Buletinul Ştiinţific al Universităţii Politehnica Timişoara
Seria Limbi moderne

Scientific Bulletin of the Politehnica University of Timişoara
Transactions on Modern Languages

Vol. 19, Issue 1 / 2020

The Problem of Evaluation in the Rhetorical Criticism

Cosmin-Constantin BĂIAȘ*

Abstract: The field of the communication sciences is a hybrid field with various influences that can be observed in the research methods that are used: the quantitative-scientific and qualitative-interpretive methods. Rhetorical criticism as a qualitative research in the field of communication calls for its own evaluation standards. Our aim is to clarify, through a meta-analysis, the evaluation criteria proposed by different authors and the standards, after which an essay of the rhetorical criticism can be appreciated. We claim that a work of the rhetorical criticism is not just an exercise of creativity and originality, but rather a way of persuasive argumentation.

Keywords: Rhetorical theory, rhetoric criticism, evaluation standards, qualitative research methods, argumentation, critical thinking.

1. The problem of evaluation

Different exegetes and theorists (Griffin, 2012; West and Turner, 2010; Campbell, Huxman and Burkholder, 2015) talked about standards or criteria in the field of the communication sciences. From the very beginning some preliminary distinctions should be made. We do not intend to set standards by which an orator "impresses", persuades or identifies himself/ herself with a certain type of audience; it is enough to refer to the theories of the public speaking for this type of analysis. We are interested in how we can evaluate the text of a critic who writes about a rhetor's work. Irrespective of the theory the critic has started and the method of criticism he has used, the appreciation of critical or meta-critical value should satisfy the rigor of a rational discourse.

In the field of humanistic or social disciplines, the problem of evaluation is a real one, as there are no so-called external, objective or scientific evaluation criteria.

* Assist. Prof., PhD., Department of Communication and Foreign Languages, Faculty of Communication Sciences, Politehnica University of Timișoara, România. E-mail: cosmin.baias@upt.ro

Rhetorical criticism can be regarded both as a set of qualitative research methods and as a body of theories of humanistic communication. As the author who coordinated two books of articles that used as analysis the rhetorical criticism (Băiaş, 2015; Băiaş, 2016), I ask myself what are the criteria by which such a critical work can be evaluated. Is the work of a rhetorical critic better than the work of another? Are there any specific criteria that can be used in evaluating an article of rhetorical criticism? Can we talk about qualitative research standards when we want to question the analysis of a rhetorical critic?

There is a problem of evaluation in the rhetorical criticism because we cannot appeal to "classical" scientific standards such as validity, replicability, or other evidence outside the critical text. Quantitative research is guided by two standards or evaluation rules: fairness (measurement) and certainty (repetition of measurement results), which do not match the interpretive research. In other words, the evaluation of an essay on rhetorical criticism should conform to qualitative standards, specific to the socio-human disciplines. Moreover, these standards should be known and proposed by the teachers to the students who prepare their work during the semester.

I consider this investigation to be a meta-analytical one. In the first part, it aims to summarize the main ideas of some representative authors who have dealt with this subject. In the following part, I propose, through a dialogue of ideas, my own standards of evaluation in the rhetorical criticism. I specify that these standards are subjective and have only a temporary character. Maybe each teacher who evaluates a student's essay, each publisher who judges the work of a professional critic or participant in the critical act has in mind his/ her own evaluation standards. The critical work (i.e., judging rhetorical artifacts) is a reflexive activity that aims both the well-being of the society and self-discovery. Through this paper I just want to draw attention to the less analyzed critical evaluation problem and to encourage the creation of new alternative perspectives.

