

A look back at Leff and McGee: Close textual analysis and the link between theory and rhetorical artifact

Dr. Kevin Stein, Ph.D

Professor of Communication, Southern Utah University

Abstract

The essay explores a new method of close textual analysis—one that neither applies common theoretical frameworks to a rhetorical artifact nor abandons theory entirely. It compares and contrasts the ideas of Michael Leff and Michael McGee and supports a method that merges the two camps. The essay argues that a solely deductive approach to rhetorical criticism, which merely imposes theory on a textual object, is not a practical approach for extracting valuable insights from a text. Conversely, Leff's essentially atheoretical approach to the close reading of texts is overly systematic and somewhat monotonous. The essay supports the idea that textual analysis should examine the implicit micro-features of discourse and therefore uses the Unabomber Manifesto as an abbreviated case study for illustrating a process of close reading that utilizes theory in a more inductive manner.

Key words: Leff, McGee, theory, object, rhetorical criticism, close reading, Unabomber.

There are numerous points of contention that divide rhetorical critics into various methodological camps. However, two tensions seem to exist at the forefront of current debate on rhetorical practices. One such tension is the rift between those critics who rely heavily on theory to guide their analyses of rhetorical objects and those critics who promote a more atheoretical approach to the study of texts. The latter group is clearly in the minority, as many prominent examples of good criticism utilize abstract theoretical frameworks to gain insight into particular artifacts. One example of this type of framework is Kenneth Burke's Theory of Dramatism. Although Burkean methods of criticism can uncover interesting details regarding the motives underlying human action, it is often projected on to the text before the appropriateness of the fit is even determined. People will often say that a square peg cannot fit inside a round hole. While it may be true the square will not fit perfectly, it certainly can be made to fit with some effort.

The same force is often applied in order to make rhetorical theory "fit" particular objects. Perhaps another overused cliché related to criticism is that critics attempting to apply a tired theoretical structure to a text are accused of conducting "cookie-cutter" criticism. This implies in some way that the critic is taking the text and reshaping it into the object that best justifies the use of the chosen theory. The merit of this claim depends on how someone views the act of interpretation. The critic does not alter or manipulate the text to make it appear as though it is physically something that it is not. The text never changes, but the lens for viewing it does. A more appropriate analogy might be the way people extract images from cloud formations. Suppose that when two people are looking up at the same cloud, one sees a giant rabbit and the other a squid. In a similar way, rhetorical critics examine texts that contain the same explicit features, but they often disagree about the implicit features. They disagree about the image that the final criticism should take.

One may see a text as calling for Boorman's fantasy theme analysis, while another critic believes that the application of Toulmin's model of argument structure will offer the best insights. Either approach would dramatically change the interpretations offered by the critic, which is always substantially different from the original text.

Michael Leff and Michael McGee, though advocating very different philosophical approaches to textual criticism, are the biggest proponents of methods that rely less on theory and more on the textual object. Leff (1986) argued that the critic becomes like a "circuit rider, forever circling the herd, but never getting to its center" (p. 377). He believes that theory deters attention away from the text and celebrates it for its extrinsic features such as context and social consequences. McGee argues that there should be a "divorce between theory and practice" (Gaonkar, 1990, p. 304). He believes that if theory is to emerge at all, it should be the result of the initial practice of observation. Both scholars provide very specific methods for examining texts independent of theory. They promote a "close reading" of texts that generates insights inherently present in the object and not extracted through the use of preexisting theoretical approaches.

The purpose of this essay is to determine if there is a method that merges theoretical approaches to criticism and close textual analysis without falling victim to the pitfalls identified by Leff and McGee. I would argue that there may be and I will attempt to illustrate this process using a short textual excerpt from a rhetorical object that is historically significant, but probably less praiseworthy than other well-known discourses: the Unabomber Manifesto. However, before I can articulate my own position in greater detail, it is important that I provide a clear discussion of the current methods of close textual analysis. I will first begin by defining the method. Second, I will explain the points of agreement and disagreement between Leff and McGee. Third, I will identify strengths and weaknesses in these positions and offer an alternative method of analysis that incorporates theory into the practice. And last, I will conduct a close reading or micro-analysis of the introduction of the Unabomber Manifesto to illustrate the method.

Just How Close is a "Close Reading?"

A micro-level approach to textual analysis was first suggested by Michael Leff (1992), who argued that a "close reading" of the text was necessary to "concentrate on the fundamental operations of rhetorical language." He makes a distinction between two types of criticism: ideological criticism and textual criticism.

