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Rhetoric Inc: Ford's Filmmaking and the Rise of Corporatism

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Rhetoric Inc: Ford's Filmmaking and the Rise of Corporatism

Timothy Johnson

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2020, 227 pp.

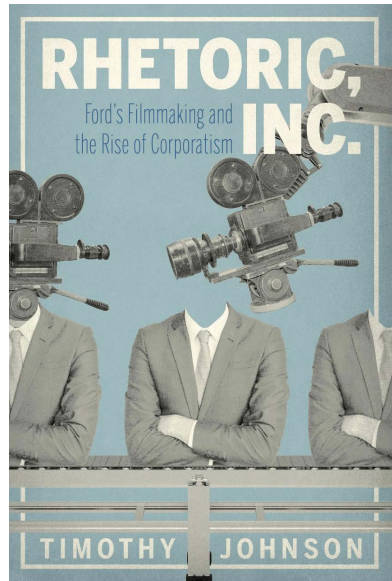
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In *Rhetoric Inc.: Ford's Filmmaking and the Rise of Corporatism*, Timothy Johnson presents the narrative of how corporate powers have structured themselves as indispensable from economic, civic, and discursive life. Scholars of communication studies, rhetoric, writing studies, and film will find that Johnson's use of incorporational rhetoric makes a firm argument for why we have a toxic relationship with how we talk about the intersections of business, enterprise, and rhetoric. To structure his larger arguments, Johnson pays specific attention to the Ford Motor Company's use of instructional films, mostly produced in-house by the Ford Film Company until World War II, to shape the discursive space of American economic and political life. Through a careful viewing of the film archives, Johnson presents an engaging study into how corporations have firmly cemented their place in America's overarching capitalist system and our national identity.

Readers of the *Community Literacy Journal* may not find the title and topic inviting; however, Johnson's book will present them with useful strategies for reading film and thinking about concepts related to power projection, identity formation, and even the role of omission in shaping discourse. Ford's films from the silent era all the way to the mid-1950s are an effective means of viewing literacies because film is a space of both examining how past generations absorbed the dominant discourses of labor, immigration, and working-class education. Like written discursive materials, film allows for the crafting of narrative, decisive choices made through editing and exclusion, and exhibiting specific themes that shape rhetoric. Johnson's work effectively takes us into an emergent space of the early 20th century to explore a literacy form as it slowly conceptualizes itself from the silent era until the post-war economic boom.

The book's introduction argues that the 2008 automotive bailout was not just a push to save jobs and economic prosperity; instead, automotive manufactures care-



fully crafted a larger economic, political, and rhetorical project meant to cement themselves as integral to American society. Specifically, Johnson highlights how “economies are powerful rhetorical constructs built to a large degree by larger corporate institutions and produced as controlling narratives ‘incorporated’ to their core” (5). These economies, both monetarily and rhetorically based, provide a larger launching point to understanding how our techcentric knowledge economy came to dominate the post-industrial makeup of many first-world countries. By digging through Ford, Johnson seeks to answer how we have let companies like Alphabet, Amazon (and the real moneymaker Amazon Web Services), and Apple create narratives central to their monolithic needs and change those narratives when confronted by problems within society. It is from this position that Johnson turns to the idea of incorporational rhetoric that he defines as “an approach to analyzing the large, distributed configurations of materials, texts, and ideas brought together by immense corporations like Ford” (6). Incorporational rhetorics go beyond the educational films meant to be distributed to willing theaters since companies can now ply their trade via social media, websites, and within the traditional print media and movies. Johnson sees these spaces as “unique enough to warrant a bracketed, named iteration of rhetorical practice,” which is meant to accent Antonio Gramsci’s theory of hegemony (6). The ways in which companies lay the groundwork for their legitimacy—not to mention their power to persuade government officials—is primary to incorporational rhetoric as it reifies their ability to position themselves as a public good rather than a strictly capitalist scheme.

