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Thinking and Writing About Television: Demystifying TV in the Language Arts

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Television is “the universal curriculum of young and old, the common symbolic environment in which we all live.”

— George Gerber¹

By the time our students graduate from high school, most will have watched an average of 18,000 hours of television. If we see ourselves not simply as teachers of English but also as teachers of communication skills enabling students to function in the world, we need to study the medium that largely creates the world in which we live. But what does it mean to *study* television? What intellectual stance will legitimize its presence in the language arts classroom?

Studying television in the classroom must mean encouraging students to discover what by nature of the medium predisposes all of us to “see the world [not] as it is [but] as television presents it to us.”² George Gerbner, for example, has shown that heavy viewers “greatly overestimate the proportion of Americans employed as physicians, lawyers, athletes and entertainers, all of whom inhabit prime-time [television] in hordes,”³ a result rooted in rhetorical strategies; *for rhetoric is an art or craft defining how we see a subject*. Studying television, then, must mean analyzing its rhetorical devices in order to demystify it.

Its presence in the language arts classroom is justified by the importance of students recognizing that television is not a conduit of objective, “unmediated reality”⁴ but, rather, a subjective, highly constructed medium; of students learning to identify, in order to cope with, television’s rhetorical devices; and of students critically interpreting the visual, verbal, and auditory messages of television. A class devoted to studying television, then, will have as its goal to make the rhetorical techniques of television visible instead of transparent.

The term *transparent* indicates metaphorically that most viewers aren’t aware of the

ontological distance between the picture on the screen and the thing it represents; they don’t see the television image as an artificial construct (Masterman, p.9). The *transparency of the medium* keeps viewers from recognizing the rendered subject presented in an arbitrary manner according to arbitrary conventions.⁵

Studying the Rhetoric of Television News

But if students are to study the *rhetoric of television news*, what exactly are its elements? How are they used? What effects do they have on viewers? In order to begin to answer these questions, I turned to a common dictionary definition:

rhetoric . . . The study of the elements used in literature and public speaking, such as content, structure, cadence, and style . . . The art of oratory, especially the persuasive use of language to influence the thoughts and actions of listeners.

In any definition of *rhetoric* pretending to encompass television, terms usually associated with print or oratory, must have an expanded meaning: *content* and *style*, for example, is thought of as containing such televisual elements as shot selection and camera angles; *structure* as encompassing everything from the arrangement of shots (montage) to the placement of stories within news programs or even news programs within a daily schedule; *cadence* as meaning not only the pattern and pace of shots but also the interplay among visual, verbal, and auditory, elements; *oratory* as including all manner of oral, auditory, and imaginistic presentations; and *language* as subsuming all verbal, visual, and auditory structures of meaning.

A Methodology for Analyzing Television News

Encouraging students to analyze the rhetoric of television news, I invited them to ask a question analogous to John Ciardi’s about poetry: “*How* does television news mean?” Students need to discover that the “meaning” of news is not simply what the news is “about,” but that it grows out of its modes of presentation.

Students are unlikely to be aware of, much less recognize, a commonly used mode—the

form of the *implied story*. This hidden and subtle form, generally discovered only through conscious interpretation of the text, *renders dramatically what is essentially nondramatic material*.

Here I will use a news story to demonstrate how students can discover one way in which the rhetoric of television news encourages viewers to see events in prescribed ways. Space won't permit me to discuss its entirety, the story I call "The Small Investor" (from *CBS Evening News*, October 12, 1982); therefore, I'll provide a summary and a transcription of it. Since the news story contains the internal form of a dramatic rendering, it's not surprising that it has the structure of the traditional "plot":

The Initial Situation:

Dan Rather announces that the economic news is generally good: President Reagan has called the lowest prime-lending rate in over two years "another burst of sunshine"; and although the Dow Jones average "lost ground" today, it remained above 1,000 in "the busiest day ever" on Wall Street. Rather introduces reporter Ray Brady and a story about big moves in the market versus "mom-and-pop" operations.

The Complication:

Brady sets in opposition significant differences between the way big investors and small investors operate in the stock market—the first, aggressively and confidently, the second, tentatively and nervously. The "big industrial investors" are "driving the . . . market to its current heights" while the "little guy is holding back."