Ideological criticism focuses on the "extensional, social, and political force of discursive practice." Textual criticism centers on "the effort to interpret the intentional dynamics of a text" (p. 223). The textual, or intentional, approach works from a finished product and looks at the processes that created it. The ideological, or extensional, approach breaks down the product in order to see how it contributes to these broader social and political processes. Though Leff (1992) argues that the two types of criticism can work in conjunction with each other, he also argues that a focus on the larger unit of a text or its effects "absorbs the unique features of a particular work" (p. 229). A more illuminating method for examining a text is to look at particulars, or what Leff (1992) identifies as textual fragments.

The implicit meanings present within the features of a text are ripe for extraction if the critic is willing to abandon his or her focus on the broader theoretical structures that dictate what is to be found. Leff and Sachs (1990) explained this process in greater precision when they wrote:

Rhetorical criticism finds its end in interpretative understanding; such understanding locates itself in the full complexity of a particular transaction rather than in the discovery of abstract regularities or disembodied theoretical principles. While the critic must frame the discourse within its context, the focus of attention centers on the text itself and the rhetorical features embedded within it. Working from the evidence within the text, the critic proceeds to make inferences about what the work is designed to do, how it is designed to do it, and how well that design functions to structure and transmit meanings within the realm of public experience. (p. 256)

The difference between Leff's method of analysis and contemporary approaches to rhetorical criticism is that judgments regarding the semantic functions of a text are expected to emerge from the examination of features rather than the analysis being used as a tool for confirming what is expected to be uncovered.

Edwin Black (1980) also supported an intentional approach to the study of texts, though he did not use the same language to describe the process. Black argued:

These corresponding perspectives on criticism are, respectively, the theoretic or etic viewpoint, which approaches a rhetorical transaction from the outside of that transaction and interprets the transaction in terms of pre-existing theory; and the non-theoretic or nominalistic or emic viewpoint, which approaches the rhetorical

transaction in what is hoped to be its own terms, without conscious expectations drawn from any sources other than the rhetorical transaction itself. (p.331)

Black seems to support a form of rhetorical analysis that does not draw heavily on extrinsic theoretical principles. But unlike Leff, he does not suggest an alternative method that utilizes the emic approach.

The above definitions inform the aspiring critic that the more effective analysis begins with an examination of the internal workings of a textual object, but reveals a fairly ambiguous procedure for exploring these features. Perhaps this is because each discourse is unique from other discourses even in the same genre. It would be inappropriate to assume that a tool appropriate for one analysis would work equally well in another analysis. Close reading celebrates the unique identity of each text and attempts to engage the rhetorical object with zero expectations, an essentially atheoretical approach. Theoretical approaches to criticism simply reduce a text to abstract regularities, implying that the smaller features can best be explained by relegating them to broad categories. McGee (1990) argued:

Foreign policy expert Henry Kissinger may have chosen 8,000 words to express in Foreign Affairs his opinion of U.S. policy in the Middle East. The debater, the public speaker, the journalist, the legislator, or the essayist, however, will represent that discourse in 250 words, reducing and condensing Kissinger's apparently finished text into a fragment that seems more important than the whole from which it came. (p. 280)

The critic might assume that a summary of the patterns of a particular text is useful to the passive reader who might otherwise not recognize these implicit features. However, reducing the text in this way alleviates all of the alternative possibilities for interpretation. The critic is likely to ignore important features in favor of those that can be more easily clustered together.

Leff vs. McGee

To this point, I have emphasized the areas of agreement between Leff and McGee. Both scholars support a more intrinsic approach to the analysis of textual objects. Both reject the use of theory as a means of reducing texts to simple categories and abstract principles. There are several issues, however, that divide them. One is the relative boundary of the rhetorical text. McGee (1990) wrote that "if by 'text' we mean the sort of finished discourse anticipated in consequence of an essentially homogenous

culture, no texts exist today. We have instead fragments of 'information' that constitute our context" (p. 287). McGee views rhetoric as a social process that generates a wide range of structures, namely beliefs, attitudes, actions, and even communities (Gaonkar, 1990). Leff, on the other hand, views rhetoric as locally stable and very much contained (Campbell, 1990). His analyses of famous oratorical masterpieces such as Lincoln's "House Divided" speech and Edmund Burke's "Speech at Bristol, Previous to the Election" are indicative of his attitude that a speech-act contains discourse that has physical boundaries that can be apprehended by the rhetorical critic. Leff sees the discursive object as "a field of action unified into a functional and locally stable product" (Gaonkar, 1990, p. 291). The way each critic views the stability of the rhetorical object should influence his or her approach to the analysis. Because Leff believes the discourse is contained, he feels justified in ignoring important extrinsic features of the text such as context and effects.

