

Protest as civic engagement: Initial steps towards a theory of dramatistic democracy"

Derek Foster – Brock University – dfoster@brocku.ca

The boreal forest is the largest remaining North American ancient forest and a key source of biodiversity. As a result, the boreal forest has become a controversial site for logging and obtaining pulp for paper products. Kimberly-Clark Corporation, the world's largest manufacturer of tissue products, is a particularly controversial company because its competitors manufacture forest friendly tissue products with a high recycled content. However, "less than 19 percent of the pulp that Kimberly-Clark uses in North America comes from recycled sources" (Greenpeace 4). Consequently, the U.S. based Natural Resources Defense Council and Greenpeace Canada announced a campaign to target Kimberly-Clark and raise public awareness of their policies and their products that endanger the boreal forest.

In November 2004, this campaign was launched with an image event specifically designed to highlight Kimberly-Clark's ancient forest logging practices. The image event is a staged occurrence that is visual in nature and designed for media dissemination. The image event is the staging of an event in order to communicate the persuasive appeals of a social movement. It is meant to first grab the attention of an audience and to encourage identification with a particular framing of a social problem. It is meant to question a culture's prevailing ideology through a dramatic visual event, ultimately breaking through people's fields of consciousness by virtue of its dramatic appeal. It is a tactic widely identified with Greenpeace, an organization that has long been known for its use of images and staged acts of protest to raise public awareness of issues such as whaling, nuclear testing, seal hunts, and so forth. As Delicath and Deluca argue, "image events are a form of postmodern argumentative practice, a kind of oppositional argument that creates social controversy, and animates and widens possibilities for debate" (2003, p. 315).

Greenpeace's "Boreal Image event" consisted of a large cube van full of activists, dressed up as a giant Kleenex box and driven in Canada's three largest metropolitan centers: Toronto, Montreal, and Vancouver. Greenpeace appropriated the logo of Kleenex and altered it to read "Kleercut," thereby challenging people to think differently about their everyday use of paper products derived from clearcutting. Subsequently, mini image events that disseminated this same message took

place in communities across Canada. One series of events was termed the “Southern Ontario Forest Crimes Tour” in which activists adopted stores that sold Kimberly-Clark products and spread the visual rhetoric of the Kleercut campaign into the environment where people live their everyday lives.

I am particularly interested in investigating such image events as cultural performances in which “the drama consists in seeing some players as victims, others as villains. Order is obtained through sacrifice so that unity is derived” (Gusfield, 1981, p. 81). The point is not just to suggest that there was a drama afoot, performed in speech acts arguing both for and against some perceived wrongdoing. While this is true, it should not represent the end of analysis. Rather, viewing statements dramatisatically allows us to speak of the rhetorical means by the problem is actually identified. The end point of this is not to suggest that people were persuaded to reject certain products or certain ways of living (or to critique those who sought to bring this about). Instead, it is to outline the means by which such performances’ moral rhetoric occurs and how they function as tropes of democratic engagement.

Image events are a dramatic mode of public engagement. They draw attention to citizenship as a process, a potentially unruly site of public action, questioning of everyday practices, and challenging of authorities and institutions. Boreal image events, in particular, asked people to think globally, but act locally. And, by doing so, they enliven Dewey's notion of democracy as a non-institutional, orientation that is a personal way of individual life. As Asen notes, “democracy asks not for people's unlimited energy and knowledge, but for their creative participation” (2004, p. 196). Image events' creative engagement with individual citizens underscores how “democracy's heart does not beat in the halls of Congress or in the voting booth, but in everyday enactments of citizenship” (Asen, 2004, p. 197).

