The fantasy-theme method of rhetorical criticism, created by Ernest G. Bormann, is designed to provide insights into the shared worldview of groups. Impetus for the method came from the work of Robert Bales and his associates in their study of communication in small groups. Bales discovered the process of group fantasizing or dramatizing as a type of communication that occurs in groups. He characterized fantasizing communication in this way: "The tempo of the conversation would pick up. People would grow excited, interrupt one another, blush, laugh, forget their self-consciousness. The tone of the meeting, often quiet and tense immediately prior to the dramatizing, would become lively, animated, and boisterous, the chaining process, involving both verbal and nonverbal communication, indicating participation in the drama."

Bormann extended the notion of fantasizing discovered by Bales into a theory (symbolic convergence theory) and a method (fantasy-theme criticism) that can be applied not only to the study of small groups but also to all kinds of rhetoric in which themes function dramatically to connect audiences with messages. In contexts larger than small groups, fantasizing or dramatizing occurs when individuals find some aspect of a "message that catches and focuses their attention until they imaginatively participate in images and actions stimulated by the message."

Symbolic convergence theory is based on two major assumptions. One is that communication creates reality. As chapter 1 describes, reality is not fixed but changes as our symbols for talking about it change. A second assumption on which symbolic convergence theory is based is that symbols not only create reality for individuals but that individuals' meanings for symbols can converge to create a shared reality or community consciousness. Convergence, in the theory, refers "to the way two or more private symbolic worlds incline toward each other, come more closely together, or even overlap during certain processes of communication."
Convergence also means consensus or general agreement on subjective meanings, as Bormann explains: “If several or many people develop perspectives of their private symbolic worlds that overlap as a result of symbolic convergence, they share a common consciousness and have the basis for communicating with one another to create community, to discuss their common experiences, and to achieve mutual understanding.” Meanings are not all that are shared in symbolic convergence. Participants “have joined experienced the same emotions; they have developed the same attitudes and emotional responses to the personae of the drama; and they have interpreted some aspect of their experience in the same way.”

Evidence of symbolic convergence can be discerned through frequent mention of a theme, a narrative, or an analogy in a variety of messages in different contexts. The war on drugs discussed by many politicians exemplifies such a theme. Widespread appeal of an advertising theme also may indicate a convergence. The “Got milk?” advertising campaign by the National Dairy Council, for example, caught the imagination of the American public and has chained out in various ways. In the Denver International Airport, for example, travelers leaving the security area encounter a sign, “Got laptop?” A Kinko’s copy shop has a sign on its recycling bin that asks “Got trees?” A catalog advertises a doormat featuring an image of a cat and the words “Got mouse?,” and a book of cookie recipes is titled Got Milk? All of these are evidence that the slogan has chained out because it is easily recognized and resonates with many people in a number of different contexts.

Evidence of the sharing of fantasies includes cryptic allusions to symbolic common ground. When people have shared a fantasy theme, they have charged that theme with meanings and emotions that can be set off by an agreed-upon cryptic symbolic cue, whether a code word, phrase, slogan, or nonverbal sign or gesture. These serve as allusions to a previously shared fantasy and arouse the emotions associated with that fantasy. Among a group of college students who lived together in a dorm, for example, sweet red grape might serve as a symbolic cue that evokes fond memories of dorm parties where they drank cheap red wine.

The basic unit of analysis of symbolic convergence theory and fantasy-theme criticism is the fantasy theme. Fantasy, in the context of symbolic convergence theory, is not used in its popular sense—as something imaginary and not grounded in reality. Instead, fantasy is “the creative and imaginative interpretation of events,” and a fantasy theme is the means through which the interpretation is accomplished in communication. A fantasy theme is a word, phrase, or statement that interprets events in the past, envisions events in the future, or depicts current events that are removed in time and/or space from the actual activities of a group. The term fantasy is designed to capture the constructed nature of the theme. Fantasy themes tell a story about a group’s experience that constitutes a constructed reality for the participants.