2. Different Perspectives

Probably, Philip Wander and Steven Jenkins' article "Rhetoric, Society, and the Critical Response" was one of the first attempts to respond to the problem. The two authors come to the conclusion that an informed critic can only offer an informed talk about an important aspect of the society, and he can try, through his critical act, to enter into a dialogue with another person:

> But beyond the procedural requirements of adequate, accurate documentation and reasonable inference, what more can we demand of a critic than that he tell the truth as he sees it?
> Not all truth, of course, is worth communicating. The critic selects an object to carry the truth he considers worth talking about. His conveyance becomes a sacred object, for not only is it to carry the critic's personal vision, it is also to carry that vision to someone else. Consequently, the critic casts about for the best available object to carry what he considers to be important. To determine whether this vehicle is an

> adequate means of conveyance, the critic must get into it, for each object has its own integrity, and where that integrity conflicts with the vision it is to carry, the vision is distorted. Where the object carries more than is anticipated, it stands to inform the critic. (Wander & Jenkins 1972: 449)

In other words, without proposing a certain universal standard, we may note the critic's freedom to choose the desired artefact and his responsibility towards the social subject that he wishes to analyze in detail. Obviously, these things cannot be measured. However, from the educational point of view students should be encouraged to express their ideas, attitudes and behaviors about current social problems. Thus, we believe that the role of social disciplines in general, and of communication sciences in particular is: to focus on subjects of civic interest, to discuss ideas, arguments and values of the society in which they live; to create the background and to encourage value judgments, to strengthen the awareness and democratic basis of the city.

Brian L. Ott, in his article: "Bridging Scholarly Theory and Forensic Practice: Towards a More Pedagogical Model of Rhetorical Criticism," published in 1988, considers that there may be three alternative standards whereby a text should be judged: the historical, ideological and rhetorical criteria. According to the first model, a student should be encouraged to provide in his/ her text details about the context of the chosen artifact and other elements that may lead to a better understanding.

In the second model "students might analyze the preferred meanings of the text around an issue such as gender, race, or sexuality, discuss the implications of that analysis for relationships of power, and judge the text democratic or undemocratic, oppressive or resistive, or some combination of these extremes" (Ott 1988: 70).

One last model could be the recourse to the salient rhetorical principles and how they can help to analyze a text. A major disadvantage of this proposal is due to the offered relativism. A young man can use a particular model but he can be penalized by an assessor who takes into account the values of another model.

Roderick P. Hart, Suzanne Daughton and Rebecca LaVally, in their recent book, *Modern Rhetorical Criticism* (2018: 36-38) propose a series of seven critical criteria that they call standards: utilitarian, artistic, moral, scientific, historical, psychological and political. It is true that the authors only sketch these standards as answers to some questions. However, most of the seven proposed standards do not refer to the work of the critic, but rather to the rhetorical act that the critic interprets. This is obvious for most rules. For example: the utilitarian standard pursues the effect on the public, the moral standard is concerned with the encouragement of the public virtue, while the psychological standard focuses on the manner in which the message has validated the public or the rhetor's emotions.

However, the authors honestly mention two final remarks. Firstly, the list is incomplete and "critics can, and should, supplement this list" (Hart, Daughton and LaVally 2018: 37); in fact, the critic chooses an adequate standard and he honestly defends it. Secondly, the compliance with a standard may lead to the loss of sight of

another. This last aspect is questionable and the authors' illustration shows us that they are considering the standards of a rhetor, rather than those of a rhetorical critic. Therefore, we consider that the provision of general standards in rhetorical criticism should lead to the discovery of some common values around which other personal preferences can be built.

If a "professionalization" of the rhetorical criticism is desired in the field of communication sciences, then either the standards should be common to all judicious judges, without exception or all the critics should have the possibility to choose their own qualitative standards. Certainly, there may be different weights and (inter)subjective interests, but this is another discussion and it involves the same starting point.

