

Kenneth Burke's Dramatism and Popular Arts. By C. Ronald Kimberling. Bowling Green, Ohio: Bowling Green State University Popular Press. 1982

In *Kenneth Burke's Dramatism and Popular Arts*, C. Ronald Kimberling seeks to reform criticism of the popular arts (also called popular culture). He calls to his aid a critical theory—Kenneth Burke's—that he claims can account for elements of the popular arts that many other theories cannot. But he is not simply substituting one theory for another, for Kimberling seeks to permit the critic of the popular arts to address not only the elements of formula and response to formula, not only the consumerism associated with the various media that convey the popular arts, but to address the content of the art works themselves and the intentions of their authors, as well as the efforts of their audiences in receiving, understanding, and interpreting these art works. This part of his program is most welcome. Anyone who is willing to look at TV, movies, or so-called formula fiction as if they were something other than commodities has my vote.

But Kimberling's book is more than just a brief for the popular arts. He defines his audience as "serious" critics and asks a key question: "How does one demonstrate to them—in terms they can relate to—that popular art is worth investigating?" (p. 11) Kenneth Burke furnishes the "terms they can relate to" as Kimberling seeks to explain Burke's theory, to parry the critical thrusts of the various thinkers who have written on the popular arts, and to generate a Burkean, i.e., dramatistic, reading of three different works in three different media—movies (*Jaws*); TV ("Shogun"); and print (*The Dead Zone*).

Kimberling divides the book into four sections. In the first section, devoted to the problem of authorship, he offers us a summary of relevant portions of Burke's theory, an analysis of other theorists of popular culture, and then some actual criticism—Burke's theory applied to the movie *Jaws* and the troublesome problem of collaborative authorship. In a second chapter, he offers us more Burke, more theorists, and a Burkean reading (viewing?) of the TV miniseries "Shogun" and the thorny problem it presents—form. In his third division he offers us Burke again, more critics, and a reading of Stephen King's novel *The Dead Zone*, focusing on its efforts to convince an "empirically minded audience" of the existence of the supernatural.

Burke's dramatic theory of art (it can be applied to any genre) "derives its name from the drama, where the crucial focus is upon *acts* performed by various players." (p. 15) Five terms, called the Pentad, provide for the various actions, actors, and scenes in any purposeful human scenario: Act, Scene, Agent, Purpose, and Agency. These answer (roughly) the questions: What happened? Where? Who did it? Why was it done? and How? I say "roughly" because those questions seem to confine analysis to the work itself, to the compass of the text, or the movie, or episode. But dramatism's chief strength as a theory for the analysis of popular art (as Kimberling is quick to point out) is its sensitivity to the role of the author in creating the work and the role of the audience in receiving and understanding it. Thus the Scene may not be only the fictive setting within a work, but may include elements of the author's and the audience's real-life settings. The Pentad, and Burke's whole theory, is not a set of rules to be rigidly imposed, but a heuristic, and a flexible heuristic at that. It has the advantage of outflanking almost any theory that would ignore one or more important parts of the transaction between author(s), work, and audience.

The all-important Burkean distinction between motion and action surfaces in Kimberling's discussion of Abraham Kaplan's theories of popular culture. "Kaplan distinguishes between an aesthetic 'response' to high art and an affective 'reaction' triggered by popular art." (pp. 24-25) Later, Kimberling explains, "The *reaction* mode of Kaplan would find its place, in Burkean terms, in the world of *motion*, not *action*. The world of human thought and language. . . implies action. . . (I)ndeed, any *social* activity among humans falls necessarily within the realm of action since such behavior involves symbolic transformation." (p. 70) Seen in a context of action versus motion, Kaplan's theory has its basis in mere response—motion—which places it outside the realm of human concerns. Kaplan ignores the very basis of any art—purposeful human action; Burke's theory helps Kimberling see this.

The "masscult" critics Dwight Macdonald and Ernest Van Den Haag succumb to a similar fate. Kimberling identifies their premise: "While others may see a mere correlative relationship between the rise of popular art as transmitted by the electronic media and a 'decline' in Western civilization, the masscult critics, feeling victimized, posit a cause/effect relationship between the two." (p. 21) To put the masscult theory in Burkean terms, the Act here is nothing less than the decline of the West. The Agency is the mass culture, and a Subagency is the electronic technology that disseminates the works.

The problem here, as Kimberling sees it, is that this analysis begs the question from the onset. "In their views (Macdonald and Van Den Haag), popular (or mass) art functions not as Scene, as one might ordinarily expect, but as Agency." (p. 21) If, however, we see the art as Scene rather than Agency, its ominous portents fall away. Suddenly, Agency is freed to be assumed by individuals rather than a faceless mass. We are in the realm of action rather than motion, of thinking creators and audiences with free will. To undermine them, Kimberling first casts the theories of Macdonald and Van Den Haag in Burkean terms, then corrects them by juxtaposing a "correct" Burkean identification of the elements of the Pentad. This could have been more convincing—Kimberling might have argued for his view rather than simply placing it next to the other theorists' inadequate explanation of how popular art works.

His conclusion about Marshall McLuhan's theory is attractive. Instead of a hulking "masscult" acting as Agency, McLuhan's theory ("the medium is the message") posits individual media as Agencies. But as in the previous critics' scheme, the audience can do little but respond in various "response modes." "Dramatism reveals McLuhan as a closet behaviorist!" (p. 22) This, too, could have been spelled out much more carefully. My sense is that Kimberling is right, but this needed much more careful attention and analysis from a Burkean perspective.

