BRIEF OVERVIEW OF SOME RHETORICAL METHODS

This is an incomplete list of the methods we’ll cover. Missing still are “frame analysis” and others.

Traditional
This is a fairly simple and straightforward approach to doing rhetorical criticism. The method is rooted in Aristotle’s five canons of rhetoric (invention, organization, style, delivery, memory). The rhetorical critic chooses an artifact (often but not necessarily a speech); and a research question. Then three major tasks are performed: the critic reconstructs the context in which the rhetorical act occurred; 2) the critic analyzes the artifact using the five canons as a guide; and 3) the critic assesses the impact of the artifact on the audience in light of the various options available to the rhetor.

Burkean Approaches
We will cover at length only one Burkean approach in class: pentadic criticism. But Burke was a prolific and influential theorist, and we’ll have an opportunity to talk about some of his ideas (e.g. identification) and how they can be used to analyze texts.

Pentadic Criticism
This method provides some pretty straightforward terminology rooted in what Burke calls the pentad. The pentad is comprised of five terms or “units of analysis”: agent, act, scene, agency, and purpose. The terms are easy to understand and easy to apply. The rhetorical critic simply applies the terms to an artifact. Then, through a somewhat painstaking (and sometimes confusing) process of working out the relationships among the five terms (this process is not written up but happens behind the scenes), the rhetorical critic shows how the rhetor encompasses a situation through rhetoric, i.e. how the terms are operating to define a situation as the rhetor sees it. The rhetorical critic shows how the artifact privileges one of the terms in the pentad and what this might imply about the rhetor’s understanding of the situation. The difficult part for the critic (you and me) is 1) finding a good artifact to analyze, and 2) working out the “ratios.” The “ratios” are the relationships between pairs of terms in the pentad (e.g. scene-act, agency-act, agent-act, etc.). A speech may make a good artifact, but you may also want to expand your search to include specific problems or controversies, and then look for written texts that attempt to deal with the controversy you’ve chosen. Even better, look for two or more artifacts that attempt to make sense of the same situation/controversy, but make sense of it in very different ways.

Cluster Analysis
This is another pretty straightforward method of rhetorical analysis. It is designed to help the critic discover the rhetor’s worldview. To do this, the critic determines which symbols are key symbols in an artifact. Then, the critic charts the symbols that cluster around the key
symbols in the artifact. In short, the task for the critic is to note what subjects cluster about other subjects (what images $b, c, d$ the rhetor introduces whenever s/he talks with engrossment about subject $a$, where $a$ is a key symbol for the rhetor). The analysis involves three steps: 1) identification of key terms, 2) charting of the terms that cluster around these key terms, and 3) the discovery of patterns in the cluster. An “agonistic” analysis may also be used to show which terms oppose the terms of the cluster. The cluster analysis method may work well with a creative or expressive text (e.g. a poem or other text rich in imagery), but the sample essay we’ll read suggests that it can work nicely with other written texts too. One problem you may find is that the method is not very fully worked out—the method is somewhat unclear about how to perform the analysis. You may also need to do some extra digging in order to find a really good artifact—not just any artifact will do.

Metaphoric Criticism

This method is pretty straightforward. The challenge for you will be to find a good artifact to analyze. A non-discursive artifact works well, especially an advertisement, a physical structure such as a building, or a design of some kind (e.g. a web site). The sample essays in our book use the Portland Building and a print advertisement for Honda as artifacts. Discursive artifacts will work nicely too, and may in fact be easier to analyze because the metaphors will be visible as written language (as opposed to images). The basic assumption of the method is that metaphors do not simply function as decorations or stylistic add-ons, but constitute our thought processes and worldview. Metaphor is seen as a way of knowing the world. Foss’s examples include “argument is war” and “time is money.” These metaphors structure our thinking in important ways. To adopt a different metaphor (e.g. “argument is a dance”) is to see the world in a new light. (Note my use of “light” and “seeing” as metaphors for knowledge and thinking!) To analyze the artifact, the critic does four things: 1) examines the artifact as a whole, 2) isolates metaphors, 3) sorts metaphors according to emerging themes or patterns, and 4) analyzes the metaphors. The fourth step is most important but also the most difficult for the critic, because it asks you to go beyond sets of metaphors in order to say something about how the dominant metaphors function to facilitate or hinder the rhetor’s goals, how the metaphors imply something about the rhetor’s worldview, and/or how the metaphors function to suggest attitudes and values that undergird them.