3. Persuasive argumentation

The great effort to solve the problem was probably made by American researcher Sonja K. Foss (1983, 2009, 2018). She believes that there are two assumptions or fundamental premises of the rhetorical criticism: the objective reality does not exist, it is a symbolic creation, namely, a rhetorical one, and a critic can only know an artifact through his/ her personal interpretation (not an objective, impartial and a detached one), because it brings particular values and experiences. Therefore, the critic is not preoccupied to find a true, fair and right interpretation for a particular artifact:

> As a result of these assumptions, your task as a critic is to offer one perspective on an artifact-one possible way of viewing it. You are not interested in finding the true, correct, or correct interpretation of an artifact. Consequently, two critics may analyze the same artifact, ask the same research question, and come up with different conclusions. One could interpret an artifact as the reframing of an issue, another as a visual metaphor of juxtaposition, and another as the creation of a compelling rhetorical vision. (Foss 2018: 24-25).

Two critics can analyze the same artifact, ask the same research question, come to different conclusions, and both articles can be excellent works of rhetorical criticism. This is potentially possible because there is no objective reality, a single correct interpretation, or a universal model of critical analysis. In fact, as the rhetorical theorist Edwin Black (2009) draws attention to us, "the method of rhetoric criticism is the critic." Thus, "to provide intelligent criticism, each critic is free not only to offer his own interpretation but is encouraged to propose responsibly his own grid, method, or procedure for analyzing a rhetorical artifact" (Băiaş 2016: 241), which means that in the critical act the critic has an existential priority.

To propose new rules, different from fairness and certainty, (Foss 2009: 17-19) considers three standards of rhetorical criticism: justification, reasonable inference, and coherence.

The first standard refers to the justification of the critic's argument or of his/her conclusion by providing data, information or evidence (proven by extensive quotations and visual descriptions of the artifact); more precisely, a standard of

adequacy and fidelity of the text: “This standard of adequate, accurate documentation requires that what you say exists in an artifact is, in fact, there” (Foss 2018: 25).

The second standard deals with the rational inference, i.e., the passage from facts to the conclusion, the way the data, the information or the evidence warrant the claim of the argument. In particular, we must explain the grounds or premises of our conclusion, the way in which they support our thesis. Each critic should explicitly offer the reader the connections he/ she establishes between premises and conclusions, i.e., “should be able to see and appreciate how you arrived at your claims” (Foss 2018: 25).

Finally, one last standard refers to the coherence. From a formal point of view, the critic can be evaluated in the manner he has ordered, arranged, and presented the results so as they should be: congruent and consistent internal. Thus, the results should not contradict each other and treat the major parts of the artifact without leaving something out. Coherence requires a critic to make a laborious analysis of the data in order to present them in a useful and intelligent way. The three proposed standards can be seen by analogy with Stephan Toulmin’s (2003) argumentative model, which highlights critical thinking skills.

In addition to these “formal” or “scientific” criteria, Foss also offers a number of content or creative criteria. Although there are three criteria that can be identified for the evaluation of the critical articles, it is necessary to note that the nucleus of the rhetorical criticism is more an art or a subjective interpretation than a science and an observation: “essence of rhetorical criticism as an art, not a science” (Foss 2018: 26). Thus, the rhetorical critic is asked to bring a variety of creative abilities to support the process of rhetorical criticism: the work shouldn’t be written in a tedious, lifeless way. On the contrary, the work should help the readers to imagine or experiment an artifact just as the critic does; it should also induce interest or passion for an artifact. Furthermore, the critic’s work should convince the readers to see the contribution of the artefact to the rhetorical theory and offer them a complete invitation to experience an aspect of the world in new way. Consequently, rhetorical criticism requires critical thinking skills and a series of creative thinking skills, as well.

