Ethnologies

Barry BRUMMETT, *Rhetorical Dimensions of Popular Culture* (Tuscaloosa, University of Alabama Press, 1991, xxiii + 220, ISBN 0-81730-0156-5).

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element of live performance — are different from most popular entertainment and
have drawn audiences and unpaid performers for thirteen years.

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ISBN 0-81730-0156-5).

In *Rhetorical Dimensions of Popular Culture*, the author reconsiders the
traditional definitions of and approaches to rhetoric, and undertakes a reorientation
of the field which would include many previously ignored aspects of contempo-
rary popular culture. To accomplish this, the book is divided into two sections.
In the first section, the author offers the reader a critical evaluation of past and
more recent theoretical perspectives on rhetoric, points out their failings, and
offers what he considers viable and necessary modifications to make these
theories compatible with his view of culture. The second section consists of a
series of four case studies demonstrating how contemporary media forms and
contents permit individuals to find personal relevance through the negotiation of
meaning within a context of the individual-medium interface.

The basis for Brummett's conceptualization of rhetoric is the recognition
that the role of verbal, extended, reasoned discourses, once the predominant form
of public expression, has been supplanted by a multitude of expressive forms
which constitute popular and mass mediated culture. Because of this modifica-
tion in the communicative environment in which the majority of people lives,
Brummett inverts the previous analytic equation and assigns priority to what a
message *does* (i.e. what social function it performs), as opposed to what forms
messages take. This notion will sound quite familiar to those folklorists who have
long espoused the primacy of function over genre or text. In the author's view,
popular culture is not "composed of 'readable objects'.... [because] "to speak of
reading a text, even of reading it in different ways, presumes that there is a text
that is already written. [The author argues] that what people do when confronting

an artifact is to make the text for themselves in the first place" [xix]. Although Brummett does not put it quite this way, he is representing the cultural artifact as intrinsically meaningless, becoming activated only when it is confronted by individuals who, on the basis of the context of culture and context of situation, create a culturally meaningful text which is assigned to the artifact. In these terms, popular culture would be "those artifacts that are most actively involved in winning the favor of the public and thus in shaping the public in particular ways" [xxi]. And, most importantly, the text or message so-created would contain within it the temporal and spatial elements of context which render it significant and meaningful to the individual in the form of a "mosaic" [70]. As Brummett notes: "...instead of seeing texts as separate entities reacting to situations and expressed by subjects who are also separate entities, the critic...sees text, context, and subject as structurally one within a mosaic" [95-96].

At first glance, Brummett's complex model seems to imply that no artifact, be it verbal, material, or gestural, possesses any intrinsic meaning or cultural symbolism, but that significance is created and attached to the artifact by the receiver, or "agent" [70]. Were this the case, a cultural artifact could mean virtually anything depending upon the circumstances surrounding the individual's reception of the artifact, a notion frighteningly reminiscent of the deconstructionist approach to the literary text. In fact, Brummett is implying a dynamic, as opposed to a static view of culture, whereby a certain range of possible significations are attached to the artifact under the influence of shared culture. Individuals exposed to the artifact then choose from amongst these significations and create a final "personalized" meaning based on the individual's relevant social experiences and position, a process similar to Fiske's tripartite model of dominant, negotiated, and oppositional readings of television or film texts (Fiske 1987). As the popular culture matrix evolves, certain readings become obsolete while new potential readings are created, and this can eventually result in the partial or total redefinition of the artifact's signification. Unfortunately, because of the dense language Brummett employs at times, it is very easy for those not familiar with this school of cultural studies to see the author's communicative model as a dehumanization and rejection of performance theory. In fact, it addresses the very important question of performer-audience interaction as a cooperative process of meaning creation, and applies this notion to the interface between popular culture and the mass media.