Feminist Criticism

Feminist criticism can be considered a subset of ideological criticism, insofar as ideological criticism is concerned with “hegemony” (i.e. domination of one group or set of ideas over another), stereotypes, and the processes through which they seem normal or natural. Feminism has a number of different meanings, but Foss attempts to identify three principles on which most feminists agree: 1) women are oppressed by patriarchy, where patriarchy refers to the domination of women’s interests by men’s; 2) women’s experiences differ from men’s; and 3) women’s perspectives are not now incorporated into our culture. Feminist criticism aims to eliminate oppression. Its focus is on the rhetorical forms and processes through which oppression is maintained and transformed. Feminist critics are interested in how gender is constructed rhetorically (i.e. through the use of symbols), and how this process can be resisted or challenged. Because feminist critics are interested in oppressive relationships of all kinds, this method can also be used to analyze the rhetorical construction of oppression based on race, class, sexual orientation, or any other dimension of identity. The
process of analyzing an artifact involves two steps: 1) analysis of gender in the artifact, and 2) how the analysis of the artifact contributes to our understanding of patriarchy.

Ideological Criticism

Ideology refers to the set of beliefs, values, and assumptions that constrain and enable our thinking. Often, ideologies can become invisible and naturalized: we simply don’t realize that our thoughts and actions are being shaped by sets of implicit assumptions, myths, or ingrained beliefs. Moreover, certain ideologies can become “hegemonic,” which means that they represent a kind of social control or “symbolic coercion” over us. Foss’s example is the ideology of racism, the which “the privilege accorded to whites seems normal, as does the lack of opportunity accorded to individuals of other races; if practices in the culture concerning people of color are questioned, the questions are seen as abnormal.” Resistance to a dominant ideology or worldview is often muted or contained, so that subjects often don’t realize that their behavior and knowledge are being shaped by “those with more power.” Because ideologies don’t announce themselves—nothing seems out-of-whack or unnatural about many of our assumptions—the critic’s job is to reveal how a particular ideology is embodied in cultural institutions (organizations, businesses, schools, etc.) or in artifacts (TV shows, software programs, etc.). Because ideological criticism often reveals something that we haven’t seen before or didn’t realize was even there, it is both a difficult method to use—it assumes that the critic can see something that most of us don’t see—but one that can have tremendous impact on readers. The method involves three steps: 1) identification of the nature of the ideology, 2) identification of the interests included (who stands to gain?), and 3) identification of the rhetorical strategies that support the ideology. This method can work very well with a non-discursive artifact (building, TV show, classroom, restaurant, club, etc.), so you may want to consider using it to satisfy the “at least one non-discursive artifact” requirement. Note finally the similarity between ideological criticism and feminist criticism, where feminist criticism can be considered a sub-set of ideological criticism.

Narrative Criticism

This method starts with the assumption that humans are essentially story-telling animals. “A narrative generally is recognized to be a way of ordering and presenting a view of the world through a description of a situation involving characters, actions, and settings.” The units of analysis are derived from the story form itself (e.g. characters, action, temporal relations, causal relations, setting, etc.). The critic who uses this method is interested in how the construction of a particular narrative directs the interpretation of a situation. A narrative can be treated as an argument that structures the world in a particular way. In other words, stories can tell us about the storytellers’ culture. Stories provide important glimpses into that culture—“the meanings attributed to particular events, those aspects of the culture that are privileged and repressed, its values, and its ethical system.” The analysis of an artifact involves two steps: 1) comprehensive examination of the narrative, and 2) selection of elements on which to focus. The hard part for you will be to find a good artifact/narrative to study. You will also need to develop a research question that will allow you to go beyond a description of a narrative in order to identify something significant about how narrative functions in a certain situation.
Genre Analysis

Genre analysis groups artifacts together into types or kinds. Examples of genres include: the TV drama, the short story, the family photograph, the novel, the business letter, the eulogy, the rejection letter, the resume, etc. We are all familiar with genres. “Generic criticism is rooted in the assumption that certain types of situations provoke similar needs and expectations among audiences and thus call for particular kinds of rhetoric.” Genres develop out of recurring situations. The key to understanding this method is to note that the critic is interested in discovering commonalities in rhetorical patterns across recurring situations, and not merely interested (as in the other methods) in examining a single artifact. Of course, while you will want to examine a single, representative artifact in order to describe the genre, you will also want to gesture beyond that single artifact to say something in general about the artifacts that make up the genre as a whole. The critic can do this in one of three ways: 1) generic description (critic examines several artifacts to determine if a genre exists), 2) generic participation (critic starts with a general class or genre of rhetoric and then tests an single artifact against that genre), and 3) generic application (critic applies a general model or genre to particular rhetorical artifacts in order to assess how well they fit the genre). As you can tell, this method may involve more labor on your part, because you will be required to find a number of artifacts that you think belong to a certain class. At the same time, the method is pretty easy to use once you find a good situation and set of artifacts to study.