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English 259

23 February 2011

Understanding Sonja Foss and James Berlin

Famous director and screenwriter of Italian Theatre, Dario Fo, once said, “I see ideology as an inherent part of culture”. Integrated in our culture are beliefs that are constantly being practiced, argued, and contemplated.. Every individual is influenced by cultural values in their society. These values shape the way of how someone perceives situations. Sonja Foss is a professor at the University of Colorado at Denver and writer on rhetoric and ideology. With her definitions of ideology, along with methods to analyze ideological artifacts, Foss has helped numerous writers advance their analytical skills. Foss recommends a process to most effectively evaluate an artifact. She uses a skyscraper as an example in her piece “Ideological Criticism”. By noticing details of the skyscraper, conclusions of an ideology may be formed. James Berlin, a theorist of rhetoric, has similarly written his own definition of ideology and how to understand the rhetoric of these beliefs. He states that “Rhetoric is always regarded as an ideology” (Berlin 477). Berlin establishes this idea that rhetoric is an illustration of one’s ideology. Used together, Foss and Berlin’s suggestions are able to assist in ideological criticism.

Ideology comes from the discourse of communities. One cannot formulate an ideology individually, but rather they are influenced by their communities. Cultures are made up of differing ideologies that suggests insight into how our world is shaped. Berlin strongly takes note on how our own ideology influences how we analyze works of others. In

his piece “Rhetoric and Ideology in the Writing Class”, Berlin states, “Rhetoric can never be innocent” (477). Because we all personally offer different ideological perspectives of how life should be, we interpret ideologies presented by others differently. This is an idea Foss would agree on as well. The cultural background of an individual and their view on an issue is visibly present in an artifact.

Foss and Berlin examine different ways in which one should evaluate the ideological rhetoric of others. Foss focuses on these artifacts as a manner in which arguments deliver ideas and beliefs to an audience. She makes four specific moves that she encourages an analyzer to do when examining an artifact. First, one must simply glance at the artifact. At this stage, you are looking for simple “clues” or elements that can help uncover what ideology might be present. Second, take these elements and study them further. What do they represent? How is this symbolic of an ideology? This helps to better recognize the ideology. After doing so, you should be able to articulate an ideology. Her ideas correspond with Lloyd Bitzer’s concept of audience; who would be in the audience of the ideology presented? The relationship the artifact has with the audience has the ability to make the audience question their own beliefs and persuade them towards the ideology presented. Understand who is involved in this belief system. Examine some of the activities that the people of this ideology are involved in. What is the exigency for the artifact? The goals of the group should also be examined, including their primary beliefs and values that motivate their principles. One should also look at any sacred text, authorities, or relationships within the ideology. Lastly, one should recognize the overall purpose of the rhetoric or artifact.

The thoughts Berlin has about analyzing an ideological rhetoric seem considerably similar to Foss. The reader or observer should ask three specific questions to assist the process of understanding the rhetoric. First, what exist in the artifact that is representative of the ideology? This is comparable to Foss’s idea of examining elements of an artifact to help

understand the values presented in a piece. After doing so, one should ask, what is good about of the ideology offered? Berlin illustrates an ideology as it “provides a subject with standards for making ethical and aesthetic decisions” (479). Why the author believes that this system of beliefs is beneficial to society is a key factor in further accepting the rhetoric. Lastly, what is possible? This concept in some ways corresponds with Foss’s idea of examining the goals in the artifact. Is there a future with this ideology? It is valuable to be able to understand what the purpose of the beliefs system is.

Utilizing both Foss and Berlin during an ideological analysis can help to better comprehend different perspectives on beliefs. We should take the expert advice of these two writers and apply them in order to grasp the concepts of rhetoric. An ideological criticism can help me to distinguish an ideology from my own. Though as both Foss and Berlin explain, my own ideologies will affect my criticism of someone else’s work. If done correctly, one would be able to uncover the overall ideology presented, and in some cases, be able to react to it appropriately.

Works Cited

- Berlin, James. "Rhetoric and Ideology in the Writing Class". *College English*. 50.5 (1988): 477-494. Print.
- Foss, Sonja K. *Rhetorical Criticism: Exploration and Practice*, Prospect Heights, IL: Waveland, 1989. 209-261. Print.