

The Montana Meth Project: Applying Burke's Dramatistic Pentad to a Persuasive Anti-drug Media Campaign

Elizabeth A. Dickinson

Courses: *Persuasion; also Rhetoric, Health, Theory, Nonverbal, and Media classes*

Objectives: *To understand Burke's dramatism and use the pentad as a tool to analyze advertisements in the Montana Meth Project anti-drug campaign*

Rationale

Kenneth Burke's (1960) dramatistic pentad is a theory and tool to analyze motivation in symbolic action. To Burke, both verbal and nonverbal elements in language are persuasive in nature and instrumental in driving social functions and processes. Rhetorical meaning is embedded in language; dramatism offers critics a way to analyze messages to determine human motivation behind them. Based in this notion of dramatism, language is a form of action that literally creates the reality or worldview in which humans act.

The pentad is a tool of analysis made up of five elements—act, scene, agent, agency, and purpose—that help a critic understand the drama or reality implicit in any given artifact or message. *Act* explores what happened (what took place or what someone consciously did). *Scene* examines where and when the act occurred (a physical locale, a literal or figurative time, era, period, phase, etc.). *Agent* is who or what kind of person or group carried out the act. *Agency* involves the means by which the agent performed the act or how the agent accomplished what took place. Last, the *purpose* asks why the agent performed the act; it can be overt but is usually concealed. The five elements go beyond naming who, what, when, where, and why. Critics can explore relationships between elements and examine ratios (sets of two elements) to understand which elements are emphasized and how they work together. The pentad breaks a message down to its most basic elements, which should be viewed as questions a critic can ask of a message or artifact. For example, these elements could

Elizabeth A. Dickinson is a doctoral candidate in the Communication and Journalism Department at the University of New Mexico. Email: edickins@unm.edu, Website: www.unm.edu/~edickins

be used to describe the motivation of a student (agent) who, at the end of a term (scene), contests his/her grade on an assignment (act) by arguing that he/she had a death in the family (agency) so he/she can receive a higher grade (purpose).

The process of applying the pentad to a text begins with the critic identifying the five elements. The critic then explores possible relationships and ratios among elements to eventually decipher a rhetor's motive. Burke (1960) argued that rhetors choose to highlight some elements while downplaying others. Examining which elements and ratios are prominent helps to reveal where a rhetor may be directing or deflecting the audience's attention and why. The first element in a ratio "determines" or is "necessary" for the second element to function. For example, in a *scene-act* ratio, the scene will determine the kinds of act the agent performs. In the example of a student contesting his/her grade, it may be significant that the end of a term (scene) may govern that the student contests his/her grade (act). By constructing and exploring different pairs of ratios—*agent-agency*, *purpose-act*, and every other combination available—the critic discovers the dominant relationship operating in a given drama. If a particular ratio reappears across texts in an ad campaign, the dominant term is said to be central, or controlling, and points to a rhetor's motive.

Once students grasp the utility of the pentad as an instrument for decoding the functions of messages in the persuasion process, applying it can be useful and appealing. The following activity offers a unique and contemporary way to teach students the pentadic elements and ratios. By studying "shock ads" from the Montana Meth Project, students can gain a more complete understanding of dramatism and the campaign.

The Activity

As dramatism is complex, instructors should assign students introductory readings on the pentad, such as the course's textbook section that covers the pentad or other summaries. Useful overviews include Foss's (2004) chapter on Pentadic Criticism, or Foss, Foss, and Trapp's (2002) chapter on Kenneth Burke. Although multiple class discussions are ideal, one session can sufficiently introduce and clarify the pentad to students. This lesson needs at least one hour to complete, including 25 minutes of lecture on dramatism and the pentad and five minutes to introduce the ad campaign. The remaining 30 minutes are used to watch the ads, begin to apply the pentad, and debrief. Access to the internet is needed to watch the videos in class.