Leff and McGee represent very different positions regarding the importance of context in rhetorical criticism. Leff seems to group context with other "extensional" elements of a text's construction. Biographical information about the rhetor, historical events preceding the rhetorical act, and social consequences of the discourse all represent fringe areas beyond the primacy of the text itself. Theoretical structures are simply distractions that move the critic away from the "intentional" elements. Leff does not dismiss that a context does exist, but argues rather that the analysis can yield fruitful insights independent of a contextual focus. It may be true that the oratorical masterpieces that are central to Leff's research contain important rhetorical features removed from their context, but many contemporary texts might lose their flavor if not for the interesting circumstances that gave rise to the discourse. McGee (1990) also believes that the text should be the primary focus, but argues that any belief that rhetoric can be constructed as sufficient unto itself is sheer fantasy." He argues that "the elements of context are so important to the text that one cannot discover or even discuss the meaning of text without reference to them" (p. 283).

These attitudes regarding the boundaries of discourse and the importance of rhetorical context help to explain the specific approaches offered by Leff and McGee. Leff wants to understand how rhetoric functions to create meaning. McGee wants to examine the product in order to understand the specific social and historical processes that constituted it. This process/product distinction is at the heart of the chasm that separates Leff from McGee.

Strengths and Limitations of Current “Close Reading” Conceptions

Hopefully, in outlining the individual positions of Leff and McGee, I have provided a sense of the advantages that this type of method brings to rhetorical criticism. An examination of the rhetorical text itself is probably one of the few areas of communication not shared with other disciplines. Perhaps the closest area to rhetorical criticism is literary criticism, which still differs greatly because of its focus on the aesthetic features of a text in lieu of the persuasive features. A movement toward extrinsic or ideological criticism moves us ever closer to other disciplines such as sociology, anthropology, political science, and philosophy. This blurring of disciplinary boundaries continues to thwart the aims of current scholars who are trying to establish the field of communication as its own domain.

One explanation for this shift to extensional issues is that theory provides readers an explanation of what is happening in the text. By reducing it to a set of categories, the critic tells readers inside and outside of our discipline that the text “essentially” functions in one particular way. We might summarize a legal discourse as containing five key arguments, a political speech as utilizing a metaphor for change, or an interpersonal dispute as consisting of a few unique conflict styles. Perhaps critics feel inadequate in using these types of findings to justify the existence of our field of study. We add more heft to our argument by situating it in a significant rhetorical situation or in identifying a broad range of social consequences of the discourse. We might even magnify the importance of our interpretations by grouping a single text with similar texts and imply that the consequences of the collective are the same as the individual. Leff and McGee offer relatively systematic approaches to close textual analysis. Their efforts to move criticism away from broad summations of discourse to a microscopic focus of textual particulars are admirable and serve the discipline well if we can more effectively justify the importance of the “intrinsic effects.”

Unfortunately, current conceptions of close readings are not as developed as they could be. Leff argues that context is both relevant and irrelevant. He implies that a text has its own unique context that is more immediate than the more distant historical processes that give rise to a text. Obviously, when a text is produced, any number of factors contribute to its construction. However, the critic determines which contextual elements are critical to the examination of the text. In some ways, the critic binds the broad contextual issues into a form that is more manageable. Suppose I wanted to do a close

reading of Martin Luther King, Jr.’s “I Have a Dream” speech. It would be difficult to ignore every facet of the discursive context and simply focus on the text in a vacuum. On the other hand, there are certainly a plethora of contextual issues that cannot, and perhaps should not, be included in the discussion of the object. Does the critic need to address the full history of the African-American struggle for equality extending back to the days of slavery or synthesize biographical information about the entire King family in order to apprehend the text’s features? The boundaries of a textual artifact’s context can never truly be identified, yet the skillful critic is still able to make judgments about which contextual issues are relevant to the analysis.

Also vague are conceptions of what a textual “effect” involves. Many scholars would probably not identify the effective merging of form and content in a speech as being an effect, especially if the effect is not explained in terms of the number of people influenced by the discourse or the number of oppressive ideologies reinforced through it. When critics use language such as “the text functions to create,” they are implying a textual effect, but often do not identify it as such because ideological critics sometimes claim ownership over the language of rhetorical impact. This hesitancy to justify textual criticism by its inherent effects limits the recognition given to this type of criticism and further establishes the intentional and ideological critics as representing two very distinct modes of thought.