A fantasy theme depicts characters, actions, and settings that are removed from an actual current group situation in time and place. Bormann distinguishes between a dramatic situation that takes place in the immediate context of a group and a dramatized communication shared by a group:
If, in the middle of a group discussion, several members come into conflict, the situation would be dramatic, but because the action is unfolding in the immediate experience of a group it would not qualify as a basis for the sharing of a group fantasy. If, however, a group’s members begin talking about a conflict some of them had in the past or if they envision a future conflict, these comments would be dramatizing messages.  

In addition to their dramatic nature, fantasies are characterized by their artistic and organized quality. While experience itself is often chaotic and confusing, fantasy themes are organized and artistic. They are designed to create a credible interpretation of experience—a way of making sense out of experience. Thus, fantasy themes are always ordered in particular ways to provide compelling explanations for experiences. All fantasy themes involve the creative interpretation of events, but the artistry with which the fantasies are presented varies. Some groups construct fantasies “in which cardboard characters enact stereotyped melodramas,” while others participate in “a social reality of complexity peopled with characters of stature enacting high tragedies.”

A close relationship exists between fantasies and argumentation in that shared fantasies provide the ground for arguments or establish the assumption system that is the basis for arguments. Argumentation requires a common set of assumptions about the proper way to provide good reasons for arguments, and fantasy themes provide these assumptions. Bormann provides an example of the connection between fantasy themes and arguments:

For instance, the Puritan vision gave highest place to evidence not of the senses but to revelations, from God. The assumption system undergirding the Puritan arguments was a grand fantasy type in which a god persona revealed the ultimate truth by inspiring humans to write a sacred text. Supplementing this core drama was the fantasy type in which the god persona inspired ministers to speak the truth when preaching and teaching. These fantasy types provided the ultimate legitimization for the Bible as a source of revealed knowledge and for the ministers as the proper teachers of biblical truths.

Other shared fantasies provide different kinds of assumptions for argumentation than did the Puritan vision. Scientists, for example, assume that argument is based on the careful observation of facts, while lawyers use precedent or past experience as the basis for argument. These groups share different fantasy themes as the basis for their construction of arguments.

The fantasy themes that describe the world from a group’s perspective are of three types, corresponding to the elements necessary to create a drama: setting themes, character themes, and action themes. Statements that depict where the action is taking place are setting themes. They not only name the scene of the action but also describe the characteristics of that scene. Character themes describe the agents or actors in the drama, ascribe characteristics and qualities to them, and assign motives to them. Often, some characters are portrayed as heroes, while others are villains; some are major characters, while others are supporting players. Action themes, which also can be called plotlines, deal with the actions in which the characters in the drama engage.
When similar scenarios involving particular setting, character, and action themes are shared by members of a community, they form a fantasy type. A fantasy type is a stock scenario that encompasses several related fantasy themes. Once a fantasy type has developed, rhetors do not need to provide an audience with details about the specific fantasy themes it covers. They simply state the general storyline of the fantasy type or refer to one of the fantasy themes in the scenario, and the audience is able to call up the specific details of the entire scenario. If a fantasy type has formed, a student in a university community can say, for example, “Students are fed up with professors who are so busy with their own research that they don’t have time for students,” and an entire scenario is called up among audience members. The success of the type shows that audience members have shared specific fantasies about teachers who are unprepared for class, who do not hold office hours, and who return exams and papers late or not at all.

Fantasy types encourage groups to fit new events or experiences into familiar patterns. If a new experience can be portrayed as an instance of a familiar fantasy type, the new experience is brought into line with a group’s values and emotions and becomes part of its shared reality. If the members of a university community, for example, share a fantasy type that the State Board of Higher Education does not support a university, the forced retirement of the university’s president by the board may be interpreted as a continued lack of support for the school, and the incident is incorporated into the group’s reality.

The second primary unit of analysis in fantasy-theme criticism is the rhetorical vision. A rhetorical vision is a “unified putting together of the various shared fantasies” or a swirling together of fantasy themes to provide a particular interpretation of reality. It contains fantasy themes relating to settings, characters, and actions that together form a symbolic drama or a coherent interpretation of reality. A rhetorical vision shared by college students at many state institutions, for example, might include hostile legislators as character themes, the legislature as a setting theme, and cutting funds to the university as an action theme.