“To say that something is a social problem requires making an evaluation that the condition isn't good. This is a question about morality” (Loseke, 1999, p. 47). This suggests, I believe, how Burke (and his use of the negative) is central to an understanding of how democracy often works (especially given the creative moralizing that is the foundation of some counterpublic claims-making, clamoring for attention on the public agenda). Creating awareness of to “Moral action

arises as a consequence of the hortatory, judgmental uses of the negative” (Foss, Foss, & Trapp, 2002, p. 205). Perhaps unfortunately, more often than not, “it takes very little inducement for us to begin ‘perfecting’ the characters of our opponents by the gratuitous imputation of unseemly motives” (Burke, cited in Blakenship, 1989, p. 133). By positing perfect villains – or pollution archetypes (dangerous people or places) so thoroughly abhorrent that purification is necessary – a perfect society can be promised. It will be a symbolic heaven wherein guilt has been expiated and the social order redeemed. This is the particular character of most successful image events.

As Brummett argues, political rhetoric refers to “discourse, symbolic and significant behavior that creates, maintains, challenges, and overthrows power; of discourse that creates community in all its complexity, of discourse that creates identity; and of discourse that creates shared definitions of reality” (2004, pp. 294-295). This also describes the nature of the boreal image event - people are challenged to change the way they think about the environment, and, by extension, everyday life.

To understand this, however, is to suggest, like DeLuca and Peeples (2002, p. 134), that an analysis of dramatistic engagement ought to be an exercise in understanding “critique through spectacle, not critique versus spectacle.” DeLuca's assessment of image events, however, pays little attention to Burke, even when image events seem to be clear examples of “the negative,” “goaded by the spirit of hierarchy,” and “rotten with perfection.” As a thought experiment, I wish to suggest that image events can advance a particular form of rhetorical democracy - not deliberative and not agonistic democracy, per se - but rather, through drama, we come to see new options for governance, new options for civil society. We have, in essence, figures of “dramatistic democracy.”

Deliberative democracy presupposes “a manifestation of reasonableness, if not reason, and that carries a commitment to the principle that the voice of the people should carry force” (Hauser, 2004, p.2). Dramatistic democracy, however, proceeds through drama, through spectacle, and through poetry. It is the raising of public voices that takes for granted that “the rhetorical democracy of the twenty-first century rests on the hurly-burly of civil society” (Hauser, 2004, p. 5). Dramatistic democracy contributes to and is constituted by this hurly burly. Image events, after all, are founded on the principles of publicity and free speech; they are the activity of interested citizens that exhibits the participatory spirit of an engaged public, even as it is an appeal for more of that same engagement. Image events subvert the normative standard of rational discourse. Yet

as a rhetorical appeal, they “invite us to reimagine and restructure our relationships, to learn new understandings of the world that will foster survival” (Hauser, 2004, p. 11). Therefore, image events, as raw material of rhetorical democracy are not identical to deliberative democracy. Yet this particular variant of rhetorical democracy that I’ve termed dramatistic democracy is not entirely inimical to deliberation either.

Anderson suggests that “Dramatism would be ineffective and out of place in matters of public policy and decision making.” However, “dramatistic deliberation seems appropriate for the earlier stages in the problem-solving process, for those points in the consideration of value when we must puzzle over the moral and ethical questions underlying issues of policy and action” (1985, p. 41). And this is where image events’ value as inventional resources of democratic engagement shines through. As Anderson points out, dramatism creates what Perelman calls “presence” - magnifying our awareness of the deliberative proposition (1985, p. 38). An image event in one’s own neighborhood, in one’s own grocery store, is concrete and, arguably, makes the deliberative issue regarding consumer practices vivid and immediate. And this sense of immediacy is key to any act of persuasion (ibid). The image event brings ideas about ancient forests “vividly before the eyes of the audience” and may be the best means of convincing the audience of “the reality and truth” of these ideas” (Longinus, quoted in Anderson, 1985, p. 39). So, while the “truth” of the boreal forest is not clear from these image events, at least Greenpeace’s “truth” is. Consequently, this form of civic activism puts audiences in touch with a range of stylistic and rhetorical possibilities otherwise unavailable.