The issue of standards can lead to the following question: “Should there be any formal and content evaluation standards in rhetorical criticism?” The subjective evaluation standards are certainly the most easily identifiable and probably the ones that move us the most. Primarily there is a special style or writing that captivates us almost inexplicably and suddenly we feel at ease and the reading becomes joy. “The direction in which the text can move you” means that “the text succeeds in answering your problems.” Maybe for somebody, the subject must be one with an affective involvement or one in which he/she is emotionally involved. And now I would refer to objectivity or as the others would call ”intersubjectivity”. For me, a genuine rhetorical critic, as opposed to a neutral quantitative specialist, should start with current social interest themes, then “conceptualize” them in his/her own language, and on the basis of this theoretical “baggage”, the genuine rhetorical critic should become a social activist who militates for a particular cause. The qualitative methods

are those that should propose not just a neutrality of the research, but an emancipation, a reform of the society.

Two other aspects, which go beyond subjectivity, are given by: the use of a specific theoretical-methodological frame and mostly of the constructive argumentation. If we try to delimit a simple essay of literary criticism, it is necessary to use a theory from the rhetorical field: either a classical theory (Aristotle) or a modern one (Kenneth Burke, Walter Fisher or Ernest Bormann); then it is also necessary to respect a method of textual analysis that ensures a certain rigor and mostly the possibility to be verified by the other. The theoretical and methodical frame is the skeleton, the nervous system or the veins that should be felt by the reader, as little as possible, to make a text fluent and valuable. This does not mean that the theoretical and methodical frame should be neglected or eliminated, but it should not stand out.

The argumentative construction is the flesh, the muscles or the leaf of the plant in a text of rhetorical criticism. Thus, a critic has little to say, he can say just what he finds in an artifact, what he thinks or imagines with his/her own mind. However, the intersubjectivity and the quality of a text is given either by the manner in which the thesis is argued or by the critic's verdict. From my point of view, if the statements can be proven by multiple artifact quotes and if the inferences or the jumps from one sentence to another are consistent, the critic does a good/ quality work. If the critic's story resonates well with the audience or readers, then it is a valuable one.

Finally, maybe not the rigorous standards (conceptualization, theory, method, argumentation, story) convince a common reader or make a specialist to consider a critic as valuable but rather the vague criteria (interesting subject, personal involvement, style of writing). In other words, a quality rhetor should only impress his/her audience in the direction he/ she wants, while a valuable rhetorical critic should rely on an intersubjective base if he wants to have a social impact.

I would like to point out one last aspect that is based on an academic writing pattern. Two American authors, husband and wife, Gerald Graff and Cathy Birkenstein (2015) have proposed the following template: "They say/ I say" a template that is in the center of many valuable works in the university space. Let's start with what others have thought about a topic, and then on the basis of dialogue, let's enter into a debate of ideas and arguments to make our own voice heard. A rhetorical critic should participate in the cultural life of the city he belongs to. The better the rhetorical critic is, the more he shows how X or Y has succeeded in creating the reality with his/her words. Perhaps a template at the end of a work of rhetorical criticism would be the following: "I argue that X has managed to say ... through his/her strategy ...".

Unlike the quantitative research where the results can be measured and the calculations can be figured out again by another researcher, the qualitative investigative methods are radically different. Therefore, there is a need for a community of experts or specialists in the field - with theoretical and/ or practical training to validate the work of a certain critic. In the absence of any scientific

standards, the main criterion left is the persuasive argumentation. In other words, has the critic succeed in arguing his assertions thoroughly? Has he succeeded in providing his readers with some probatory references, proving his assessments? Is his work a coherent one and does it respect a certain formal structure?

Probably the argumentative criteria can be used in a scientific way to provide the basis on which an essay of rhetorical criticism is evaluated. Without respecting this main principle, an article can turn into a well-written essay of literature or journalism. However, the stake of a critical text should be the persuasion of the readers (in the spirit of a traditional rhetoric) or the invitation to enter the world of the critic (in the spirit of an invitational rhetoric). These inter (subjective) steps can be either the choice of an artifact that treats a controversial topic, a discussion on an important matter of a particular community or a chance/ possibility to clarify an individual's values. Obviously, these last expectations are worthy of appreciation and depend on the cultural context of the person making the final evaluation. That is why I believe that only a community of specialists in the field of socio-human disciplines can reach agreement on the value or lack of value of a text of rhetorical criticism. In fact, this is a serious problem, because the number of these experts is low and moreover some polemics can occur between them, depending on either the school they represent or the theory they practice.

