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Bakhtin and the Carnavalesque: Calling for a Balanced Analysis within Organizational Communication Studies

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Bakhtin's perspective and concepts have generated great interest in American and Western European academic circles in recent years. This review describes Bakhtin's concept of carnivalesque and how it has been utilized in organizational communication research. The synopsis of the carnival application in organizational communication scholarship shows, however, very limited usage of a Burkean approach to Bakhtinian theory. In this paper, I call for a more balanced application of Bakhtinian carnival concept in the organizational communication field by including both Goffman's and Burke's frameworks to analyze organizational communication.

Keywords: Carnival, Theatre, Bakhtin, Burke, Goffman

Scholars from disciplines such as anthropology, linguistics, psychology, literary studies, and social theory have uncovered and applied Mikhail Bakhtin's perspectives and concepts in their works. In the past 20 years, communication scholars, particularly in interpersonal communication (e.g. Baxter & Montgomery, 1996), and more recently in organizational communication, have utilized his framework in their research (e.g. Beyes & Steyaert, 2006; Boje, & Rhodes, 2006). His concepts represent "a timely arrival at the scene of transition from modern to postmodern perspectives in the organizational field." (Belova, King & Sliwa, 2008, p. 494), and offer exciting possibilities for critical-qualitative analyses in communication studies. However, organizational communication scholars seem to be lagging behind their interpersonal communication colleagues, who have been exploring Bakhtin's concepts for nearly twenty years. There are some relatively underutilized Bakhtinian concepts that might be of interest for critical organizational communication scholars. In this essay, I will explore the concept of the carnivalesque from Goffmanesque and Burkean perspectives as a medium for criticizing organizational power. I argue that the primary benefit of this approach is to create a space for those from the margins within corporate spaces to find, create, and/or use their voice. In

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order to achieve this goal, I first explicate Bakhtin's notion of the carnival before then showing some of the ways that organizational communication scholars can take up this term in their own scholarship.

The Carnival

Tracing the term "carnival" through history, Clark and Holquist (1984) argue that the carnival played a very important role in the life of European people during the Middle Ages. In large cities, carnivals could last an average of three months each year. As described by Clark and Holquist (1984) in a literal sense,

At carnival time, the unique sense of time and space causes the individual to feel he is a part of the collectivity, at which point he ceases to be himself. It is at this point through costume and mask, an individual exchanges bodies and is renewed. (p. 302)

Normally dominant constraints and hierarchies were temporarily lifted during the carnival. During this time of feasting, music, dance and street performances, all people, paupers and upper class members interacted (and sometimes played) together. Social class distance was temporarily nonexistent, the poor could make fun of rich, and the rich could dance with poor. Laughter, irony, sarcasm, and criticism of social rules and barriers were encouraged.

Literary critics, particularly Bakhtin (1984), utilize these ideas to argue that carnivals were not only festivities, but were also the only time when powerless members of the society could interact as equals with the powerful. The term carnival became prominent in literary criticism after the publication of Bakhtin's *Rabelais and his World* in 1965, now considered a classic study of the Renaissance. In this book, Bakhtin conducted an analysis of the Renaissance social system along with its discursive practices based on literary work of the 16th century author Rabelais (e.g. *Gargantua and Pantagruel*). According to Bakhtin (1984), Rabelais' greatest inspiration came from the folk humor of the Middle Ages that manifested in the social practice of carnival. As a result, Bakhtin identified the carnival as a social institution and grotesque realism with its irony and parody as a literary mode. Clark and Holquist (1984) state that, for Bakhtin (1981), the carnival could be understood:

Not (merely a) spectacle seen by the people; they live in it, and everyone participates because its very idea embraces all the people. While carnival lasts, there is no other life outside it. During carnival time life is subject only to its laws, that is, the laws of its own freedom. (Bakhtin, 1981, p. 7)

Stallybrass and White (1986) point out that by the late 19th century the middle class had, both culturally and legally, rejected the carnival tradition. Although

the carnival was no longer practiced, it reemerged in the form of popular culture. In this sense then, the meaning of carnival has transformed from its literal sense of play and festivities on the streets to the more metaphorical sense used by contemporary individuals.

The Carnival in Organizational Communication Scholarship

The anti-authoritarian aspects of the carnival have been used in critical postmodern perspectives of organizational life (Boje, Luhman, & Cunliffe, 2003). Everyone can participate in the carnival, and by using the language of irony, can criticize dominant power structures. Boje, Luhman and Cunliffe (2003) indicate that “the field of organization studies uses ‘theatre’ as a metaphor for organization life in two particular ways: first, ‘organizing-is-like-theatre,’ and second, the more literal ‘organizing-is-theatre’” (p. 7). Organizational communication scholars use these two approaches to portray dominant corporate structures. The first approach, emerging from sociology in general and the writings of Goffman (1959, 1974) in particular, uses the theatrical metaphor to study social processes in organization, whereby the employees are like actors who perform various roles (Morgan, 1980). The second approach draws from philosophy, literary criticism, and Burkean traditions. Burke believed that social action and organizing is literally dramatic and theatrical. What differentiates Goffman from Burke is that the former uses theatrical metaphors to explain social processes in organization (e.g., framing, scripting, staging, and performing), while the latter focuses on language analysis and discursive practices, which shape meaning (Boje et. al., 2003). The Bakhtinian concept of carnival integrates these two approaches, Goffman’s descriptions of social interactions between people and Burkean interpretation of their discourse. According to Boje, Luhman, and Cunliffe (2003):

Carnival is a theatrics of rant and madness seeking to repair felt separation and alienation. It is a call for release from corporate power, a cry of distress and repression mixed with laughter and humorous exhibition meant to jolt state and corporate power into awareness of the psychic cage of work and consumptive life (p. 8).