Image events’ rhetoric may contribute to deliberation but are not elements of a deliberative democratic appeal, per se. And yet, even as they clearly highlight conflict or competition among adversaries, they are not elements of an agonistic democracy either. In political theory, this typically entails an acknowledgement of irreducible difference, but a struggle between adversaries instead of an antagonistic struggle between enemies. As Mouffe argues, “An important difference with the model of “deliberative democracy”, is that for “agonistic pluralism”, the prime task of democratic politics is not to eliminate passions from the sphere of the public, in order to render a rational consensus possible, but to mobilize those passions towards democratic designs.” Agonism implies a respect and a concern for the other. It entails an acknowledgement and even sometimes a

celebration of conflict, which need not mean a celebration of domination of one party over another.

Burke, however, used these terms somewhat differently. He believed that “a total drama ... is analytically subdivided into competing principles, of protagonist and antagonist” (1941, p.76). He called this alignment the principle of the “agon,” now widely understood as the principle of “what vs. what”. Audiences for rhetoric are often encouraged to consider “things in terms not of *some* other, but of *the* other. The sharpest instance of this is an *agon* wherein the protagonist is motivated by the nature of the antagonist” (Burke, 1945, p. 33). Indeed, the principle of the agon begins to appear when groups seek to (a) infuse members of the public with attitudes of rejection (towards other groups, against other claims, against rules and laws), and (b) provoke conflict (see L. Griffin, 1969, p. 463). Image events deliberately seek to portray specific parties as villains in order to employ a sacrificial principle whereby members of the wider public will come to a new awareness of an issue and reject the party (or policy or principle or product) that is portrayed antagonistically. As such, their celebration (indeed, even creation) of conflict further entrenches the public identification of enemies. These are not forms of rhetoric designed to make creative use of adversarial politics and sometimes-inflamed emotions. Rather, they typically seek to inflame emotions and constitute new adversaries for people who might not have otherwise realized that they ought to be so oriented.

Yes, the boreal image event engaged audiences both emotionally and rationally with imagistic appeals inducing people to pay attention to the written evidence that ultimately motivated the visual spectacle. Yet citizens are engaged “primarily by activation of a dramatic scenario in which specific forms of identification and participation become meaningful” (Hariman and Lucaites, 2001, p. 15). What then are viewers supposed to identify with (or against)? And how, on the basis of this identification, will they be inspired to participate in civil society?

In general, image events become the performative embodiment of one group's idea of the public good - they reconstitute the public interest in graphic manner: they deliver evocative pictures of enemies of the commons and similarly tragic acts that correspond with their malignant agency. With the boreal image event, at least, the appeal to think differently about tissue products depended upon a rhetoric of division. Kimberly-Clark is figured as an exploiter of the wilderness,

and as the self-appointed opposition of Kimberly-Clark (and thereby, protectors of the land), Greenpeace stands in for the ideals of civic virtue, moral responsibility, and industriousness with a conscience - all the things that Kimberly-Clark is not. The dramatic charge behind the protest comes from its evocation of emotions such as anger, enmity. (anger at the indiscriminate loss of green space, enmity directed at the agents of that loss - in this case, Kimberly-Clark). Through scapegoating Kimberly-Clark, Greenpeace transformed comforting consumer products into icons of irresponsibility and thereby testified to the pathology of Kimberly-Clark's way of doing business. Dramatistically speaking, this established guilt is directed at Kimberly-Clark by clearly demonstrating that there are better ways of doing things (using more post-consumer recycled fibre) and through this, a path to a better, more responsible society that is left untaken. Guilt is then shared by all those who use Kimberly-Clark products. Redemption is then sought by positing (more) ideal relationships between people and their environment.

Through the drama of the boreal image event, people learn how to live better by rallying against those who don't act properly. Kimberly-Clark is not only shown to be unfriendly to ancient forests; through their acts, they are identified as irresponsible members of the community. And thus, to protect the boreal forest means to protect all our own mutually held interests. It entails identification of the good life in which, through division, Kimberly-Clark is sanctioned and its ill-effects minimized. As an intervention into civil society, then, the boreal image events visually dramatize (a) the forest crimes being committed elsewhere, and (b) the ease with which individuals can play a part in a wider socio-political drama and reconstitute their daily practices as eco-friendly. For instance, one tactic on the "Forest Crimes" tour involved setting up police tape to cordon off products for sale that feature ancient forest fibre. Through this action, activists stylistically present "an elaborate set of prescriptions and proscriptions for 'doing the right thing'" (Burke, 1984, p. 268). By visually shocking shoppers, they exhort them to pay attention to their more deliberative appeals and direct them to ancient-forest friendly products.