The Rising Action:

The behavior of the small investors is not necessarily typical of them. "Time and again" they have "managed to beat the market" by selling when they're not "convinced the economy is turning around." But big investors are bolder and smarter. Although they may be wary also, interest-rate trends and the decline in the prime-interest rate have convinced them that this is the time to buy; stocks are now "more attractive [because] other investments [are] less so."

The Climax:

Treasury Secretary Donald Regan gives official testimony that "signs of recovery are definitely here."

The Falling Action:

Brady stresses that, if the small investor would only "shed his pessimism," the nation would have even more reason to be optimistic.

The Resolution:

Brady tells us, however, that the small investor is as yet unconvinced and is "refusing to join in the fun."

"The Small Investor" appears to be a straightforward news story about the different stock-buying practices of "big" and "small" investors, yet another level of meaning eventually becomes clear: to show that many "little people" around the country are partially responsible for the market not recovering as rapidly as it could. Furthermore, the story implicitly documents that class conflict exists between big and small money, that differences in appearance and behavior are justified, because gaps in money, power, and position exist.

But how is this deeper level of meaning rendered? By means of a *log*; here is the *complication* in the "plot" of the story:

SHOT	CAMERA	COMMENTARY
[3]	Dan Rather speaking directly into the camera (CLOSE SHOT) [INSERT GRAPHICS: Still-shot of the stock exchange] [0:06]	RATHER Ray Brady tonight looks at who sets such store in the market these days and finds it's no mom-and-pop operation.
COMPLICATION		
[4]	Middle-aged Stock Brokers speaking on the telephone (CLOSE SHOT) [0:10]	STOCK BROKER G-M-A-Cs . . . BRADY (VOICE OVER) When the big money on Wall Street decides to move, it sounds like this— STOCK BROKER That'll run . . . a little over . . . five hundred thousand dollars.
[5]	A Fat Man operating a computer terminal; behind him, an Old Bearded Farmer, along with others awaiting their turns (MEDIUM SHOT) [0:02]	BRADY (VOICE OVER) But the little people, the ones who buy stocks
[6]	The Fat Man's hands punching the computer terminal (CLOSE SHOT) [0:02]	BRADY (V.O.—Cont'd) in one-hundred share lots
[7]	Over-the-shoulder view of the Fat Man punching the computer terminal (MEDIUM SHOT) [0:02]	BRADY (V.O.—Cont'd) sound a lot more like this—

[8]	The Old Bearded Farmer, toothpick in his mouth (CLOSE SHOT) [0:04]	OLD BEARDED FARMER I stayed in oils too long. I'm tryin' to get out. (Laughs)
[9]	On floor of the Stock Exchange man in suit holding up a buy/sell order (MEDIUM SHOT) [0:04]	BRADY (VOICE OVER) In other words, while the big industrial investors, such as the banks,
[10]	Two stock brokers, one on the telephone, studying computer monitor and consulting each other (MEDIUM SHOT) [0:04]	BRADY (VOICE OVER) In other words, while the big industrial investors, such as the banks,
[10]	Two stock brokers, one on the telephone, studying computer monitor and consulting each other (MEDIUM SHOT) [0:03]	BRADY (V.O.—Cont'd) are driving the stock market to its current heights,
[11]	The Old Bearded Farmer, coached by someone, punching the computer terminal, referring to the computer monitor and, once again, punching the terminal—sweater thrown casually over his shoulder (CLOSE SHOT) [0:10]	BRADY (V.O.—Cont'd) the little guy is holding back. In fact, one major brokerage house says that in the current rally, stock selling by small investors has run ahead of stock
[12]	Computer monitor (CLOSE SHOT) [0:02]	BRADY (V.O.—Cont'd) buying by about three to two.
RISING ACTION		
[13]	Reporter Ray Brady, in suit and tie, casually leaning on a counter-top in a small-town brokerage firm—speaking directly into the camera (MEDIUM SHOT) [0:16]	BRADY Does this mean that, once again, the small investor has been outfoxed? Not necessarily. A look at the record over the past eight years shows that time and again the small investor has managed to beat the market—buying when stocks are low, selling when they're high.

Rhetoric in “The Small Investor”

I first have students begin by simply describing what they saw and heard as they

watched the story. Next I encourage them to ask why certain shots were selected and why the subject matter within shots was arranged in certain ways. Both questions required students to consider not only what effect the *presence* and *placement* of elements has but also what effect their *absence* and *alternate placement* would likely have. As I hoped, analysis followed description, and they were quickly able to speculate about how television messages were constructed. These questions also led to others having as much to do with the strategies of persuasion, argumentation, and exposition in print as in visual media.