Before the activity, the instructor should become acquainted with the Montana Meth Project. The campaign was developed by Tom Siebel, a retired billionaire who applies marketing techniques to social problems. Siebel combines video "shock ads" with community outreach to educate teens on the destructive methamphetamine epidemic. The campaign's slogan is "Not Even Once" and its goal is to discourage the target population (12- to 17-year-olds in Montana who have never taken meth) from trying the drug. The campaign has received both praise and criticism for its techniques. Along with the readings, I assign students a 17-minute online PBS video clip for an introduction (<http://www.pbs.org/now/shows/335/index.html>, *Video:*

Montana Meth Project & Meal Plan). Additionally, a 60-minute PBS Frontline documentary entitled *The Meth Epidemic* offers a more complex historical, political, economic, and cultural context of methamphetamine use in the US. Assigning the readings and video before class allows more class time to work through the complexities of the pentad. If the homework assignment is not feasible, the campaign can be briefly described in class.

Begin with a 25-minute presentation of dramatism, starting with Burke's concept of rhetoric and the theoretical assumptions that inform the pentad (as overviewed above). Define and explain the five elements, and the concept of ratios and how they are useful in analyzing persuasive campaigns. Students often get confused differentiating between elements, and it is useful to offer examples before analyzing the videos. After a brief overview of the campaign, break the class into small groups. Access the ads online at <http://www.montanameth.org/>, and click "view ads." It may be necessary to forewarn students that some ads are graphic.

Showing multiple ads is necessary to uncover dominant ratios in the campaign. If students work with just one video, it is more difficult to see how motive is embedded in the dominant term. There are multiple ads, and I typically show *Bath Tub*, *Laundry Mat*, and *Parents*. *Bath Tub* shows a teenager getting ready to go out for the evening. While showering, she screams when she sees blood and a naked meth user crouching beside her in the tub and realizes it is her future self as a meth addict. In *Laundry Mat*, while a teenager on meth robs a laundromat, he encounters his pre-meth self, grabs him by the sweatshirt and screams, "this wasn't supposed to be your life." *Parents* depicts a teenager violently trying to enter his locked home while his frightened parents huddle inside. As he screams and bangs on the door, the voice of his pre-meth self tells how he gets along with his parents and how they trust him.

Show each ad several times. Ask the students to first watch the ad as if they saw it on television. In subsequent viewings, the students should focus on identifying the pentadic elements. Give students time in their groups to discuss which elements and ratios appear salient, and students will begin to notice similar elements repeating across ads. As a class, discuss each element to give students an opportunity to hear from their peers and clear up any misunderstandings about the pentad. If online access is unavailable, students can watch the videos outside of class (see the Appendix for a worksheet on this alternative). As another alternative, the instructor can have students use their laptops in class, where groups can watch different ads.

There is no correct or true application of the pentad, and groups will come up with different analyses. For example, one group might produce the following results: across the three ads, the *agent* is a "teenager," while the *scene* is "adolescence," including places and situations in which a teenager may find him/herself. The *act* is "using meth"—either doing it or not. The *purpose* is "choice," or being an independent teenager by deciding between the acts. The *agency* is "being able to see both options." These elements may point to an *agency-agent* ratio, where seeing and understanding the options (of doing meth or not) influences what the agent will do. Here, the ratio points to the power of the controlling term *agency* in drug use and

addiction. This may indicate that the rhetor's motive in this campaign is to persuade teenagers that they have a choice and to pick the correct one to avoid drug addiction.

Debriefing

The following questions can be used to debrief the pentadic elements and the campaign:

1. What might the elements and ratios say about the rhetor's motive? How would you design a campaign to communicate alternative motives?
2. How do the ads persuade audiences to view the meth epidemic and meth addicts?
3. Do you think the "shock ads" work? Why or why not?
4. Dramatic before-and-after arrest mug shots of meth users are used in the campaign to show the drug's devastating physical effects. Why might these be persuasive, especially to the target audience?
5. What are the limitations of this campaign?
 - a. What is not addressed in the campaign that may make it ineffective?
 - b. How is the campaign limited by its target population? How can additional demographics and target audiences be included?
 - c. The campaign has been criticized for taking credit for decreased meth use in Montana. What other contextual, economic, political, and cultural factors are omitted that would account for decreased meth use? How might these factors make the campaign problematic or ineffective?
6. Compare the Montana Meth Project to other anti-drug movements, such as Nancy Reagan's "Just Say No" campaign.

