

## Retoryka mediów: USA Rhetoric of media: USA

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**ROBERT WESTERFELHAUS**  
COLLEGE OF CHARLESTON, USA  
westerfelhaus@cofc.edu

### Interrogating American Popular Culture

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#### Abstract

Rather than relegating the study of rhetoric to the past, and confining it to its traditional analyses of ceremonial, forensic, and political speeches, the author argues that it has much to say to and about contemporary popular culture. Rhetoric enables students to understand how they and their communities are shaped by the economically, culturally, and socially influential products of American popular culture, such as films, television series, and video games. Such knowledge, the author contends, equips students with the media literacy required to make informed decisions when purchasing products, casting a vote, and so on. Some practical advice regarding how to connect rhetorical analyses to American popular culture is provided.

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#### Key words

American monomyth, archetypes, liberal arts, metaphor, popular culture, rhetoric, YouTube resources

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**ROBERT WESTERFELHAUS**  
COLLEGE OF CHARLESTON, USA  
westerfelhaus@cofc.edu

## Interrogating American Popular Culture

There is currently a trend in American higher education toward curriculum designed primarily – if not exclusively – to prepare students with the occupational skills necessary to succeed in the contemporary workplace. This is certainly true of state supported colleges and universities and those smaller private institutions that compete with them for enrollment. Indeed, some colleges are now abandoning any pretense of offering the kind of well-rounded liberal arts education that in the past prepared students to make a life and not just a living. One prominent example of this trend is the controversial proposal by the University of Wisconsin at Stevens Point to eliminate 13 humanities and social sciences majors including history, philosophy, political science, and sociology, as well as language studies in English, French, German, and Spanish. That same university plans to expand other academic programs such as Chemical Engineering, Computer Information Systems, Finance, Management, and Marketing. As reported by Valerie Strauss in *The Washington Post*, in a released statement UW-Stevens Point claims the majors slated for expansion “have demonstrated value and demand in the region.” The proposal would also add such new majors as Aquaculture/Aquaponics, Ecosystem Design and Remediation, and Environmental Engineering. This curricular emphasis upon pragmatic business majors and the so-called STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Math) subjects is not unique to UW-Stevens Point. While not as draconian as that institution’s proposed curricular changes, my own college is moving in that same direction.

I teach at the College of Charleston, an historic institution founded in 1770. The college is justifiably proud of its robust traditions and long history. Among its founders were three future signers of the Declaration of Independence and three others who went on to sign the United States Constitution. My college still claims to provide its undergraduate students with an education that has a strong liberal arts focus. While this remains true, that focus has been diluted in recent years and is continuing to diminish. The value of a liberal arts education has been called into question by administrators, politicians, parents, and many students who, the latter of whom are understandably concerned about obtaining a job once they are

graduated and do not see the utility of developing aesthetic and literary appreciation, acquiring historical knowledge, learning another language, engaging in philosophical inquiry, etc. Rhetoric is another academic subject that is viewed as ostensibly impractical. Why would anyone in the 21st century want to learn the principles of persuasive influence as articulated by ancient authorities such as Aristotle or Cicero; or, for that by matter, by contemporary professors building upon that classical foundation and extending it? I would argue that studying rhetoric, the queen subject of the traditional Trivium, develops mental habits and abilities that will serve students well throughout their lives as citizens, consumers, and professionals. Of course, to inspire students to devote time and attention to the study of rhetorical theory it is important to render that theory relevant to their lives, rather than simply dissecting it as a dead subject.

Toward that end, my classes focus upon the application of rhetorical theory to an examination of popular American culture artifacts, such as comic books, films, pop music, social media, sports, television series, video games, etc. Admittedly, there is some bias within the academy toward treating such subject matter seriously. But if we are being honest, our students spend – and will continue to spend – much if not most of their leisure and even working lives immersed in popular rather than high culture. The same is probably true of many professors as well. While I enjoy attending an Ibsen play, reading a novel by Dostoevsky, or listening to a symphony by Górecki, I also watch television sitcoms, read murder mystery novels, and listen to blues, country, and rock-n-roll. Of course, liking Beethoven does not preclude enjoying James Brown. Having said that, I contend that the most compelling reason for studying American popular culture through the lens of rhetoric is the pervasive influence that culture exerts, as it reflects, reaffirms, and at times even reshapes society. The economic, cultural, political, religious, and social impact of popular culture cannot be understated. Consequently, students should know how it manipulates and shapes them and the communities to which they belong. One need look no further than the rapid shift in societal attitudes toward the LGBT+ community due, in no small part, to television series such as *Ellen*, *Rosanne*, and *Will and Grace*, and films like *Boys in the Band*, *La Cage aux Femmes*, and *Philadelphia*. The legalization of gay marriage in the United States is evidence of the power of popular culture to bring about serious and substantive socio-political change. Given such influence, popular culture deserves – indeed demands – thoughtful academic study. Rhetoric provides students with a means of understanding how they and the world they live in are shaped by popular culture. Such knowledge will equip them with the media literacy required to make informed decisions when purchasing products, casting a vote, and so on.

