Fantasy Theme Analysis

Fantasy theme analysis, which is the line of scholarship that resulted in the development of the symbolic convergence theory, is an empirically based study of the shared imagination. In addition, fantasy theme analysis is a humanistically based study of rhetorical history and criticism and interpretative approaches to the study of interpersonal, small group, organizational, and media communication.

The social scientific basis for symbolic convergence came from small group laboratories. Studies at Harvard and Minnesota discovered the basic process of group fantasy chains. The chains resulted in the participants coming to share a group fantasy and the resultant common consciousness with its associated symbolic common ground, emotional evocations, motivations, and group culture. The investigations began with the careful definition of dramatizing messages. Observers then studied the effect of dramatizing on group members. They found that some dramatizations caused a minor symbolic explosion in the form of a chain reaction. As the members shared the fantasy the tempo of the conversation would pick up. People grew excited, interrupted one another, laughed, showed emotion, and forgot their self-consciousness. The people who shared the fantasy did so with the appropriate responses. If the storyteller wanted it to be funny they laughed; if it was supposed to be serious or solemn they grew serious and solemn. Further studies revealed that on some occasions group members were apathetic and ignored the dramatizing while on others they rejected the fantasies contained in the dramatizations. Scholars then discovered that the sharing of fantasies also characterized listener responses to a wide range of communication including conversations, public speeches, and mass media messages.

The symbolic convergence theory has evolved out of fantasy theme analysis over the last several decades as part of a general movement in rhetorical and communication studies to recover and stress the importance of imaginative language (and the imagination) in nonverbal and verbal transactions and upon group consciousnesses. The efforts at finding some

accommodation for imagination, feeling, and envisioning on the one hand and rationality on the other have included investigations into subjects then thought to be more appropriate to aesthetics, art, and literature than to rhetoric.   In the 1960s and 1970s these efforts have often had to face the barrier of rationality. While rhetoricians paid some attention to the imaginative dimension of rhetoric their attention tended to focus on the logical.   Among those who saw themselves as scholars of communication the hegemony of rationality promulgated a view of communication that suggested that myths were false, that stories were fictitious, metaphors were rhetorical adornments, and that anecdotal evidence was suspect.

Fantasy theme analysis was controversial, particularly in the early years. Some critics saw it as essentially dealing with the irrational and unrealistic with an undue reliance on Freudian thought. Other critics suggested that while the sharing of fantasies was an important part of small group communication the move to other contexts was not justified. The proponents of fantasy theme analysis and the symbolic convergence theory have responded by denying the Freudian link and emphasizing the way the sharing of fantasies provides the values and common ground required for logical argument. They have also argued that additional research has demonstrated the sharing process in other communication contexts.

The first fundamental term of fantasy theme analysis is that of *dramatizing message* and the second is of *shared group fantasy*. The point is that people may be exposed to many dramatizing messages without sharing any of them and, if so, *they do not share a group fantasy:* the two technical terms are not interchangeable.

Ordinary usage may focus on one meaning of fantasy, that is of moonshine, cartoon sorts of things that are opposed to what is real. The technical term, *fantasy*, in fantasy theme analysis denotes the creative and imaginative shared interpretation of events that fulfills a group's psychological or rhetorical need to make sense of its experience and to anticipate its future. Rhetorical fantasies often deal with nonfictitious as well as fictitious dramas. Group fantasies are generally a result of the internal fantasy life of audience members and they are full of images reflecting experience. Often when people dramatize objects of the perceived world they succeed

in getting sharing by shaping and forming them until they are consistent with the fantasies (the existing mental world) of audience members.

Once members of a group have shared a fantasy they often create another important communication phenomenon in the workings of *symbolic cues or* triggers. The symbolic cue may be a code word, phrase, slogan, or nonverbal sign or gesture. It may refer to a geographical or imaginary place or the name of a persona. The symbolic cue is an induction that allows members to symbolize an entire fantasy chain with a brief allusion to it. The inside-joke phenomenon is an example of such a trigger. Only those who have shared the fantasy theme that the inside-joke refers to will respond in an appropriate fashion. But the symbolic cue need not be only an inside-joke. The allusion to a previously shared fantasy may arouse tears or evoke anger, hatred, love, and affection as well as laughter and humor. Inside cues provide the basis for further generalizations. When members of a group have shared several similar fantasy themes they develop a more abstract recurring form that summarizes the common features of the themes. The more general scenario is a *fantasy type*. Group members can use the fantasy type as a script to explain and evaluate the breaking news or changing experiences and bring these events into line with the values of their group. The Watergate fantasy theme has been generalized to become a type cued by the suffix "gate." Thus new scandals can be typed by using the suffix as in "Billygate" or "Irangate".

Finally, a community of people may share fantasy themes and types until at some point they fit them into an overarching and coherent view of some aspect of their social reality. The technical term for such a view is *rhetorical vision*. A rhetorical vision is often integrated by a master analogy. The people who share a rhetorical vision form a rhetorical community and participate in a common consciousness.

Fantasy theme analysis forces the scholar to search for the boundaries of rhetorical communities and reveals the complex and complicated symbolic terrain in a given historical period. Such analysis is a strong antidote to interpretations that select out of such complexity a cluster of ideas and suggest that this cluster represents the essence of a historical period in

national life. Even selecting out a half-dozen such clusters will often oversimplify the rhetorical diversity in the history of a given time-period or geographical region.

Rhetorical criticism involves more than descriptions of discourse and accounts of how it came into being and functioned. Fantasy theme analysts are free to approach their critical work from a variety of perspectives and they have done so. They always begin, however, by documenting the presence of the sharing phenomenon and the resulting shared consciousness among members of the community. They have, because of the method of criticism, been forced to put the audience back into the rhetorical paradigm. Much rhetorical criticism focuses on the message divorced from an audience that responds or fails to respond to the stimulus. Some criticism focuses on the message and discusses an implied audience or an ideal audience. By contrast the fantasy theme analyst is encouraged to bring the audience forward into a central position in the study for until the dramatizing is shared it does not become a fantasy.

Critics who reconstruct the rhetorical visions of communities of people can ask general rhetorical questions in order to analyze the hopes and fears, the emotional tone, and the inner life of the group by examining how the rhetoric deals with basic universal problems. Such insight flows from answers to such questions as these: How well did the communication deal with the problem of creating and celebrating a sense of community? Did it help generate a group and individual self-image that was strong confident and resilient? How did the rhetoric aid or hinder the community in its adaptation to its physical environment? How did the communication deal with the rhetorical problem of creating a social reality that provides norms for community behavior in terms of the level of violence, exploitation, dominance, and injustice.? Did the communication create a panoramic vision that served such mythic functions as providing members with an account of the world, the gods, and fate, and that gave meaning to their community and themselves? How well did the vision aid the people who participated in it to live with people who shared different rhetorical visions?

Because fantasy theme analysis incorporates a general social scientific theory of communication (symbolic convergence) it is based on a carefully defined common set of

technical terms. Such common terms imbedded in a coherent theoretical structure enables

fantasy theme analysts to compare and integrate the findings of a number separate studies into

generalizations about communication. Scholars using the approach often aim to discover

knowledge about human communication that transcends communication styles, contexts, and

transitory issues. The method allows its practitioners to aim at broad general understandings of

human communication in all its varied forms, but particularly as it is used in a rhetorical way.

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