4. Conclusions

The critical exercise is an activity that centers on the examination of values. The so-called scientific, objective, or quantitative criteria will not be able to offer a direction for the individual people's choices, nor will they offer landmarks in search for good or justice in the society. In the spirit of a self-awareness of the particular values and of the respect for the proposed values of democratic societies, the young students, experienced teachers and researchers should be encouraged and rewarded for their work and reasonable investigation of the social controversies.

The main criterion for evaluating a work of rhetorical criticism should be a rigorous and persuasive argumentation. Such a rigorous argumentation should pay detailed attention to the coherence of the text, to the rational inferences and the justification of the assertations. A persuasive argumentation should take into account the choice of a controversial topic, the provision of a valued clarification and the intention to change society. The critical thinking skills should be combined with creative thinking skills in evaluating a text of rhetorical criticism.

Through these proposed qualitative standards, we want to be able to evaluate the work of a rhetorical critic, as well as other meta-critical texts in the sphere of rhetorical criticism. First of all, what matters is that the entire scientific community should be aware that not every work can be measured and evaluated according to quantitative standards. It is the duty of rhetorical specialists to reach an agreement on the quality standards specific to the field. Our work offers a possible opening and does not want to close this topic in the future.

References

1. Băiaș, C. (coord.), *Comunicări retorice: figuri critice*. Ed. Eurobit: Timișoara, 2016.
2. Băiaș, C. (coord.), *Arealul criticismului retoric*, Ed. Eurobit: Timișoara, 2015.
3. Black, E., *On Objectivity and Politics in Criticism*, in *Rhetorical criticism. Perspectives in action*, Ed. J. A. Kuypers, Lanham, Lexington Books: London and New York, pp. 29-32, 2009
4. Campbell, K.K., Huxman, S.S. & Burkholder, T.R, *The Rhetorical Act: Thinking, Speaking, and Writing Critically* (5rd edition). Cangage Learning: Stamford, 2015.
5. Foss, S. K., *Rhetorical Criticism: Exploration and Practice* (5rd edition), Weveland: Long Grove, Illinois, 2018.
6. Foss, S. K., *Rhetorical Criticism: Exploration and Practice* (4rd edition), Weveland: Long Grove, Illinois, 2009.
7. Foss, S. K., "Criteria for Adequacy in Rhetorical Criticism", *Southern Speech Communication Journal*, 48, 1983, pp. 283-295.
8. Graff, G., Birkenstein, C., *"They Say / I Say": The Moves That Matter in Academic Writing, with Readings* (Third Edition). W. W. Norton & Company: New York, 2015.
9. Griffin, E., *A first look at communication theory* (8th edition). McGrow-Hill: New York, 2012.
10. Hart, R. P., Daughton, S. and LaVally, R., *Modern Rhetorical Criticism* (4rd edition), Routledge: New York and London, 2018.
11. Ott, B. L. "Bridging Scholarly Theory and Forensic Practice: Toward a More Pedagogical Model of Rhetorical Criticism" available at *https://www.researchgate.net/publication/237324964_Bridging_Scholarly_Theory_and_Forensic_Practice_Toward_a_More_Pedagogical_Model_of_Rhetorical_Criticism* , 1988 [accessed December 2018].
12. Toulmin, S., *The Uses of Argument*. Cambridge University Press: Cambridge, 2003.
13. Wander, P. and Jenkins, S., "Rhetoric, Society, and the Critical Response", *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 58, 1972, pp. 441-450.
14. West, R. and Turner, L., *Introducing Communication Theory: Analysis and Application* (4th edition). McGraw-Hill: Boston, 2010.