A primary goal of popular culture rhetorical analyses is to denaturalize the mundane and view it in fresh ways; or, as anthropologist Ruth Benedict succinctly put it, to see the familiar as strange and the strange as familiar. In rhetorical terms, this means looking beneath the surface of a text (film, television show, video game, etc.) for meanings not readily apparent and beyond the text for connections to other texts as well as to cultural, political, social, and other exo-textual considerations. As an aid toward helping my students understand the kind of rhetorical analyses I want them to engage in, I share videos that are easily available – and for free – from YouTube. I am an admitted Luddite, and as such I personally prefer “old-school” pedagogy: learning through in-class discussion, lectures, and books. And I still use these tried-n-true methods. But today’s students, who inhabit a media-saturated society, require more contemporary methods of instruction as well. This of course includes various visual media. For this reason I supplement my instruction with videos produced by Wisecrack! These include the Thug Notes and Earthling Cinema series, which offer short (5 to 7 minute) focused analysis of a single text, as well as longer (15 to 20 minutes) videos offering extended analyses disseminated under the imprint of Wisecrack! Videos produced by Wisecrack! use humor and clever visuals to capture and keep interest. But, at the same time these videos also provide smart insightful commentary – about books (Thug Notes), films (Earthling Theater), and more complex artifacts, such as a multi-episode television series (Wisecrack!) – that introduce, define, and most importantly employ methodological tools and theoretical concepts relevant to rhetorical analysis. “The Philosophy of The Walking Dead – Wisecrack Edition” video is an instructive illustrative example of the high quality of, and the deep insights provided by, this online resource. Its analysis of the AMC cable network series’ post-apocalyptic zombie narrative introduces students to such concepts as binaries, metaphors, and various definitions and distinctions; references thinkers like Aristotle, Giorgio Agamben, Albert Camus, Friedrich Nietzsche, and Carl Schmitt; and draws connections between the series’ storyline and historico-political contexts ranging from the ancient Roman Republic to 21st century America. In doing so, the video makes such material palatable to contemporary students without pandering. I counsel that instructors should of course use lecture, assigned readings, and class discussion to set up and debrief students after showing them such supplemental videos.

Among the other approaches I take to teaching students how to look at American popular culture rhetorically is the use of mythic analysis. Myths are metanarratives comprised of archetypal characters and stock storylines that give expression to a culture’s core values. While some mythic elements are universal, tied to what Joseph Campbell calls the monomyth, cultures tend to create distinctive myths

that respond to and reflect their own unique experiences. Robert Jewett and John Shelton Lawrence identify what they refer to as the American monomyth as a variation of the universal monomyth. The American monomyth celebrates the selfless superhero, most often a loner, who serves as a community's savior, and who then leaves that community literally (like Shane riding off into the sunset) or figuratively (as when Batman returns to his secret identity as Bruce Wayne). The American Monomyth informs a wide range of popular culture genres, including noir detective stories, tales featuring costumed superheroes, science fiction stories, and the classic American Western. Its mythic formula gives narrative expression to such American values as radical and rugged individualism, righting wrongs through the use of violence, and retribution justice (i.e., an eye for an eye). This triumvirate drives plots involving cathartic revenge such as the classic spaghetti Westerns of Clint Eastwood, Jodie Foster's *The Brave One*, the John Wick films starring Keanu Reeves, and the *Death Wish* franchise, recently resurrected with Bruce Willis playing the lead. Jewett and Lawrence have gone on to write two additional books (for which, see the References page) exploring how the American monomyth plays out in popular culture and what its current iterations reveal about contemporary American cultural beliefs and values and how these are translated into private behaviors and public policies, such as the impulse of the United States government – on behalf of its citizens – to attempt saving the world via military intervention. When students examine narratives that conform to the conventions of the American monomyth, they can see for themselves how these mythic stories serve to reflect, reaffirm, and thus perpetuate American cultural values in ways that are not always obvious and which are, therefore, all the more powerful for that very reason.

Fictional stories communicated through popular culture texts do not simply entertain or even occasionally educate. They also exert a great deal of influence that has concrete consequences – both negative and positive – in the non-fictional world in which we live. For this reason, knowledge of how this influence is effected is critical and should be a component of any contemporary college curriculum designed to prepare students for life in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Rhetoric provides that knowledge. Absent the kind of perspective that the liberal arts provide, of which rhetoric is an important constitute subject, our institutions of higher learning will manage at best to produce only myopic technocrats adept at programming the latest app but incapable of the kind of reflective, analytical thinking that they will need to succeed in both their personal and professional lives.

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