As exhibitions of dramatistic democracy, the productive capacity of the boreal image event lies, in part, in its insertion (and dramatic reminder of) the activity of the private spaces of the home into the barnyard of public spaces. Much more remains to be said about image events and their potential to stimulate civic engagement through the public "screen" or through direct interventions in the public sphere. Still, through such performances and their evocation of corporate

malfeasance, often mindless rituals of using tissue paper and the similarly everyday activity of buying tissue products are made into dramatic events that metonymically remind audiences of the spectral presence of Kimberly-Clark's ecologically unfriendly activity.

The material rhetoric of boreal protests encourages consumer-citizens to investigate their banal, everyday, material practices. As Dickinson (2002, p. 23) argues, "it is within the everyday that we create ourselves, our communities, and our politics." Importantly, the boreal campaign was composed, first and foremost, of image events that were meant to disrupt citizens in the places of their everyday movement (city streets, shopping centres). Citizens were meant to apprehend these material, imagistic practices, but unlike the paradigmatic Greenpeace image event that took place in some far off locale and beamed images of protest into the living rooms of otherwise disengaged citizens, boreal image events were meant to directly engage and involve audiences. Thus, like Hariman and Lucaites (2003) suggested about the iconic photo "Accidental Napalm", these image events confronted citizens with the immorality of their own actions.

The original Greenpeace image events succeeded ironically - as interruptions or interventions against specific environmental practices, they failed - even as they gained widespread exposure for the movement against such practices. Yet even if the boreal image event does not widely disseminate (as indicated by paltry mainstream media coverage), it nonetheless succeeds as a democratic intervention. As Brown and Herndl suggest, "the rhetoric of the environment performs two different kinds of cultural work: one which produces knowledge about the physical world, and a second which produces the consciousness - indeed the identities - of those who produce that knowledge" (1996, p. 215). As image events circulate - indeed, as Greenpeace went on its self-proclaimed "Southern Ontario Forest Crimes Tour" - believers have their faith renewed even if non-believers are not converted. Believers are the already-engaged, those activists on the front-lines of democratic culture, questioning the things that everyone else takes for granted as their symbolic equipment for living. And through the labor of these believers, the larger society can confront alternative ways of conducting its business. Admittedly, image events are strange artifacts to make an argument for civil society since they are by their very nature a violation of civility, normal ways of conducting oneself in public and private-public places. Yet they are not simply the stark evidence of a society's preoccupation with divisive practices of agonistic democracy. Rather, they are the figures of what might be termed a "dramatistic democracy." In a

culture that pays attention to imagistic appeals, they provide reasons for a way of life and reasons to change the way we live our lives. They animate discussion about the type of society that people see for themselves. To quote Hariman and Lucaites, “they “illustrate how a visual practice can underwrite liberal-democratic polity by providing resources for thought and feeling that are not registered in the literate media and the norms of rationality that constitute the discourse of political legitimacy in Western societies” (2001, p. 7).

