

Report of the Seminar on  
Communication and Culture

Conference of the Kenneth Burke Society

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Members: James Klumpp, University of Maryland at College Park,  
          convenor  
          Bernard Brock, Wayne State University  
          Ron Primmeau, Central Michigan University  
          Star Muir, George Mason University  
          Steve Depoe, University of Cincinnati  
          Sarah Sinopoli, University of Maryland at College Park  
          Sharon Howell, Oakland University  
          Phyllis Japp, University of Nebraska-Lincoln  
          Keisuke Kurata, Hokkaido Musashi College

This seminar began with the diversity that a title such as ours would suggest and ended with a series of perplexing questions which returned us to the job at hand: turning the critic toward communication in the moments which constitute culture.

The papers submitted to our fellow seminarists fell into three basic themes. The first group began with the sense that the Burkean method provided the critical power to illuminate communication as cultural expression. These treatments typically considered the power of the critic to interpret communication (broadly considered) as expression of culture and, through this power, to interpret culture. The second group highlighted Burke's direct commentary on the character of our culture. They viewed the critic and rhetor as located within a cultural reality toward which s/he rhetorically orients. The critic's art turns toward the rhetor searching for strategies to cope with the culture, but strategies of critic and rhetor are clearly nested

within rhetorical problems defined by the character of contemporary culture. The third group empowered the critic more than the second group. The orientation that forged their thinking was the critic, alive in the world, continually coming to terms with it. They asked: Given the critic's active involvement in constructing his/her culture, how are we to construct such involvement?

From our initial work with this contributed material, we ranged across many topics with far more concrete discussion of events and discourse around us than this initial list of topics might indicate. This tone to our discussions led to a fascinating working through of the theory and praxis of criticism. Three major ideas formed to challenge our seminarists.

What is the stance of the critic? Is the critic interpreter (observer) or participant (activist)? This is, of course, a classic question in criticism. We discussed this question in some guise again and again. Certainly we had no one who was prepared to defend the extremist "interpreter" position, and those who articulated the "participant" position always seemed to praise the powers which the interpretive character gave the participant-critic. The resulting discussion seemed to drive us to answer "both . . . and . . ." -- a consideration of the character of the critic forged in the merger of interpreter and participant.

This led us naturally to ask: What voice characterizes the

involvement of this critic? Is it a rejective voice? a voice which defines the terms of acceptance? a voice responsible for interpretation? Once again our discussion tended to take us to find the stance of the critic in a merger of seemingly contradictory ideas. "Reorientation" involves the voice of change, but with a grace note of the sacred. The note of persuasion in the critic's voice carries the construction of a piety or sacredness which would be an orientation.

Perhaps the final paradox in the stance of the critic which marked our discussion was the dialectical relationship between the voice of the critic and the voice of the theorist. Perhaps this relationship was best typified by the actual emergence of a much more practical consideration of communication within culture from the abstract positions which our preliminary papers presented. The result was a vision of a stance in which the character of the critic and the character of the theorist could both be perceived in the critical act. The critic would manifest each with a fluidity of capability, but with the expression of each being fullest in the expression of the other.

How do we orient ourselves to Kenneth Burke? I suppose we asked the question: Do we need to go beyond Kenneth Burke? Our initial answer was an obvious "Yes" tempered only by the realization of the paradox created by the fact that no one goes beyond Kenneth Burke quite as often as Kenneth Burke. In the end, however, the simple answer to the question turned out to be not as important as what a reflexive consideration of our

discussion revealed. We would go for extended periods of time in deep discussion of ideas without mentioning Burke's work and in retrospect realizing that we had developed voices of our own which carried the tenor of Burkean starting points. We noted that our turning to the praxis of communication transformed our voice time and again. Some saw evidence of the relationship between Burkean "theory" and criticism in our own turn. In the end, we agreed the seminar seemed to be less "about Burke" than about critics in our moment. We often found an inspiration in Burkean concepts, but these concepts were transformed even as they were posed. The consubstantial expression of the voices of theory and criticism seemed to describe the orientation with which we conducted our seminars. Needless to say, we did not fully resolve questions such as these, but they will certainly constitute a legacy of the seminar in each of our thinking.

Seizing the moment for communication and culture. Overlying our discussion was an often tacit, but occasionally explicit, realization that we were meeting in this seminar at a moment when the work we were doing had never been more vital. As one seminarist put it: There may have been no previous time when our sense of public place is as up for grabs as today. The peoples of Eastern Europe are constructing their sense of the public in new ways in an intricate web of communication largely hidden from American view, but with potential for innovation. That technology is out of control and robbing humans of control over

their lives in subtle -- and some not so subtle -- ways is becoming increasingly evident. With the isolation of American politics from popular relevance, the loss of the sense of public place in America is an increasing focus of critical inquiry. The emergence of a global awareness -- not simply inter-nationalism but alternative senses of global definition of experience -- calls for new languages of expression to articulate transformed understanding.

The critical voice in the public sphere acquires vitality from this moment. Communication, which creates the public moment in the encounter with experience, reorients understanding through a vital dialogue of critique, enables new languages which adapt ways of encounter, reconstructs the sacred from the critique of the old piety, and transforms the culture in the babel. The critic's moment lies connected to the past and future, to theory and experience, to the work of Burke (and others) and the demands of the new, and the critic who transforms that moment vitally defines the importance of communication and culture.

Thus, we ended with an elevated sense of the urgency in our task -- the critic's merger of interpretation and participation places his/her voice at the vital center of the process of the transformation of the moment -- but with a humble realization that this task opened a series of questions which we only began to address in our brief time together.

Interpreter/Participant

James F. Klumpp