

CONTEXTUALIZATION (THE DRAMATURGICAL METHOD)

Previous models of contextualization include the traditional triangulation approach as well as the dramatistic approach. However, scholars have suggested that there may be even more to consider within the rhetorical situation.

A Rhetorical Scholar named Richard Vatz once suggested that not only is rhetoric a social act, but that social acts are rhetorical (159). Given this mandate for understanding the rhetorical situation, finding a mode of analysis which takes this concern of socialization into consideration is difficult. Yet, upon exploration of social act theory, one may find someone who can provide such a framework. His name is Erving Goffman, a renowned anthropologist and social theorist.

Although Burke dramatistic model of contextualization predates Goffman's methodology by about twenty years, Goffman's Dramaturgical model actually provides some interesting additions to Burke's dramatistic solution. Since Goffman's "Dramaturgical perspective" and its corresponding analysis look into social action, it is possible that they reveal much more about the context in which a text is written.

Goffman's model not only applies some of the most basic dramatistic nuances (again borrowing from drama) but it allows for us to attempt to achieve an even higher understanding of the text.

Considering the rhetorical context, Goffman asks questions about interactions (in general). He considers some of the following ideas and concepts: The Stage (or the setting of the social interaction), the Borders (or boundaries, which help to indicate and constrain movement of individuals). In a sense, they control the access of the performance (e.g., who sees/reads/appreciates the performance).

Yet, not all of these concepts are readily applicable to the needs and demands of texts. However, constructing a mode of contextualization is possible when using some of the concepts, especially ideas such as Stage and Borders, since we have yet to consider the contextual boundaries of a text; moreover, we have yet to formulate a model of contextualization which asks about the different settings of social action beyond the grossly obvious ones). Therefore, Goffman's model may be useful.

If we reconstruct some of Goffman's concerns, we end up with a few interesting properties, which help us to formulate a dramaturgical model of contextualization (different yet somewhat more useful than a "Dramatistic" one, as proposed by Burkean scholars):

STAGES

In a dramaturgical model, we essentially find three stages*, where the performance or text sets itself.

The Front,
The Back,
and The Outside.

[*Borrowing from Goffman's terms: The Front Stage, the Back Stage, and the Outside].

If we apply these terms and their meaning towards contextualization, we might find the following approximations of their meaning:

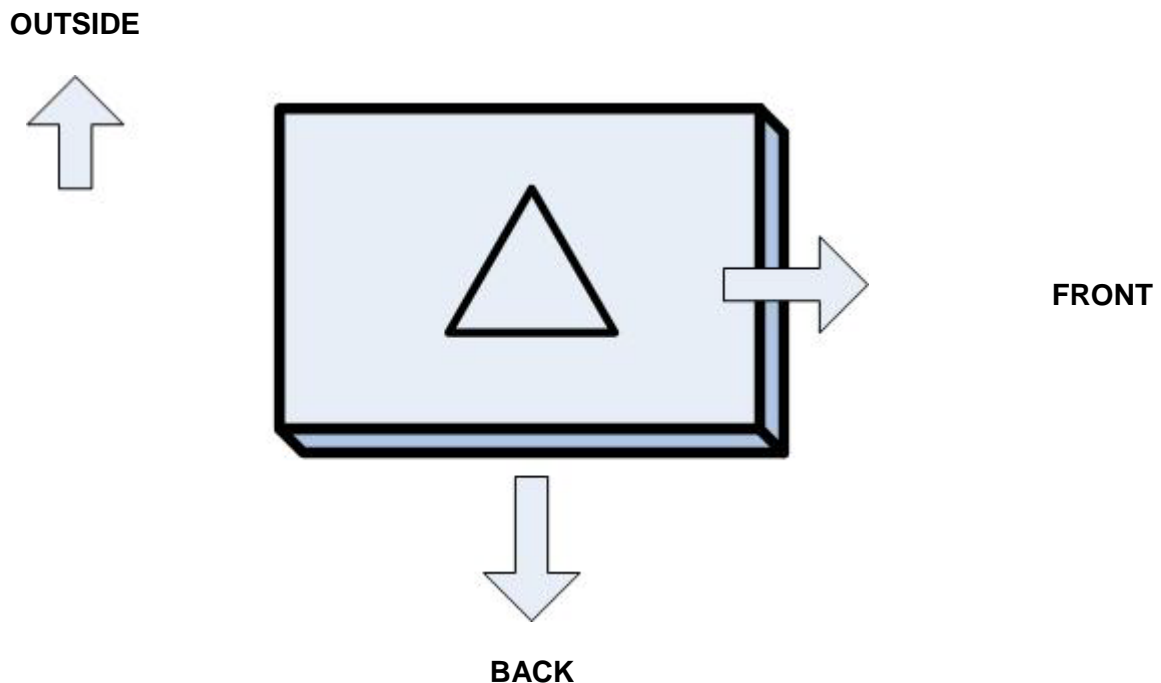
The Front being a place where we search for an obvious purpose to the text...

