



A Rhetoric of Style

By Professor Barry Brummett PhD

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Exploring style in a global culture

In *A Rhetoric of Style*, Barry Brummett illustrates how style is increasingly a global system of communication as people around the world understand what it means to dress a certain way, to dance a certain way, to decorate a certain way, to speak a certain way. He locates style at the heart of popular culture and asserts that it is the basis for social life and politics in the twenty-first century.

Brummett sees style as a system of signification grounded largely in image, aesthetics, and extrarational modes of thinking. He discusses three important aspects of this system—its social and commercial structuring, its political consequences, and its role as the chief rhetorical system of the modern world. He argues that aesthetics and style are merging into a major engine of the global economy and that style is becoming a way to construct individual identity, as well as social and political structures of alliance and opposition. It is through style that we stereotype or make assumptions about others' political identities, their sexuality, their culture, and their economic standing.

To facilitate theoretical and critical analysis, Brummett develops a systematic rhetoric of style and then demonstrates its use through an in-depth exploration of gun culture in the United States. Armed with an understanding of how this rhetoric of style works methodologically, students and scholars alike will have the tools to do their own analyses. Written in clear and engaging prose, *A Rhetoric of Style* presents a novel discussion of the workings of style and sheds new light on a venerable and sometimes misunderstood rhetorical concept by illustrating how style is the key to constructing a rhetoric for the twenty-first century.

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Editorial Review

Review

120Normal0falsefalsefalseEN-USX-NONEX-NONE

By way of illustrating how his system might be applied, Brummett offers a critique of the gun culture in the United States. After identifying himself as a lifetime member of the National Rifle Association (NRA), Brummett evaluates his personal experiences attending gun shows, participating in the Usenet group rec.guns, shopping at firearms stores, and shooting guns at ranges, and performs a close reading of six issues of *American Rifleman*. According to Brummett's analysis, gun culture performs as a rural, White, male, working-class style and thus coheres around two key contradictions: 1) "a passion for individuality and self-determination on the one hand, and deference to authority, rules, and laws on the other hand" and 2) a tension between rural work contexts and urban threats (155). Given these constraints, Brummett suggests that gun-culture style "be seen as part of a wider effort to preserve an exploitative class structure" (170) that encourages submission to authority. This example provides a useful model for how one might use Brummett's system to analyze the political and social consequences of style.

Brummett concludes his book with an unapologetic critique of academics who lament the cultural shift away from "the verbal, expository, and demonstrative toward a more aesthetic mix" (172). Whether we are happy about this shift or not, says Brummett, style is increasingly becoming the way people communicate, so we need to understand how it works. Brummett's book provides us with a solid literature review to increase our understanding and provides us with a useful methodology for carrying out our critiques. Brummett presents a compelling case that a rhetoric of style is particularly suitable for analyzing twenty-first century texts (such as the 2008 Olympic ceremonies). However, I agree with Brummett that this rhetoric should supplement, not supplant existing schemas and methodologies of rhetorical analysis. Therefore, I would recommend the entire book for graduate-level classes studying other rhetorical theories and/or methods of rhetorical analysis. Although much of the material in the early chapters requires some fairly substantial grounding in postmodern theories (e.g., Baudrillard, Lacan, Jameson), chapters 4 and 5 could also be used successfully in undergraduate courses. --D. Alexis Hart, Virginia Military Institute

(D Alexis Hart *Issues in Writing* 2010-01-01)

About the Author

Barry Brummett is the Charles Sapp Centennial Professor in Communication and chair of the communication studies department at the University of Texas at Austin. He is the author or editor of several books, including *Rhetoric in Popular Culture*, *Rhetorical Homologies*, *Uncovering Hidden Rhetorics: Social Issues in Disguise*, and *The World and How We Describe It*.

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