The nature of the participation in the civil sphere, based on these thoughts and feelings, however, is still in question. As adjuncts of a dramatistic democracy, image events encourage the conception of public issues through comic and/or tragic frames. Dressing up a cube van as a giant Kleenex box (with Kleenex creatively remediated to read Kleercut) involves a visual synecdoche to connect clear cutting with an everyday consumer product in one's home. It is a way of encouraging reflection that asks people to recognize their own complicity in environmental crimes but through laughter as a way of piquing curiosity and producing social consciousness. Yet verbal and visual rhetoric of the boreal campaign also frames the issue of boreal deforestation tragically; through the victimage of Kimberly-Clark the message of the activist-clown engaged in “pranking rhetoric” (see Harold, 2004) becomes inexorably linked to the need for malicious immolation. While the comic frame “allows observation of oneself, recognizing one's failures and limitations” (Madsen, 1993, p. 171), the tragic frame reminds us that we are not entirely to blame - that corporations like Kimberly-Clark put these problematic products on the shelves in order that we can bring them into our homes and thus they must ultimately bear the brunt of our ill-will. Through dramatic spectacle, then, members of the public are able to deliberate on potential courses of action even if the visual argument of Greenpeace's appeal lacks the logical or dialectical content of the verbal (see Blair, 2004).

Greenpeace's boreal protest was a rhetoric of engagement that functioned primarily by division. Yet more than simply asking people to say “No” to Kimberly-Clark, Greenpeace also encouraged audiences to change their own individual behavior. Ultimately, like the anti-fur activists studied by Olson and Goodnight (1994), Greenpeace sought to reconfigure purchasing decisions as public acts with consequences that extend beyond the cottony softness of one's tissue products. Greenpeace's website blatantly excludes the government as a target audience for its boreal campaign. Instead, it is directed at consumers, institutions (namely schools - and the attempt to

educate future consumers), and companies (anti-Kimberly-Clark rhetoric, meant more for the consumption of consumers than the company that produces tissue products). Image events, then, reinforce how, “from the perspective of the individual, democracy means participation in and direction of the activities of the groups with which one affiliates” (Asen, 2004, p. 197). Thus, boreal protests are a symbol of civic participation and disaffection. Greenpeace proffers the idea that individuals can become stakeholders in the ongoing game of environmental protection and through their actions of civic responsibility, ultimately contribute to a healthier social world. This engagement, however, envisions democracy as a personal project.

As an object of analysis, the boreal image event allows us something to say about both dramatism and democracy, and, as such, “it simultaneously suggests a way of seeing that combines an understanding of the unique qualities of visual discourse with a rhetorical sensibility that can account for how visual discourse comes to mean something in the public sphere” (Finnegan, 2004, p. 211). Through image events such as boreal protests (and their vivid representation of the guilt-redemption process), citizens can come to understand the options available to them for bringing about both personal and social change. This isn't to suggest that spectacles of either mortification or victimage are “the” means by which we should come to decisions. The options presented to audiences may be quite limited. However, to ignore image events as structuring devices for our post-modern polity is to ignore how, increasingly, struggles over democracy and ways of locating ourselves in it come about everywhere - not just in the legitimate institutions of the status quo. If democracy is a perpetually unfinished project, then rhetorical critics can always look for the guilt, the shortcoming, inadequacy, inconsistency or imperfection that frustrates human congregations and compels us to keep communicating.

WORK CITED

Anderson, Chris (1985). Dramatism and Deliberation. *Rhetoric Review*. 4, 34-43.

Asen, Robert (2004). A discourse theory of citizenship. *Quarterly Journal of Speech*. 90, 189-211.

Blakenship, Jane. (1989). Magic and mystery in the works of Kenneth Burke. In H. W. Simons & T. Melia (Eds.), *The legacy of Kenneth Burke* (pp. 128-155). Madison, WI: The University of Wisconsin Press.

Blair, J. Anthony (2004). The rhetoric of visual arguments. In Charles A. Hill and Marguerite Helmers (eds.), *Defining Visual Rhetorics*. New Jersey: Lawrence Erlbaum. 41-61.

Brown, Robert L., and Carl G. Herndl (1996). Beyond the realm of reason: Understanding the extreme environmental rhetoric of the John Birch Society. In Carl G. Herndl and Stuart C. Brown (Eds.), *Green culture: Environmental rhetoric in contemporary America*. Madison, WI: The University of Wisconsin Press. 213-235.

Brummett, Barry (2004). Communities, identities, and politics: What rhetoric is becoming in the Twenty-First century. In Patricia A. Sullivan and Steven R. Goldzwig (Eds.), *New approaches to rhetoric*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage. 293-307.