Herbert J. Gans falls short because his model "reduce(s) the overall Scene from one wherein multiple Acts of communication and response occur to one focusing solely on response." (p. 24) Gans defined various audiences, called taste publics, to identify the kinds of art they consume. "The main problem with Gans' model is its failure to go beyond the Act of consumption. The Act performed by the artist, producing the work of art, is completely ignored." (p. 23) What dramatism shows Kimberling is the lacunae in the theories, the places where a given consideration of popular art falls short of doing justice to the complicated interchange that communication always involves: "Overall we find that Gans' model is limited in scope, reducing the overall Scene from one where multiple Acts of communication and response occur to one focusing solely on response." (p. 24) Throughout his discussion of the various critics, Kimberling merely sketches, where he should provide a detailed blueprint. In a book with such large ambitions, the mere 108 pages he writes seem too often inadequate.

But what does any of this have to do with a given work of art? To find out, I examine the last of Kimberling's critical test cases, his dramaturgical reading of Stephen King's *The Dead Zone*. The central problem in King's novel, Kimberling says, is "(T)o make the macabre more credible in the eyes of those who grew up believing in the scientific method. . . . In Dramaturgical terms, the challenge that King faces is one of building audience identification with a protagonist who has supernatural powers." (pp. 84-85) "Identification" is a Burkean term, and Kimberling explains Burke's "Hierarchy of Response," a four-part structure: "pure" response to form, physical in nature (the response, e.g., to sheer repetition); "personal identification with the patterns of experience symbolized in a work of art"; "conventional response" (that is, response to artistic conventions); and "'dynamic' response, where the audience encounters patterns or characters alien to their own experience." (pp. 71-73) But having defined this hierarchy, Kimberling virtually abandons it as he lists the elements in the book that create the audience's identification with the protagonist's paranormal powers.

After demonstrating convincingly (although not through Burke) that the audience does indeed come to abandon its skepticism and embrace the paranormal as it is manifested in the protagonist, Kimberling finally returns to the hierarchy when he examines the last, "highest" form of response to art—the "dynamic." The protagonist, Johnny, has foreseen that a man will be elected president who will lead the nation into nuclear war. Faced with this evil and faced with his guilt at not having done enough when he foresaw lesser, though fatal, disasters, Johnny decides that nothing short of assassination will stop this evil but charismatic politician from winning office and, eventually, destroying the world. For Kimberling the audience's conversion to a belief in psychic powers is a "conventional" response,

because it is a response to a convention of this particular genre. "However," he continues, "for the audience to assent to the appropriateness of Johnny's assassination attempt, there must be a 'deeper' involvement, a *dynamic* involvement with the value conflicts raised by the work. To this extent, *The Dead Zone* provides a serious challenge to Abraham Kaplan's distinction between 'reactions' and 'responses.'" (p. 91)

I am sympathetic to this claim that the novel asks readers to do more than just react. But I am not sure that Kimberling has grounded his claim for this response in the best possible way. "Dynamic" response requires that the audience encounter "patterns or characters alien to their own experience." Kimberling claims that this "alien" element is moral. The moral question the book asks is the "Hitler question": Is assassination justified in the face of evil of almost unimaginable proportions? Or, more concretely and personally, Would you have killed Hitler if you had had the opportunity? Substitute for Hitler the politician who will lead us into nuclear war, and we have the question Johnny asked himself. He decided the answer was "Yes," but we see him reason his way slowly to this decision, thus inviting the reader to reach it with him. But surely, this change in the reader's value system is not nearly so large as the change (however temporary) in his epistemological beliefs—where he is willing to believe, at least for the duration of the novel, that paranormal powers exist. Kimberling's application of Burke's hierarchy leads him to label this identification with the paranormal as merely "conventional," while the challenge to our moral system is "dynamic." Devaluing the conventional hides the power of formula fiction and blinds us to the important work that formulas do.

But this shortcoming is understandable. Almost everyone who works with popular art seeks to demonstrate that it, like so-called high art, has ideas, not just formulas. Kimberling's analysis of King's novel—and *Jaws* and "Shogun" as well—places these works in a light that illuminates their art rather than the bottom lines of their creators' bank accounts. Kimberling redirects our attention to the transaction the creators conduct with the reader/viewer rather than typifying the audience as a group of slavering consumers incapable of thought. His desire to "raise" *The Dead Zone* to the highest level of identification is particularly understandable when we remember his audience—critics. Yet it is in satisfying this audience that the book falls short. They will ask why Burke was invoked, only to be left behind in the analyses. They will ask how Burke's theory, which seems so protean in Kimberling's hands, does anything more than answer the sympathetic critic's whims in writing what could be viewed as an apology for popular art. He has the right approach, and perhaps, the right theorist. At least Burke insists on seeing action where others see only motion. Thus Kimberling's intentions—to elevate criticism of the popular arts from the level of mere sociology—are laudable. But to convince his chosen audience of critics—the most-entrenched elitists ever produced—he needed more: more explanation of Burke, more integration of Burke's theory with the practical criticism he offers, and more arguments for the superiority of this way of doing things over business as usual.

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