As Vatz notes, people may intentionally or inadvertently hide things, claiming “The critical question, therefore, is what accounts for the choice by [spectators] and participants of what to organize into a meaningful structure and what to ignore. Any rhetoric is involved in this sifting and choosing... (156). And, since the traditional rhetorical contextualization model does not recognize this ideal, then a model which does is more useful in this capacity. Here, we may apply Goffman’s concept of the Back Stage to locate and situate these concerns.

The Back being a place where we search for possible purposes, unintended purposes, unintentional purposes, and/or even unseen purposes...

Furthermore, since Vatz posits that “The very choice of what facts or events are relevant is a matter of pure arbitration,” then it seems necessary that a model for rhetorical analysis keep some form of “checks and balances” which help to make sense of what we regard as the purpose. In order to do this, it seems necessary to find a place within the context where we ask ourselves what are the outcomes....

Here, the Outside becomes a place where we can observe the fallout of something rhetorical (as a logical unit of stabilization, where we can trace how the purpose of the object/text/person has affected its own reality or even the environment).



Put into perspective, think of a play or other staged performance which is being performed publicly. When looking at the Stage or the performance itself, you are looking at the FRONT. Everything happening backstage (e.g., people preparing themselves for the play, dressing, doing makeup, rehearsal, etc.) relates to the BACK. BACK items are things you do not see happening, yet you know that they must happen for the performance to occur. Finally, anything occurring as a result of the FRONT and BACK activities is considered OUTSIDE. For example, if actors are preparing themselves for the performance, they may be outside of the theater

taking drugs (prescription or other) to fight the anxiety/stage fright of the performance. Or, people may be involved in marketing the performance. Or, other people may be selling tickets on the street. Like the metaphor suggests, such "effects" or "situations" may occur outside of the theater, the stage, or even backstage, yet they may be necessary to the entire performance, its outcomes, and its origins.

BORDERS

Another Scholar, Lloyd Bitzer, suggests, "rhetoric always requires an audience – even when a person engages himself or ideal mind as audience... It is clear also that a rhetorical audience must be distinguished from a body of mere heard or readers; properly speaking, a rhetorical audience consists only of those persons who are capable of being influenced by discourse and of being mediated or changed (Bitzer 8). Therefore, audience is key to the understanding of the context.

However, since our current models attempt to look closely at audience, it would seem appropriate that we name the borders of the audience (who is listening/viewing the rhetoric and who is not), when addressing the different Borders of a text.

These borders should include the primary audience, any secondary audiences, and any areas of marginalization (people who cannot directly receive or who do not directly receive the text). In other words, ask: Who is the object/text/person meant to address? And, who is left out? And, why?

Thus, we might look at a few different things (which tend to restrict the text in terms of audience or allow for the creation of the text because of their audience).

1. The Space of the text (where it was created and where it lives)/Other spaces
2. Time of the text (where it was created and where it lives)
3. Predominant Age of the Audience Members/Others
4. Predominant Gender of the Audience Members/Others
5. Predominant Cultural Population of the Audience Members/Others

Applying such questions and concerns to context reveals some interesting findings.

Examples:

EX #1 The Declaration of Independence

STAGE

Front: Resisting the Tyranny of the British Sovereigns and Opposing Taxation

Back: Helps to establish financial independence of landowners, liberates US Citizens from paying taxes (initially)

Outside: Provokes the British King into War, allows for free/new economy

BORDERS

Space: US Colonies, Philadelphia

Time: July 4, 1776

Age: 16-100

Gender: Predominantly Male (mostly landowners)... Not expressly for women...

Culture: Predominantly White (mostly landowners... marginalizes minorities, slaves, etc....

EX #2 Barbie Dolls

STAGE

Front: A toy for entertainment purposes (front purpose)

Back: Making money (back purpose)

Outside: Toy; becomes a role model; encourages eating disorders; encourages an overabundance of women with blond hair; encourages unrealistic expectations for women/families

BORDERS

Space: United States (and later the world)

Time: 1959 to present

Age: 4-14

Gender: Predominantly Female

Culture: Predominantly white, Caucasian (and later some minorities – given the creation of black and brown skin-toned dolls). Therefore, Barbie has historically tended to marginal minorities...

EX #3 The War on Terror

STAGE

Front: “Liberate the people of Iraq and Afghanistan”; “Suppress terrorist threats (e.g., Taliban and Al Qaeda)”

Back: Preserve US Interests in the Middle East; keeps the oil flowing and keeps it cheaper; Seek and Destroy mission for Saddam Hussein (missed by US Forces during Operation Desert Storm)

Outside: Disrupts Government; Kills Civilians; Creates a worse image of Americans in the Middle East; Creates more sympathy to terrorist organizations; Destroys previous ways of life

BORDERS

Space: Iraq/Afghanistan/USA

Time: September 11, 2001 to Present

Age: 5-100

Gender: Predominantly male members of Terrorist Groups

Culture: Mostly Arab, Muslim (Sunni and Shiite) and US Citizens