. Bormann has just published a new book on this topic, *The Force of Fantasy; Restoring the American Dream*, consisting of a theoretical essay and application to American Public Address from the puritans to Lincoln. Finally, Charles J. Stewart, Craig Allen Smith, and Robert E. Denton collaborated to produce *Persuasion and Social Movements* which discusses several perspectives on movement criticism and includes several applications to specific rhetorical movements.

Science Research Associates publishes a series of short monographs on particular topics in communication. Six deserve mention here. Craig R. Smith's *Orientations to Speech Criticism* includes an overview of rhetorical criticism and focuses on three criteria for critical judgments: pragmatic, aesthetic, and ethical. Another broad introduction, albeit from a different perspective, is Karl W. E. Anatol's *Fundamentals of Persuasive Speaking*, which considers persuasion generally, and the audience, credibility, and message structure and content. *Fundamentals of Evidence and Argument*, by Stephen Robb, and *Orientations to Rhetorical Style*, by Michael Osborn, address specific components of rhetorical discourse. Finally, two other monographs in this series provide a theoretic structure and then focus on actual discourse, campaigns, and movements: Kathleen M. Jamieson's *Critical Anthology of Public Speeches*, and James W. Chesebro and Caroline D. Hamsher's *Orientations to Public Communication*.

The most difficult question to answer is: which book is most useful? The simplest, most correct, but least satisfying, answer is that no book is best—each one has its own unique strengths and weaknesses. The "best" book is the one which most directly addresses the critic's needs. For example, a critic who believes that particular discourse is best approached from a fantasy theme/rhetorical vision should consult Cragan and Shields and Bormann;
the neo-Aristotelian critic at minimum should examine Thonssen, Baird, and Braden and Black; the intending critic of a movement should examine Stewart, Smith, and Denton, and so on.

However, many intending critics have no notion of what approach best suits the discourse they wish to criticize. Students who need a brief introduction to rhetorical criticism in general should read some introductory material, like the first chapter in Brock and Scott, Smith's first chapter, or the first two chapters in Campbell. Students who need exposure to a variety of methods in order to obtain a feel for the variety in available approaches could look at Campbell's third chapter or at Brock and Scott. Then, the critic can turn to more specialized and detailed discussions of the appropriate method. Nor is this account intended to slight other resources, like the myriad articles published in our journals—it is just that some limits needed to be imposed on this undertaking. However, this discussion, as general as it is, should provide beginning students and coaches with some idea of the resources available to aid in the development of their rhetorical criticism, and a broad notion of their basic thrust.

BIBLIOGRAPHY


Campbell, Karlyn Kohrs, and Jamieson, Kathleen Hall, (Eds.). *Form and Genre: Shaping Rhetorical Action*. Falls Church, VA: Speech Communication Association, [1978].


Abbreviations:  

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<tr>
<th>CE</th>
<th>Communication Education</th>
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<tr>
<td>P&amp;R</td>
<td>Philosophy &amp; Rhetoric</td>
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<td>QJS</td>
<td>Quarterly Journal of Speech</td>
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<td>SSCJ</td>
<td>Southern Speech Communication Journal</td>
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*Books marked with an asterisk should be in print in 1985.*