Johnson’s first chapter foregrounds the melding of Progressive Era educational expansion—as captured through various reforms from Thomas Dewey to the integration of onsite workplace schooling—with the increased industrialization of American life. To frame this, Johnson uses a July 1916 Ford event that combined the pageantry of schooling with the then ever-present call for assimilation where American flags, foreign workers who arrived to work on the assembly line, and a banner promoting the Ford Motor Company English School presented a facade for democracy (28–29). Worker education, especially that of those not born into American culture and language, was pure indoctrination, which, as Johnson points out, focused on citizenship and language acquisition with those who took to the program given both citizenship and a chance to advance into the burgeoning pre-war middle class. In a way, the student *cum* workers of the Ford plant were in themselves a commodified engine of the economy set to be built on a working line and sold to both the public and future employees in videos.

The turn to Ford’s silent film-era educational movies offers one of the more brilliant parts of the chapter as Johnson dissects the popularity of the *Ford Educational Weekly*—later becoming the *Ford Educational Library*—in both theaters and among the press. What is striking is the way in which the films were labeled as educational and distributed to schools under the auspices of both industrial and civic use in the classroom. These films pre-date the later post WWII Coronet films, which also focused on similar themes of good citizenship and were marketed as educational training, and featured the same “homogenized national experience of visual learning as

theatregoers, workers, and students received identical lessons” (34). What Ford crafts is a modified version of reality meant to stimulate the imaginations of the viewers but at the same time indoctrinate their worldviews to match each subsequent film. In a way, the early Ford films were less about strict education and more propaganda for the audiences to ingest in order to alter the makeup of social, political, and labor life. Johnson sees these films through *mise-en-scène*, which he reads through Jacques Rivette’s conception of the term to mean a rhetorical tool used to observe the complex assemblages of people, place, and networks. Rivette’s framework helps further Johnson’s incorporational rhetorical argument through the complexity that these films present on an educational level. On one hand, instructional films were meant for emulation of form, training, and potential. Yet, Johnson argues that Ford’s films were sites of the modernized shift away from localized labor towards a transformed, mechanized, and unified industrial similitude. What we might get from Johnson’s masterful reading of these films is the paired modernization of education—worker and school education—that still prevails: a sterile, one-size-fits-all form of indoctrination that throws out ingenuity and local knowledge in favor of standardization and corporate oversight.

Chapter two highlights how Ford uses the hagiographical metamontage, *As Dreams Come True* (1921) to present the ur-narrative of both Ford the person and Ford the company. The goal of *As Dreams Come True*, in Johnson’s view, is to “presen[t] the aspirations of its figurehead to naturalize a larger and often turbulent, boom-and-bust structure for economic cycles” in order to “obfuscate elements of labor on the assembly line” as well as “recast an influx of money into new forms of capital including military prowess, mass consumption, and leisure” (65). To unravel this film, Johnson draws upon a diverse framework of theoretical perspectives ranging from Casey Boyle, Gayatri Spivak, and Gilles Deleuze in order to deliver the sharp message that “[p]erfecting a new reality was, as *As Dreams Come True* makes clear, at the heart of the Fordist project” (69). *As Dreams Come True* serves as a kind of economic *topoi* that captures the world Ford wants his audience—plant workers and theatergoers alike—to internalize through their imagined selves. To achieve this, the film captures two economic realities (the meritocratic rise of Ford and the regime of labor at Ford’s plants) and twists them into a propagandic assemblage meant to exhibit aspirational qualities to be emulated by the audience.

Chapter three takes us from the imagined foundations of emergent American economic life to constructing the spatial dimensions of Ford’s automotive industry. The focus in this chapter moves from *As Dreams Come True* to the follow-up films like *Good Roads* (1921) and *Village-Industries* (1932), to which Johnson uses the expansive highway system as a metaphor for the circulation of capital, bodies, labor, and commercial products. The use of scenic backgrounds as opposed to city spaces presents an imagined assemblage of the real as structured through freedom. It is here that Ford’s films bifurcate into scenes from Michigan villages to vast American National Parks. The use of villages like Milford and Hayden Mills, Michigan are meant to provide the larger networks of industry that act as “intermediary space[s] between the urban and rural” (106). Whereas prior spaces would have been independent from

incorporation, these films present them as proximal nodes in the gears of industry and ultimately tied to the larger facets of the growing transportation network. Later films like *Fairy Fantasy in Stone: Bryce National Park* (1937) expand upon the nationwide increase in visits to the National Park system. Ford's travelogues connect viewers to the larger America they are beginning to visit, if not imagine, as part of the network of interconnected highway systems. Johnson concludes that the intermixing of National Park vistas and vehicles triggers both physical and emotional reactions that dictate an imagined life with access to both possible. Specifically, now travel is a consumable product.