The presence of a rhetorical vision suggests that a rhetorical community has been formed that consists of participants in the vision or members who have shared the fantasy themes. The people who participate in a rhetorical vision, then, constitute a rhetorical community. They share common symbolic ground and respond to messages in ways that are in tune with the rhetorical vision:

They will cheer references to the heroic persona in their rhetorical vision. They will respond with antipathy to allusions to the villains. They will have agreed-upon procedures for problem-solving communication. They will share the same vision of what counts as evidence, how to build a case, and how to refute an argument.

The motives for action for a rhetorical community reside in its rhetorical vision. Each rhetorical vision contains as part of its substance the motive that impels the participants. As Bormann explains: “Motives do not exist to be expressed in communication but rather arise in the expression itself and
come to be embedded in the drama of the fantasy themes that generated
and serve to sustain them." Bormann provides some examples of how par-
ticipation in a rhetorical vision motivates individuals to particular action:

The born-again Christian is baptized and adopts a life-style and behavior
modeled after the heroes of the dramas that sustain that vision.
Likewise the convert to one of the countercultures in the 1960s would
let his hair and beard grow, change his style of dress, and his method of
work, and so forth.

Actions that make little sense to someone outside of a rhetorical vision
make perfect sense when viewed in the context of that vision because the
vision provides the motive for action. The willingness of terrorists to die in
support of a cause, for example, may seem absurd to most of us. Once we
discover the rhetorical vision in which these terrorists participate, however,
we have a much better idea of why they are motivated to sacrifice their lives
for that cause.

**Procedures**

Using the fantasy-theme method of criticism, a critic analyzes an arti-
fact in a four-step process: (1) selecting an artifact; (2) analyzing the arti-
fact; (3) formulating a research question; and (4) writing the essay.

**Selecting an Artifact**

The artifact you select for a fantasy-theme analysis should be one where
you have some evidence that symbolic convergence has taken place—that
people have shared fantasy themes and a rhetorical vision. Any artifact that
is popular—an advertisement, a song, a book, or a film, for example—is
likely to show evidence of such symbolic convergence. An artifact produced
by a major public figure, such as a U.S. president’s speech or a commenc-
ment address by a talk-show host, also typically constitutes evidence of
symbolic convergence because it incorporates themes the rhetor knows will
resonate with the audience. Both discursive and nondiscursive artifacts can
be used with the fantasy-theme method of criticism.

**Analyzing the Artifact**

Analysis of an artifact using fantasy-theme analysis involves two steps:
(1) coding the artifact for setting, character, and action themes; and (2) con-
structing the rhetorical vision(s) from the fantasy themes.

**Coding for Fantasy Themes**

The first step in the fantasy-theme method of criticism is to code the
artifact for fantasy themes. This involves a careful examination of the arti-
fact, sentence by sentence in a verbal text or image by image in a visual arti-
fact. Pick out each reference to settings, characters, and actions. This coding
process can be illustrated in the first two stanzas from P!NK’s song, “Dear
Mr. President”: 
Dear Mr. President,
Come take a walk with me.
Let’s pretend we’re just two people and
You’re not better than me.
I’d like to ask you some questions if we can speak honestly.

What do you feel when you see all the homeless on the street?
Who do you pray for at night before you go to sleep?
What do you feel when you look in the mirror?
Are you proud?\footnote{16}

The setting themes you would code in these stanzas are: street and night. Setting themes suggest where the action takes place or characteristics of the places in which the action occurs. This excerpt is relatively unusual in that it contains few setting themes. There is nothing wrong with your artifact or your coding if you find fewer themes in one category than in another. That is important information about how the rhetor has set up the world.

Character themes to code in the song are: Mr. President, me, we, two people, I, and homeless. Here, Mr. President and you are referring to the same character, I and me refer to the same character, and two people and we refer to the same set of characters, so your coding would reveal four characters—the president, the narrator, the two of them together, and the homeless. To keep two people as a character separate from the president and the narrator might seem odd, but the two of them together seem to be functioning differently from how the two characters function individually. Further coding and your later analysis would let you know whether you have four characters here or just three—the president, the narrator, and the homeless.

