Defending Symbolic Convergence Theory From an Imaginary Gunn

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In what follows, we defend symbolic convergence theory (SCT) from Joshua Gunn’s recent criticisms. Gunn calls for the creation of a new post-humanist, -Marxist, -Freudian approach to rhetorical criticism that would combine literary, critical, and psychoanalytic methods in a new “popular imaginary” paradigm. While urging acceptance of his new paradigm, Gunn advances three major criticisms of SCT. To respond to them, it is important to lay out a general stance from which to defend SCT.

Gunn’s criticisms do not evolve out of any rhetorical or social scientific research on SCT that he conducted himself. Instead, his ideas flow from a critical theory stance developed by other post-modernist writers. Gunn does not refer to the main body of SCT research that would blunt his critique. Long ago Bormann established the theoretical basis for using SCT, a general theory, to critique a special communication theory. He reasoned that a general theory is grounded in social science research studies and is timeless, whereas special communication theories are time-bound, transitory rhetorical visions. Shields, for example, showed that the common ground between SCT and a special communication theory is that SCT explains the special theory as style specific and, thus, ephemeral. His critique of the critical autoethnography special theory demonstrates that Gunn’s indictments of SCT (presented as contradictions or Gordian Knots) can simply be cut, à la Alexander the Great, because as a general theory, SCT explains any special communication theory as another rhetorical vision. Gunn espouses a nascent rhetorical vision in which post-modern rhetoricians will develop a paradigm called the popular imaginary, which is similar to Castoriadis’s concept of the social imaginary as modified through Althusser’s thinking on ideology and psychoanalysis, as a replacement. We choose not to participate in his vision; thus, we untie each knot.

Gordian Knot 1: SCT is Ontologically and Paradigmatically Inconsistent

SCT is alleged to be ontologically and paradigmatically inconsistent because it maintains a humanistic rhetor while advocating a de-centered, post-modern, co-construction of reality via publicly shared fantasies. Gunn views SCT as a bridge between modern and post-modern paradigms, as a forerunner of post-modern critical rhetorical theory that is in decline because it retains a modern ontology of humanism while espousing a post-modern, de-centered co-construction of symbolic reality. Gunn is mistaken on many levels. The first is that SCT is in decline with “diminished popularity” owing to “a number of internal contradictions” (50).

If by decline Gunn means popularity, he is mistaken. Scores of SCT-based articles have been published. Their appearance has been relatively constant over 30 years, and the number of fields using SCT is expanding. At this writing, the professional
articles and books exceed 485. Julie Kendall, for example, used SCT to examine chairs’ “Boiler Plate” for corporate rhetorical visions.\(^\text{10}\) Brad Jackson, another business professor, published a book in which he described management gurus as participating in three SCT rhetorical visions (righteous, social, and pragmatic).\(^\text{11}\) Many early SCT studies were in political and other applied communication areas, and they continue.\(^\text{12}\) Leena Saarinen of Helsinki, Finland, recently used SCT to study the group dynamics and rhetorical vision of an imagined community in cyberspace.\(^\text{13}\) “Rhetorical vision” has entered the lexicon of journalists and has been used to evaluate national research guidelines.\(^\text{14}\) Even critical theorists, such as Omar Swartz, have turned recently to SCT to do cultural criticism.\(^\text{15}\) Gunn’s report of SCT’s demise is greatly exaggerated.

Gunn’s claim about paradigm contradiction is only valid if one accepts paradigm purity as a basis for evaluation.\(^\text{16}\) We do not. SCT has been classified and re-classified as a hybrid theory via many paradigmatic schemas. Initially, SCT’s creators described it as a message-centered theory that displayed elements of a humanistic paradigm while being part of a social scientific paradigm.\(^\text{17}\)

Gunn classifies rhetorical theories into three paradigms—pre-modern, modern, and post-modern—using Richard Kearney’s genealogy.\(^\text{18}\) He then advances a fourth paradigm—the popular imaginary. The genealogy metaphor (fantasy type), however, changes the argument. Through the idea of genealogy, Gunn is not comparing equally valid paradigms on a parallel plane; rather, he presents them vertically as if one generation begets the next. Kearney, too, advances a fourth generation that he labels the ethical imaginary; for Gunn, it is the popular imaginary. The point both writers make is obvious. Generations die off and make way for new generations; however, this spawning fantasy type is invalid because theories do not die off over time. Aristotle’s rhetorical theory, for example, did not decline; it is used presently as a basis for criticism in many communication classes and remains a vibrant means for doing rhetorical criticism. The same is true for SCT.