Another limitation of close reading is the systematic and often overly descriptive method of moving through the text. Leffs (1988) close reading of the temporal dimensions in Lincoln’s “Second Inaugural” address illustrates this style of criticism:

The opening paragraph contains no striking ideas or stylistic flourishes; in fact, it has a somewhat awkward appearance. Yet, it seems carefully constructed to achieve Lincoln’s purposes and to establish the framework and tone for the speech as a whole. Most obviously, Lincoln introduces the temporary markers that define his perspective. The first sentence contrasts the present occasion with his previous inaugural. The second sentence refers to the past, the third and fourth to the present, and the final sentence looks forward to the future. (p. 27)

Leff moves systematically through the features of the text paragraph by paragraph and line by line. Apart from a brief introduction that justifies the use of a close reading and identifies temporality as a theme that emerged from the close reading, the above excerpt indicates

how Leff begins his discussion of the speech. He includes no contextual information other than the names of the speaker and the speech. Though he identifies a common theme of the text, he does attempt to use the theme as a signifier of the whole discourse. Leff also does not imply that the text carries a specific "effect" beyond its mere "symbolic action" (p. 31).

An Alternative Approach to Close Reading

Based on these inherent limitations in previous efforts at close reading, I would like to offer an alternative to the close textual methods introduced by Leff and McGee, though admittedly this approach is not wholly original. Other scholars have suggested that an effective merger can exist between theory, context, and close analysis of textual artifacts. For example, Wayne Brockreide (1974) suggested that critics should look for the specific elements of a text and then compare what is found against existing theory. If no theory currently exists to explain the findings, a new theory should be developed. This approach is similar to grounded theory, but there are a couple of key differences. One is that Brockreide's method does not reduce a text to its essential features. It measures individual features against the broader theoretical perspectives. A second important difference is that once a new theory is created, it is viewed as an end unto itself. The developed theory is not used again to explain other texts that have not yet undergone a close textual reading.

Black (1980) agrees with Brockreide in terms of where the interpretation should begin. He said: "I don't believe that a critic should evaluate an object emically, but an emic interpretation may be an avenue into a fair and full etic evaluation" (p. 334). Both scholars offer perspectives that run counter to Leff and McGee. A close textual analysis should begin with the text and end with theory. However, it is difficult for critics to resist the temptation to use the new theory on a textual object. When a fisherman finally catches a fish, does he throw the fish back and take satisfaction in learning that worms are the best bait, morning is the best time of the day to fish, and that shore fishing is as effective as boat fishing? Most likely, he will use what he has learned in subsequent fishing expeditions. But when a new theory emerges from close textual reading, the critic should be satisfied with having an isolated glimpse into what persuasive effect a rhetorical object can produce.

Micro-features of the Unabomber Manifesto

I will now attempt to utilize a method of close reading that incorporates the strengths of existing notions of close reading, while minimizing the limitations inherent in this type

of method. Let me first summarize what this method entails. First, I recognize that context is artificially bound and can be referenced in a close textual reading without jeopardizing the "closeness" of my focus on textual features. Second, I side with Leff's argument that a discourse is relatively stable and contained. Though the boundaries are not concrete, as asserted by McGee, the process of rhetorical criticism would become obsolete without some sense of these discursive boundaries. Third, and perhaps most importantly, rhetorical criticism cannot be done independent of theory. A critic might be able to do a close reading without attaching a theoretical framework to the text, which dictates how it is to be categorized, but no one can read a text without bringing a single theoretical assumption to the table. Just as qualitative researchers attempt to bracket their assumptions going into a communication event, rhetorical critics should do the same at the onset of each observation. The critic should be aware of what philosophical paradigms might influence the analysis and attempt to reconcile these preconceived ideas with the insights generated from the observation.

Several assumptions guided me in my selection of the Unabomber Manifesto as an important text worthy of study. This sentence alone illustrates a bias by asserting that the text is both "important" and "worthy of study." All researchers, including rhetorical critics, select their objects of study based on which questions interest them. If they randomly selected research questions in order to avoid these biases, there would be no such thing as a program of study and there would be a great many bored scholars. Apart from my assumption regarding the text's worthiness, I also assume that the context is significant, that the text will yield something interesting, and that a close systematic examination of the features is the appropriate method of analysis.

The contextual issues surrounding the creation of the Unabomber Manifesto are complex. However, just as this is a micro-analysis of textual features, it will also be an abbreviation of other elements of rhetorical criticism that would typically be included in such an analysis. Therefore, let me simply summarize what this brief analysis entails. Ted Kaczynski, also known as the Unabomber, was terrorizing airports and universities nationwide by sending explosive devices through the mail system. His plan was to use the fear generated from this violence to blackmail a prominent national newspaper into publishing his lengthy treatise expressing criticism of technological advancement in society. His plan worked. The manuscript was published in its entirety and the violence ceased. Kaczynski was apprehended by the F.B.I. when

his brother recognized the manuscript in the Washington Post and alerted the officials.