Burke, Kenneth. (1941). *The philosophy of literary form*. USA: Louisiana State University Press.

Burke, Kenneth (1945). *A grammar of motives*. New York: Prentice-Hall.

Burke, Kenneth (1984). *Permanence and Change* (4th ed.). Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.

Delicath, John W., and Kevin Michael DeLuca (2003). Image events, the public sphere, and argumentative practice: The case of radical environmental groups. *Argumentation*. 17, 315-333.

DeLuca, Kevin Michael, and Jennifer Peeples (2002). From Public Sphere to Public Screen: Democracy, Activism, and the "Violence" of Seattle. *Critical Studies in Media Communication*. 19:2, 125-151.

Dickinson, Greg (2002). Joe's Rhetoric: Finding authenticity at Starbucks. *Rhetoric Society Quarterly*. 32:4, 5-27.

Finnegan, Cara A. (2004). Doing rhetorical history of the visual: The photograph and the archive. In Charles A. Hill and Marguerite Helmers (Eds.), *Defining visual rhetorics*. Mahwah: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.

Foss, Sonja K., Foss, Karen A., & Trapp, Robert (Eds.). (2002). *Contemporary perspectives on rhetoric*. Prospect Heights, IL: Waveland Press.

Griffin, Leland M. (1969). A dramatistic theory of the rhetoric of movements. In W. H. Rueckert (Ed.), *Critical responses to Kenneth Burke: 1924-1966* (pp. 456-478). Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Gusfield, Joseph. (1981). *The culture of public problems: drinking-driving and the symbolic order*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.

Hariman, Robert, and Lucaites, John Louis. (2001). "Dissent and emotional management in a liberal-democratic society: The Kent State iconic photograph." *Rhetoric Society Quarterly*. 31, 5-32.

Hariman, Robert, and John Lucaites. (2003). Public Identity and Collective Memory in U.S. Iconic Photography: The Image of 'Accidental Napalm'. *Critical Studies in Media Communication*. 20, 35-66.

Harold, Christine (2004). Pranking rhetoric: "Culture jamming" as media activism. *Critical Studies in Media Communication*. 21, 189-211.

Hauser, Gerard A. (2004). Rhetorical democracy and civic engagement. In Gerald Hauser and Amy Grim (Eds.), *Rhetorical democracy: Discursive practices of civic engagement*. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates. 1-14.

Loseke, Donileen R. (1999). *Thinking about social problems: an introduction to constructionist perspectives*. New York: Aldine De Gruyter.

Madsen, Arnie J. (1993). The comic frame as a corrective to bureaucratization: A dramatistic perspective on argumentation. *Argumentation and advocacy*. 29, 164-177.

Mouffe, Chantal. "Deliberative Democracy or Agonistic Pluralism?" *Social Research* 66 (1999): 745-58

Olson, Kathryn M., and G. Thomas Goodnight (1994). Entanglements of consumption, cruelty, privacy, and fashion: The social controversy over fur. *Quarterly Journal of Speech*. 80, 249-276.

Supplemental reading suggestions, useful to the project:

Ivie, Robert L. (2002) "Rhetorical Deliberation and Democratic Politics in the Here and Now. *Rhetoric & Public Affairs*. 5 (2), 277-285.

Stob, Paul. (2005) Kenneth Burke, John Dewey, and the Pursuit of the Public. *Philosophy and Rhetoric*. 38 (3), 226-247.

Possible questions for discussion:

What is gained (or lost) by seeking to understand image events and/or cultural performances through the lens of dramatism?

Can Burke's dramatism/logology be applied to the visual rhetoric of such image events alone (the act of protesting, captured by cameras, broadcast to a wider audience), or should dramatism be applied strictly to the words used to describe such acts of protest/creative engagement?

What is the benefit of adding "dramatistic democracy" to the lexicon of deliberative/agonistic democracy? If it is a unique supplement, does the principle of the agon always have to end up expressed in antagonistic terms?