Chapter four pivots from imagined landscapes to Ford's attempt to build relationships with consumer audiences through the spectacle of the 1934 World's Fair films. In contrast to the Depression Era films produced by The Film and Photo League that fought for the regulating of labor practices, Ford's film presents a serene counter to the economic anxieties of the public deep into the Depression years. Johnson's shot for shot readings of *Ford and a Century of Progress* (1934) and *Rhapsody in Steel* (1934) pairs each film with the notions of the sublime. Each film is categorized differently—*Ford and a Century of Progress* stands as a montage of images meant to invoke escapism while *Rhapsody in Steel* presents an absurd bread and circuses effect—but their main focus is on presenting a narrative counter to the feelings of the general public of the time. Unlike previous films meant to showcase training, the World's Fair films are an exercise in an “overwhelming overlap of multiple sensory experiences coordinated through their own spectacular features,” which are intended to subdue the audience (147). Johnson uses these two films to foreshadow the last film of the chapter, *Harvest of the Years* (1940), where the abstract, sensory images are replaced by a cohesive film where montages are meant to show both the beginning of economic and emotional recoveries of the spectator.

Ford's wartime film strategy shifts from spectacle vis-a-vis the viewer's experiential enchantment to a more strident argument for a managed technocratic society. Chapter five spends significant time examining the shift to wartime production with the outwardly propagandist piece *Women on the Warpath* (1943). The film is an extension of both the war effort and corporate management. Johnson frames this through the tripartite forms of managerial, masculine, and colonial gazes that objectify bodies in motion as they work in tandem with machines (157). One of the more compelling arguments made in the chapter concerns the late-stage editing and omission of international and gendered labor in favor of the “white, male, Western executive” as savior narrative shown in Ford films during the war years (180). While the section on editing is relatively short, Johnson points us to the belief that the “final editing in film can offer important insights into the ideological positions being taken by a filmmaker—these editing decisions inform us of what a rhetor-editor finds worthy of seeing” (181). The choices editors make, as part of their process, help to shape wartime attitudes towards Ford's manufacturing in other countries: Germany gets a small focus before American entrance into the war, Sweden and Finland are sites where the male and female body are meant to be observed and sexualized, and Egypt is space where the American, néé Fordist, way of life has proven successful. Each of these

choices are part of the larger editorial scope of the film and their selections speak volumes about their utility to the ultimate mission of corporate culture through their observation of Ford's success.

In his conclusion, Johnson suggests that the automotive corporations had ultimately proven a simple point in the leadup to the 2008 bailout: they were too big to fail because they were integral to American society. Effectively, companies like Ford circulated an incorporational rhetoric, which crafted a networked understanding of their own value throughout the 20th century that "work[ed] to subvert or reshape what we traditionally consider rhetorical action" (185). *Rhetoric Inc.* reminds us that the appeals made by corporations and corporate interests are grounded in a long-term political project undertaken to persuade the public through visual rather than written rhetoric. If we are to better understand why corporations have a stranglehold on discourse in this country, we must look at how each corporation has used incorporational rhetorics to define their value and need in daily life beyond just the consumption of their goods. As Johnson articulates through the book, Ford's corporate style of rhetoric is one that is carried out over a long period of time and uses a multitude of genres to define its mission.

Johnson's book reminds us that so much of the corporatist rhetoric we see today is based on a series of obfuscations meant to divert our attention away from labor conditions, stagnant wages as well as loss of pensions, and gendered inequity in favor of corporately crafted imagined ideals of community, life, and structure. For literacy scholars, chapter one offers perhaps the best source material for potential use because Johnson spends significant time on the ways in which film was used as an instructional tool for a variety of audiences. Film and communication scholars will get the most out of the subsequent chapters (chapters two and three, especially) where Johnson focuses specifically on the intersections of theory and film. Rhetoric scholars will find the whole book worthy for more than just the idea of incorporational rhetoric, as Johnson's major arguments are expertly grounded in a variety of rhetorical theories that present new pathways for future research. Overall, *Rhetoric Inc.* presents scholars many different entry points into how corporations use film, rhetoric, and narrative to create new structures of persuasion that come to dictate modern economic realities.