In some texts, you might find some nonhuman entities engaging in human-like action. If so, they should be coded as characters—perhaps something like the earth or music—although there are no such characters in this passage. If the artifact contains descriptions of characters, code those as character themes. Not better than me, for example, also would be coded as a character theme because it describes and fills out the picture of the character of the two people. If more than one setting is presented, note which characters appear in which settings.

Then code the actions in which the characters are shown engaging as action themes, noting the character to whom the action is linked: take a walk (president and narrator), pretend (president and narrator), ask questions (narrator), speak honestly (president and narrator), feel (president), see (president), pray (president), sleep (president), and look in mirror (president). Note that you do not code anything in the text that is not a setting, character, or action theme, so Are you proud? is not coded in this method.

At this preliminary stage of the coding, you may not always be sure if a theme belongs in one category or another—settings, characters, or actions. A word such as America, for example, may function both as a setting and a character. If the appropriate category is unclear, code it in both categories initially. Decisions you make in the next step of looking for patterns as you construct the rhetorical vision will determine in which category the word or phrase best belongs.
Constructing the Rhetorical Vision

Your second step in a fantasy-theme analysis is to look for patterns in the fantasy themes and to construct the rhetorical vision from the patterns. Begin by determining which of the fantasy themes appear to be major themes and which are minor themes. Those that appear most frequently are major themes that become the subject of the analysis, and those that appear only once or infrequently are discarded as not important parts of the rhetorical vision. In “Dear Mr. President,” for example, the character of the homeless may appear only once, while the president appears several times. The president would be considered a major character in the vision, but the homeless would not. The fact that the character of homeless people appears implicitly in a later stanza with the line “Building a bed out of a cardboard box,” however, may keep the homeless in your analysis as a major character.

Your next task is to construct the rhetorical vision from the patterns of fantasy themes you discovered. This involves looking at the major setting themes you identified and linking them with the characters depicted in those settings and the actions those characters are performing. There may be more than one rhetorical vision in your artifact. Some rhetorical communities participate in numerous dramas, with each one developed around a different topic. By linking setting themes with the appropriate characters and actions, you can discover if more than one rhetorical vision exists. If two setting themes appear in the artifact—America and Iraq, for example—the characters of good citizens engaged in the art of working to support their families would be combined with the setting of America to create one rhetorical vision. The characters of terrorists seeking to harm American soldiers would be placed in the setting of Iraq to form another vision.

Formulating a Research Question

Knowing the rhetorical vision of an artifact can be the basis for understanding many different rhetorical processes, so the research questions asked by critics using fantasy-theme analysis vary widely. You can ask questions, for example, about strategies used to accomplish specific objectives, the kinds of messages that are being communicated through particular rhetorical visions, the functions of particular rhetorical visions, or the implications of certain rhetorical visions for rhetorical processes or social controversies.

Writing the Essay

After completing the analysis, you are ready to write your essay, which includes five major components: (1) an introduction, in which you discuss the research question, its contribution to rhetorical theory, and its significance; (2) a description of the artifact and its context; (3) a description of the method of criticism—in this case, fantasy-theme analysis; (4) a report of the findings of the analysis, in which you reveal the fantasy themes and rhetorical vision(s) identified in your analysis; and (5) a discussion of the contribution the analysis makes to rhetorical theory.
Sample Essays

The sample essays that follow illustrate applications of fantasy-theme analysis to various kinds of artifacts. The research question that guides Eleanor M. Novek's analysis of a prison newspaper is, "How do prisoners resist imprisonment to endure and transcend the prison experience?" In Kelly Mendoza's analysis of the song "One Tree Hill" by U2, fantasy-theme criticism is used to explore the question, "What strategies does a rhetor use to cope emotionally with the loss of sudden death?" Kimberly A. McCormick and David Weiss analyze a mural in the parking lot of a Planned Parenthood clinic in Albuquerque, New Mexico, to explore the question, "How can a subversive art form articulate socially acceptable views of controversial issues?"

Notes


3 Bormann, "Fantasy and Rhetorical Vision," p. 397.


7 Ernest G. Bormann, "How to Make a Fantasy Theme Analysis," unpublished essay, p. 4.


9 Bormann, The Force of Fantasy, p. 10.

10 Bormann, The Force of Fantasy, pp. 16–17.