Apart from the purely academic importance which his work might offer, the author perceives the consequences of his perspective as laden with political significance. By attaching equal value to both the type of reasoned argument which characterizes the educated elites and the type of protest discourse linked with mass demonstrations, the author sees his work as potentially empowering those who have "been excluded from rhetorical arenas because they have little facility with (or opportunity for) producing their own extended verbal texts, for

there are other ways to participate in rhetorical struggles in addition to making speeches and writing essays" [xiv]. By de-emphasizing the representational definition of culture (i.e. culture which privileges the artistic and articulate by placing value on symbolic representations, thereby devaluing the reality which by definition transcends any *single* representation of it, but encompasses equally *all* representations, regardless of aesthetic quality) the author paves the way for the validation of the rhetoric of popular culture and mass media as foci for the expression of human cultural and social concerns.

A number of related issues are examined by the author in the course of constructing his model. In Chapter One, Brummett examines the question of *media determinism,* a school of thought once widely held in media studies, and still espoused by researchers in the field. The essential hypothesis underlying this issue is that the ability of the mass public to conduct reasoned discourse on substantive issues has been eroded under the influence of the mass media in general, and television in particular. Brummett examines in detail the theories of two media determinists, Neil Postman and David Altheide, who hold that "the danger of television's dominance lies in constraining public discourse within categories that have a conservative bias, which serves the dominant ideology of the times." [12], a position not unlike that held by advocates of Marxist approaches to media studies. Brummett responds that these concerns have not been proven, and that, even were public discourse in some way altered by the media logic-processes of commodification, narrativization, visual apprehension of reality, and intimacy, such restricted discourse can nonetheless "be a discourse that enables meaningful, productive rhetorical struggles over public issues" [18]. Brummett continues an in-depth response to Postman and Altheide, and offers convincing counter-examples to demonstrate the weaknesses of their conclusions. Brummett himself feels what television actually accomplishes is a process of metonymization, the "reduction of complex and abstract issues to more easily grasped images..." [27] which the public then uses to render its judgements. From this perspective, television does not control the public by presenting diluted information; it actually engages in the "radical transformation of issues into a different form of public discourse" [27].

The core of the author's approach to popular culture is contained in his model of the "functions" of public discourse, which he represents as a continuum ranging from the "exigent," to the "quotidian," through to the "implicative." Rhetoric serving the exigent function addresses "pressing problems, perceived quandaries, and frank questions" [39]. This involves all that is said and done which symbolically represents and comes to grips with critical issues (e.g. war, elections, etc.) impinging on the popular experience. Such rhetoric is manifested in the form of "interventionist" discourse which implies an awareness of the crisis, defines an interventionist stance, and consciously assumes responsibility on the part of the rhetors in their effort to influence meanings. At the mid-point

of the continuum, Brummett locates the quotidian function of rhetoric, by which he intends rhetoric which manages "the public and personal meanings that affect everyday decisions" [41]. This level of rhetoric involves "long-term concerns as well as momentary choices that people must make to get through the day" [41]. This rhetoric takes the form of "appropriational" manifestations, that is, the use of appropriate phrases, language, actions, non-verbal behaviour, in short, all that constitutes the communally held shared knowledge making up the communicative competence of a cultural group or speech community. The far right of the continuum is identified as the locus of implicative rhetoric, which is that dimension of discourse which contains the "sub-texts" of meanings underlying rhetoric and which define "the ways a society constructs its categories of thought and language, such as gender and race, its fundamental values, its most unquestioned priorities" [44]. This rhetoric is produced through "conditional" manifestations. Hence, the implicative function implies the conditions relative to which the other rhetorical functions are to be defined as exigent or quotidian. Brummett goes on to discuss the applications of such a functional model to popular culture studies, and broaches such topics as the "Athenian Rhetorical Legacy," "The Discursive Nostalgics," and "The Marxist Corrective."

The second section of the book contains a series of four case studies. The first of these is an analysis of a single film text, the motion picture "Gremlins," which the author suggests is a metaphor of the dangerous consequences of the misuse of technology. The analysis is ingenious as the author establishes links between the film's content and the potential interpretation which he outlines. Nevertheless, the author does admit that he "cannot, of course, claim that every viewer of 'Gremlins' is troubled over technology, but for those who are, the symbolic...described here should obtain" [116]. This he considers a justifiable assumption, given that one of contemporary society's major concerns is with the proliferation of technology and the potential for misuse that goes with it.