The text itself is rhetorically interesting. First, Kaczynski espoused the doctrines in the manifesto so passionately that he was willing to kill people and to blackmail a major newspaper. Second, there was a rather apparent contradiction between Kaczynski's hatred of all things technological and his *modus operandi* of using technology to construct state of the art bombs to achieve his end goal. The method of close textual analysis calls for a broader focus on the surface features of the text, followed by a close analysis of the implicit features, and finally a reexamination of the broad features in light of what was found in the close reading.

After examining just one paragraph of the introduction of the manifesto, I soon realized why critics have chosen not to engage in this method of analysis. One paragraph yielded enough interesting insights to warrant a full rhetorical study. I will share just a few insights of each stage of my three-stage analytic process. As I began inductively to look for what Leff would call "transparent" features, I noticed several things, some of them very obvious. First, the manifesto is a treatise on the ills of technology and industry. Second, the organizational structure of the piece is important to the author because paragraphs are numbered. Perhaps he believes this essay will receive great attention and needs paragraphs to be numbered for easy reference. This might elevate the aesthetic value of his work to that of poetry, which also often contains numbered lines. Third, Kaczynski is not seeking a physical change, but an attitudinal one. Fourth, Kaczynski does not provide his own individual voice to the text, but relies on a collective voice through his frequent use of "we" phrases. Fifth, the paragraphs are poorly developed and seem to represent random thoughts. This might be an indication that the manifesto was not very well planned out. And sixth, there appears to be little or no evidence of outside material used to support the claims made in the text.

Now I will move to more implicit or micro" features, though I concede that what is deemed implicit or explicit is a matter of judgment. First, Kaczynski uses a couple of metaphors to illustrate his overall complaint. He argues that people are like "engineered products" and "cogs in the machine." He also personifies the technological system as being able to experience a "physical or psychological adjustment" and that this adjustment will cause the system "pain." This juxtaposition of metaphors reveals an inherent contradiction in his choice of images. How can the system be simultaneously alive and dead, humanistic and

machine-like? Second, Kaczynski argues that the process of change, if even possible, will be very long and painful. The form/style of the text seems to parallel the argument that Kaczynski makes. The flow of his words, like the road to technological revolution, is also long and painful. Third, Kaczynski uses a hypothetical syllogism to illustrate the two divergent paths that face civilization. He argues that "if the present system survives, the consequences will be inevitable: There is no way of reforming or modifying the system so as to prevent it from depriving people of dignity and autonomy." However, Kaczynski does not provide a scenario for the other path. If the system were to break down entirely on its own, there would be no need for reform. Whether Kaczynski was aware of this omission cannot be known, but the absence of this logical step in his argument may be textual evidence of his underlying intent.

After examining just a few of the extrinsic and intrinsic features of a single paragraph of the Unabomber manifesto, I believe that some distance can be created between the critic's "bracketed" assumptions about what is likely to be yielded from a textual exploration and the analysis itself. Some may dispute the possibility, but I did not begin my analysis looking for syllogisms, metaphors, and periodic sentences. These were not theoretical structures that I used to guide my analysis of the text. "Touchstones are not models for copying, but referents which can inform our expectations of what rhetorical discourse ought to do and of what it is capable of doing (Leff, 1990, p. 269). Rhetoricians should not be trained in broad theoretical structures that can be used to analyze texts. They should become masters of rhetorical processes. An extensive knowledge of rhetorical possibilities will allow the critic to examine textual objects freely and without expectations because they will allow the text to communicate its most important features. In a way, rhetorical functions serve as theoretical principles that can inform our reading of a text, but we should always go into the analysis with what Leff (1980) calls "informed innocence." We possess knowledge of what rhetoric can do based on what its functions have previously been, but we are always open to new possibilities that may emerge based on the unique nature of each text. Clearly, rhetorical criticism can be conducted without a broad theoretical framework guiding the method. The abbreviated close reading of the Unabomber text indicates that close features can be examined in light of common rhetorical principles (theory), but should not be analyzed with preconceived expectations. Gaonkar (1990) wrote: "In the last twenty-five years rhetorical criticism has moved in the wrong direction. The focus has shifted from substance (object) to methods to such an extent that criticism

has become an object of study rather than a vehicle of study" (p. 308). "Cookie Cutter" critical theories only reinforce this attitude by objectifying criticism as pentadic, fantasy-theme analysis, metaphor, cluster, narrative, and many others.

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