An overview of “The Small Investor” reveals that it’s rhetorical in a number of obvious ways. Students discovered that its “meaning” is entirely due to rhetorical manipulation. While ostensibly presenting events objectively, Ray Brady performs selecting and arranging operations that encourage viewers to interpret events within an imposed confrontational scenario. Quite apart from whether Brady’s interpretation of events is correct, the result is a constructed artifact—a highly manipulated *version* of “reality” that is as much a fiction as any short story.

For instance, Brady introduces conflict missing in the actual events. (His implication that big and small investors are in direct opposition to each other, like players on the same field, is an exaggeration.) In addition, in order to establish such conflict, he puts characters in artificial contexts. (He sets in opposition individuals who never met and whose actions are not at all interdependent.) Furthermore, he personifies non-human forces. (He renders the abstract concept of market trends metonymically in terms of the actions of individuals.)

Closely analyzing the story, students discovered just *how* Brady goes about selecting and arranging words and pictures to create a drama with a preconceived theme: for the good of the country, the conflict between big and small money must be resolved in a way consistent with the practices of the more competent and powerful institutional investors.

The *forming action*—Dan Rather’s state-

ment about a “mom-and-pop operation” (shot #3)—sets the stage for the *conflict* by suggesting low-budget, amateur transactions. Next, an oppositional context is established when “big money,” in the form of the Middle-aged Stock Broker’s figure of \$500,000 (#4), is juxtaposed with small “one-hundred share lots” and the Old Bearded Farmer’s lament that he “stayed in oils too long” and is “tryin’ to get out” (#8).

Throughout the story, the “little people” are illustrated as unsophisticated individuals: they operate a computer terminal in what looks like a lobby of a bank; their dress is common and, at best, casual—like that of the tooth-pick-chewing Old Bearded Farmer with his sweater thrown over his shoulder and a Fat Man with his shirt hanging out of his pants.

On the other hand, the dramatic proxies of the “big institutional investors” exude technological expertise and power: men in suits and ties fill the screen, and sophisticated electronic equipment abounds (#s 4, 9, 10); an energetic mob mills on the floor of the Stock Exchange, symbol of the heart of financial America (#9); and confident brokers, knowledgeable and in control of their environment, go about their business (#s 4, 10). Although a number of “little people” wait to have access to the bank’s computer, all of the stock brokers work at their own terminals. In essence, small money is unsure and diffident; big money, confident and arrogant.

In reality, of course, it makes no difference what small or big investors are really like, or what settings are actually typical, or what statements and shots are truly representative. Brady selects, arranges, and presents—and the viewers are forced to buy into his total package. Brady refers to the small investors—represented as country bumpkins and small-town hicks—as “little people,” “little guy[s],” and “small-fry.” Viewers assume that the fault lies with small investors instead of with “big industrial investors.” Like the Stage Manager in *Our Town*, reporter Brady himself acquires power and control in his own right by presenting characters, shifting scenes, and interpreting action. His speech and mode of dress rhetorically identify him with the interests of big money.

Students also studied selective and manipulative use of the camera—in order to interpret content. For example, close-shots isolated and emphasized certain individuals; of those accorded enough importance to be presented close-up on the screen, most represented big money—like the Middle-aged Stock Broker and Treasury Secretary Donald Regan. Of the little people, only the Old Bearded Farmer is presented close-up—and when he speaks, he shows his ineptitude through his comments with an embarrassed, self-conscious, helpless laugh: the emphasis furnished by the camera only revealed that all is clearly beyond him.

An Overview

The lesson my students learned about the rhetoric of television news is that manipulative acts, such as accompanying image with language, largely control viewer response to events: the various contexts in which Brady places images and language determine not only how they see these elements, but ultimately *how they see the entire story created*. They recognized that “The Small Investor” not only exemplifies uses of rhetoric, but possesses little meaning apart from the various rhetorical acts that comprise it.

I believe that thinking and writing about the rhetoric of television “works.” By achieving some control over a medium that has previously completely controlled them, students become active viewers instead of passive ones—in other words, they are participants in what is ostensibly a one-way form of communication—and, in becoming so, are motivated to think critically which enables them to write cogently.

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