The second study involves an entire category of films: haunted house movies. While the author discusses the potential psychological significance of recurring motifs (mirrors as "symbols of introspection" [128]; doors as "instruments of control" [129]; stairs as "symbols of access" [130]), it is the theme of disorder which receives most attention. Essentially, the author proposes that the horror felt by viewers of such films derives not so much from the nature of discrete episodes as from the sense of "disorder causes by the joining together [of] two realms that should be kept apart" [131]. Obviously, to a folklorist or anthropologist, this theme of separate sacred and profane domains is a familiar one, as is the fear, culturally widespread, that contact between the two is fraught with danger and a sense of disorientation: things are not in their proper (and safe) place. Brummett suggests it is just this fear which renders relevant the representation of events which the viewer knows *consciously* are pure fantasy.

The third example is an analysis of the significance of the vampire film in popular culture, and it is with this study that the author begins to lose some credibility. Granted, he begins well by introducing the notion of the "representative anecdote" which he portrays as a narrative template which can be applied to any specific category of discourse, a notion not unlike the discourse model used by Polanyi in her *Writing the American Story* (Polanyi 1989), and one certainly similar to Proppian structuralism. As Brummett defines it, "the anecdote is a pattern the critic imposes on the discourse in order to sum it up, a pattern expressed in a few key terms, symbols,or ideas. The critic might ask who the chief human figures are, what the basic tropes or moves of plot development are, and what kinds of motives are mirrored in the discourse...." [148-48]. So far, so good. However, the author then goes on to demonstrate how the vampire theme is actually a metaphor for the "fears over technological, economic, and political changes of the fifties and seventies...." [157]. It is true that many of the fears connected with the vampire myth (e.g. powerlessness in the face of a more powerful foe) are found in other domains of social life. However, this does not imply that similar concerns in different contexts necessarily imply linkage between the contexts. And Brummett himself is tentative about his own findings, writing that "[his] purpose here is to reconstruct a mosaic that people, faced with a range of problems having to do with conformity, individuality, and technology, *might* (emphasis mine) have constructed out of an environment of signs and texts" [148]. This is far from a convincing argument, and certainly flies in the face of empirical social research methodology. Likewise, Brummett describes his final case study as one where he considers "how an agent, making a diffuse text from many different sources *might* (emphasis mine) symbolize the important public problem of race relations...." [172].

In conclusion, my reactions to this work are ambivalent. On the one hand, I feel that Brummett offers an interesting and (somewhat) novel perspective on the relationship between the products and consumers of popular culture. My one criticism of his theoretical section is that it targets such a specialized readership, and will be less accessible to students in other disciplines. As for his case studies, they are legitimate inasmuch as the author admits that they represent possible/ potential readings of the materials examined. However, being based on one individual's perception of the dominant concerns of popular culture and his interpretation of how these (perceived) concerns are reflected in various media forms, the conclusions he reaches are unfalsifiable. Because of this circular methodology, the author's findings offer little insight into the process of the public management of meaning in popular culture.

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David Gordon WHITE, *Myths of the Dog-Man,* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1991, pp. 334)

This book is about monsters, specifically those with the head of a dog and the body of a man and others labelled Dog-Man, and their fantastic peregrinations in some 4000 years of monster traditions. David White's study of Dog-Men and Dog-Headed men is premised on the idea that monsters are an ideological construct; his objective is to present "an exercice in the history of religious method" [xiii] to show how the history of ideas is relevant to an understanding of their modern embodiment in contemporary sociopolitical situations. As an ideological construction, monsters are used for propaganda ("The Yellow Peril," "Communist") or social manipulation ("The Jewish Conspiracy," "Mad Dog Gadaffi," "The Evil Empire"). In a deeper sense, monsters are a lens through which humans refract their experience of the world and express that experience.

Monsters pose the existential question of self-identity; where does the human begin and the monster leave off — how do Dr. Jekyll and Mr.Hyde cohabitate? The Dog-Headed men, which White names "cynocephalics," are a hybrid creature; a male human companion yet a potential traitor (dogs of war) who can attack or become rabid. Dog-Men, cynoanthropics, are barbarians said to be descended from dogs which in turn stand as metonyms for their outcast masters, also male. Discussing physical and metonymic forms, White seems not