

The communications process: imaginative worlds

Sociology



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Dramatism has the flexibility to enable us to penetrate several aspects of popular arts from a variety of angles; unlike much of the earlier criticism of popular arts, it is not steeped in the "ideological" paradigm of a single academic discipline. While it may not be the Ultimate Answer, Dramatism assuredly provides critical insights that cannot be generated by any other method.

Burke derives his methodology from the basic assumption that human beings are divided from other members of the animal kingdom by virtue of their ability to communicate symbolically via language. As Burke defines us:

Man is

the symbol-using (symbol-making, symbol-misusing animal)

the inventor of the negative (or moralized by the negative)

separated from his natural condition by instruments of his own making

goaded by the spirit of hierarchy (or moved by the sense of order)

and rotten with perfection.

Here Burke suggests that we are qualitatively different from other animals by the fact that language enables us to build symbolic models that become a "scenic" reality, serving as a backdrop for our thoughts and experiences.

This is not an idea original to Burke; the concept is basic to social anthropology, psychology, and several other disciplines. But Burke builds upon this insight, using it as the basis for a world-view wherein the major distinction is between motion and action. In Burke's universe things move, person act. No symbolic transformation is involved when a rock rolls down a hill, gathering moss as it travels. But when I raise my wine glass to toast the good company at my table, something magical occurs. My act represents something for all who are present, and the essence of all human activity

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occurring within a social arena is best captured by a methodology that recognizes and reveals something about the interaction among the "imaginative worlds" of each guest as he or she is transformed by language. Two possible philosophical premises may underlie such a methodology. One way to build such a system would be to start from epistemological assumptions, creating a system based upon how humans "know" the world. Another would be based on praxis, human action, with an emphasis on the study of motivated behavior over modes of consciousness. Burke chooses the latter approach, focusing on manners and motives instead of knowledge and understanding.