Currently, the majority of organizational communication studies that have utilized a Goffmanesque approach to Bakhtinian theory have a limited view (e.g. Beyes & Steyaert, 2006; Boje & Rhodes, 2006; Rhodes, 2001). Organizations are described from Goffman’s perspective of “organizing-is-like-theatre,” that is, as stages in theatre with actors who are performing their roles in their interactions with others (i.e., by acting or costuming). There are powerful kings and queens (managers and supervisors) and clowns (critics of the status quo). The emphasis in this type of analysis is on social structure and power dominance shown through the position one occupies on the social ladder, not through the analysis of discourses among characters.

Perhaps one of the best examples of a Goffmanesque approach to the Bakhtinian carnival concept is presented in the study of *The Simpsons* (Rhodes, 2001). Through the lenses of cultural perspective, the researcher examines how organizational life is represented in this popular cartoon series. Rhodes (2001) claims that “the carnivalesque spirit is alive and well in *The Simpsons* and that it provides a wealth of knowledge about contemporary understandings of work–knowledge whose laughter and parody provide the opportunity for a compelling critique of modern organizations”(p. 375). What Rhodes (2001) means by the carnivalesque spirit is the way characters are presented in the cartoon, not the way they talk. The star of the show, Homer Simpson, is presented as a bumbling, doughnut-eating, and beer drinking buffoon—a clown role from Goffman’s perspective, who constantly makes a parody of his employer, Montgomery C. Burns (a king role), the owner of the Springfield Nuclear Power Plant (SNPP), and Yale graduate. As Rhodes (2001) claims, animation/cartoon is an ideal medium for the representation of grotesque realism because it draws attentions to “such bodily functions through, for example, the town drunk, Barney’s belching; Homer’s overeating and obesity; or Bart, Homer’s son, ‘mooning’” (Rhodes, 2001, p. 378). Rhodes’ emphasis on the importance of social positions, roles and presentation of the bodies shows the author’s reliance on a Goffmanesque understanding of Bakhtin’s concept of carnival. Goffman’s approach, and Rhodes in the above study, is very metaphoric, graphic and symbolic, and focuses on analyzing visual rather than verbal messages.

Unlike Goffman’s approach to Bakhtinian carnival, a Burkean understanding of theory focuses on analysis of verbal messages and discourses between actors/ characters. This perspective calls for a closer look at the verbal script used by organizational actors. Scholars using this approach focus on dialogue, instead of only analyzing the appearances of actors/characters and their bodily functions. There are many dialogues in *The Simpsons* between Burns and Homer that are full of irony and sarcasm.

Burns: We don’t have to be adversaries, Homer. We both want a fair union contract.

Homer’s brain: Why is Mr. Burns being so nice to me?

Burns: And if you scratch my back, I’ll scratch yours.

Homer’s brain: Oh my god! He is coming on to me!

Burns: After all, negotiations make strange bedfellows.

(Burns chuckles and winks at Homer.)

(Homer’s brain screams.)

Homer: Sorry, Mr. Burns, but I don’t go in for these backdoor

shenanigans. Sure, I'm flattered, maybe even a little curious, but the answer is no! (Cited in Richmond & Coffman, 1997, p. 110)

By adding a Burkean approach to the analysis of the carnival, critical scholars might be able to discover a more complex language of power and oppression in organizational studies. As the above dialogue shows, Homer and Mr. Burns still retain their clown/king roles (respectively); however, the exchange also features Homer's over-the-top aversion to Mr. Burns' "proposition." His reaction reveals a deep-seated heterosexism—an all-to-common trope in U.S. media (see Fejes & Petrich, 1993). Although Homer may be viewed as a figure that is diametrically opposed to Mr. Burns in terms of power, he is also the instigator of symbolic violence on LGB individuals by showing same-sex relationships as abnormal and undesirable. A Burkean approach to Bakhtinian theory shows how carnival language, not only bodily performances important to Goffman, contributes to unmasking/reinforcing systems of oppression. In other words, adding a Burkean approach can help organizational scholars create a more nuanced approach to power dynamics by going beyond the dichotomy of powerful/powerless.

The Bakhtinian concept of the carnival has been utilized in two ways, Goffmanesque and Burkean approaches, however, based on the review of studies in organizational communication field it has only received attention in one—Goffmanesque. This short synopsis attempted to show how a Goffmanesque understanding of organizational life might be enhanced by adding a Burkean lens to Bakhtinian theory. It does not mean that a purely Goffmanesque type of reading is "wrong" but rather that is limited. By adding Burkean type of analysis critical scholars should be able to provide a more holistic analysis of the system of dominance in society.

Conclusion

The Bakhtinian concept of carnivalesque has recently been adapted to critical and cultural approaches, transformational leadership, change communication, and discourse analyses in organizational communication. Although the concept has gained increasing prominence in organization communication scholarship, the majority of work in this area relies on a Goffmanesque approach to Bakhtin's work. In this paper, I have offered that by adding Burkean analysis to this traditional approach, organizational scholars can expand their focus beyond the powerless/powerful dichotomy. This "balanced approach" to Bakhtinian analysis can help create a more nuanced view of power by showing how communicative exchanges within organizations draw upon and perpetuate discourses beyond the immediate context (e.g., worker-supervisor communication). Ultimately, I hope that scholars take up this balanced approach in order to account for the visual and textual components of organizational communication.

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