Conclusion

This lesson plan applies an important theory and tool to a current, relevant, and age-appropriate media campaign. The author has never had a student react negatively to the ads, but instructors should be conscientious of their sensitive nature. Make sure to carefully debrief and point students to available resources, if needed. Some students may share personal stories of family and friends who use meth. This offers a powerful personal link to dramatism and the topic. Moreover, combining students' experiences with the campaign's efforts to reach its target audience can be used to reiterate other concepts in dramatism such as "identification."

References

- Burke, K. (1960). *A grammar of motives*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.
- Byker, C. (Director). (2006). *Frontline: The meth epidemic*. PBS Home Video [Documentary]. (Available from PBS Frontline, <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/meth/>)
- Foss, S. (2004). Pentadic criticism. In *Rhetorical criticism: Exploration and practice* (3rd ed., pp. 383–410). Long Grove, IL: Waveland Press, Inc.

Foss, S. K., Foss, K. A. & Trapp, R. (2002). Kenneth Burke. In *Contemporary perspectives on Rhetoric* (3rd ed., pp. 187–232). Prospect Heights, IL: Waveland.

Meth Project Foundation, Inc. (2005–2008). *Montana Meth Project*. Retrieved April 1, 2008, from <http://www.montanameth.org/>

PBS Now (Producer). (2007, August 31). *Montana Meth Project & Meal Plan* [Television broadcast]. (Available from PBS NOW, <http://www.pbs.org/now/shows/335/index.html>)

Appendix: Worksheet

Applying Burke's Pentad to Ads in The Montana Meth Project



About the Campaign

When Tom Siebel, a billionaire part-time Montana resident, learned of the crippling effects of methamphetamine addiction in the state, he decided to use marketing techniques to un-sell the deadly and addictive drug. It is called the “Montana Meth Project.” We will apply Burke’s pentad to video “shock ads” used in the campaign to assess their effectiveness and motive.

Part I (do outside of class)

Visit the website <http://www.pbs.org/now/shows/335/index.html>. Click on “Video: *Montana Meth Project & Meal Plan*” (right) and watch the video (first 16 minutes). Take notes while watching and answer the following five questions:

1. What is the most important goal for the campaign? What does it want to specifically do?
2. Compared with other drugs, what is it about meth that might warrant a different approach?
3. Do you think the “shock ads” work? Why or why not?
4. Why might before and after mug shots of meth users be effective to show?
5. What is not addressed in the campaign that may ultimately make it ineffective?

Part II (do outside of class)

Visit the website <http://www.montanameth.org/>. Watch the three ads labeled *Bath Tub*, *Laundry Mat*, and *Parents*. Watch each ad three times (first—as if you saw it on TV; second and third—begin to identify the five pentad elements). Take notes describing each element.

Part III (do in class)

In groups, describe how each element of the pentad is seen in the ads:

1. **Video 1: Bath Tub**

- A. *scene:*
- B. *act:*
- C. *agent:*
- D. *agency:*
- E. *purpose:*

Which two stand out most (a “ratio”)? What might this tell us about the rhetor’s motives?

2. **Video 2: Laundry Matt**

- A. *scene:*
- B. *act:*
- C. *agent:*
- D. *agency:*
- E. *purpose:*

Which two stand out most (a “ratio”)? What might this tell us about the rhetor’s motives?

3. **Video 3: Parents**

- A. *scene:*
- B. *act:*
- C. *agent:*
- D. *agency:*
- E. *purpose:*

Which two stand out most (a “ratio”)? What might this tell us about the rhetor’s motives?