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GHOST HUNTING: A Rhetorical Analysis of American Media on the Waterboard

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THE QUESTION OF RHETORIC'S EFFECTS

Rhetorical scholars have long struggled with the question of rhetoric's effects. **Arguing that a given rhetorical artifact is causally associated with a given effect is problematic, because the artifact in question may simply be one of any number of conditions that precipitated the outcome in question.** As a result of this problem, the project of accounting for the effects of rhetoric has been, save a few notable attempts, all but abandoned. Instead, rhetorical scholars have turned their focus to accounting for modes of "circulation"--a term borrowed from literary studies.

This project takes a unique approach to the question of rhetorical efficacy, by considering "circulation" as simply a middle-step in the broader goal of accounting for rhetoric's effects. Whether directly or indirectly, I argue, **rhetoric has effects, and those effects can be measured best by an approach I call "critical reverse engineering."**

FROM EFFECT TO CAUSE

Critical reverse engineering is an approach whereby the rhetorical critic reconstructs a sequence of events by accounting first for a given outcome and its context, then traces relevant discursive clues backward to the point of rhetorical origin. The critic as reverse engineer must approach a given event with an organic interest in explaining what happened and why. That is, the critic must refrain from foregone conclusions as to the rhetorical origins of a given effect.

Whereas past critics concerned with accounting for effects begin their critiques with a given rhetorical act, and then proceed linearly to what they argue as the effects of that act, **this process begins with effect, then moves backward through analysis of the discursive context within which the effect came to be, then moves linearly backward to account for the rhetorical act(s) that precipitated that effect.** This project begins with the peculiar effect of journalists waterboarding themselves.



HITCHENS AND THE WATERBOARD



In an effort to investigate whether the "waterboard" constituted a torture technique, **journalist and renowned contrarian Christopher Hitchens agreed to be waterboarded in May, 2008.** At the time, his support of the Bush administration's "enhanced interrogation" program was no secret. In previous months, Hitchens had loudly attacked those who claimed the techniques constituted torture, suggesting that dissenters were "helping to besmirch and discredit the United States all around the world."

After about three seconds of waterboarding, Hitchens relented. The name of his next article in Vanity Fair?

"Believe me, it's torture."

DISCOURSES ON THE WATERBOARD



Others in the media also took to the waterboard toward investigating its status as a torture technique. Journalist Steve Harrigan (left), radio personality Mancow Muller (top), and artist Steven Powers (bottom right) each took to the waterboard for investigative purposes. Unsurprisingly, each came to the same conclusion: it's torture.

HISTORY OF THE WATERBOARD

The waterboard has historically been considered by United States and international law as a torture technique. In the Spanish-American war, American soldiers were court-martialed for it; in World War II, Japanese soldiers were tried as war criminals for using it; as recently as 1983, a Texas Sheriff was found guilty of torture for using it on a prisoner.

PUBLIC HAUNTINGS



If the waterboard had for over a century of U.S. law--and half-a-century of international law--been considered a crime, then why was the media so obsessed with "proving" its status as torture or not-torture? **Why did Hitchens and others submit themselves to something that had historically been regarded as torture?**

It is my contention that these were reactions to the lack of clarity and general discomfort brought on by information regarding the treatment of the United States' detainees in the "war on terror." **The photographs of prisoner abuse at Abu Ghraib, combined with the leak of "torture memos" effectively haunted American public culture, such that its media representatives felt compelled to investigate the waterboard as "ghost hunters" might investigate a site of unresolved human trauma.**

Various examples of similar haunted rhetorical effects exist throughout American history, usually after gross human rights violations. According to Jacques Derrida, haunting is immanent to hegemonic rule. **As the weight of historical injustices exceeds the capacity of language for symbolic repression, victims of American hegemony continue to haunt our national identity from beyond the fold.**

TERROR RHETORIC



As Rene Bergland notes in her book *The National Uncanny*, **"The entire dynamic of ghosts and haunting... is a dynamic of unsuccessful repression. Ghosts are the things that we try to bury, but that refuse to stay buried. They are our fears and our horrors, disembodied, but made inescapable by their very bodilessness."** The Bush administration did its best to suppress evidence of its interrogation program and to redefine the boundaries of torture. Ultimately, though, the images of the tortured and torture memos would not be suppressed. **The investigations of the waterboard were thus an indirect effect of the administration's rhetorical failures.**