Paradigmatic schemas are always a post-hoc activity.\(^\text{19}\) One problem with such post-hoc analysis is that paradigmatic boundaries end up looking quite permeable because there are always theories that fit comfortably in more than one paradigm. That is often mistakenly taken as evidence that there is something wrong with a theory rather than that the paradigmatic sorting system is flawed. We suggest that Joshua Gunn has made this mistake. Thus, it is of little consequence to say that SCT is a hybrid theory bridging modern and post-modern paradigms.

**Gordian Knot 2: SCT’s Freudian Fantasies are Deceptive**

Gunn claims that SCT’s Freudian roots preclude prediction because fantasies are always deceptive. Gunn believes that SCT’s advocates have failed to refute Mohrmann’s charge that fantasy themes are always deceptive whether in the subconscious, as in Freud’s theory, or in the conscious fantasies of SCT. Gunn extends Mohrmann’s argument by saying that those using SCT cannot divine the presence of motives in large groups of people based on the fantasy theme analysis of a subjective critic. Mohrmann has it wrong and so has Gunn. SCT researchers have repeatedly predicted individual behavior on the basis of large quantitative studies, thereby demonstrating the presence of meaning, emotion, value, and motive for action in the
rhetoric, that is, in the symbolic structures of fantasy, fantasy type, rhetorical vision, and saga.  

Bormann has long maintained that "fantasy theme analysis as a humanistic method of rhetorical criticism when combined with the general theory of communication (symbolic convergence) ... provides a way for unifying the humanistic and social scientific studies of rhetoric and communication." In a 1994 defense of SCT, we detailed the social scientific methods and research findings that demonstrated empirically that fantasies chain-out across large groups of people and that people act on the meanings, emotions, motives, and values of the rhetorical visions in which they participate. By ignoring the social scientific studies, Gunn overlooks the evidence that fantasy themes may be identified accurately and established simultaneously as being present within large groups of people and directly linked to their behavior as individuals.

In addition to ignoring the social scientific basis for fantasy theme analysis (FTA), Gunn does little to make his case for the deceptive nature of rhetorical fantasies. His attack on FTA is made indirectly by arguing that Freud's psychoanalytic method cannot accurately analyze dreams. Gunn's citation from Freud that dreams are deceptive and undecipherable because of "concealing actual motives in the language of myth and symbol" is itself deceptive and weakens his indirect argument (50). Gunn quotes from the Strachey translation of Freud's *The Interpretation of Dreams*:

> The dream-thoughts and the dream-content are presented to us like two versions of the same subject matter in two different languages. Or more properly, the dream-content seems like a [translation] of the dream-thoughts into another mode of expression ... The dream-thoughts are immediately comprehensible, as soon as we have learnt them. The dream-content, on the other hand, is expressed as it were in a pictographic script, the characters of which have to be transposed individually into the language of the dream-thoughts. If we attempted to read these characters according to their pictorial value instead of according to their symbolic relation, we should clearly be led into error.

The bracketed material is not in the original. Gunn has substituted "translation" for the original word "transcript." The difference, perhaps, is not great; however, reinsertion of the omitted material is telling to Gunn's argument. That sentence—with the missing material replaced in italics—from Strachey reads: "Or more properly, the dream-content seems like a transcript of the dream-thoughts into another mode of expression whose characters and syntactic laws it is our business to discover by comparing the original and the translation. The dream-thoughts are immediately comprehensible, as soon as we have learnt them." Thus, for Freud, dream interpretation is not deceptive. One comprehends the dream's meaning through comparison just as we are analyzing Gunn's claim through comparison of these two scripts.

SCT is unaffected by Freud except to the extent that Gunn misuses him. As we have noted elsewhere, rhetorical fantasies are not Freudian fantasies, and the Freudian vocabulary is not SCT's vocabulary. A conscious fantasy, visibly present in the stuff we call communication, is not the same as a Freudian subconscious fantasy. Freud's theory of dreams is different SCT. The Freudian psychoanalytic method of dream interpretation differs from fantasy theme analysis. Rhetorical motives differ from Freud's subconscious desires. Rhetorical fantasies are not deceptive; they are discoverable through fantasy theme analysis. They can be translated because meaning, emotion, value, and motive for action are present in the communication, not hidden in individual psyches.
Gordian Knot 3: SCT is a Deficient Theory of Invention

Gunn claims that SCT is an incomplete theory of invention because it treats imagination as a form of suasory communication and because SCT only considers conscious creativity. Gunn indicates that his objective is to negotiate meaning for the concepts of invention and imagination. He believes the discipline will benefit if rhetoricians consider the imaginary (imagination) as a psychoanalytic concept of the collective unconscious, thus relieving disciplinary tension regarding the status of the rhetorical agent. Gunn says:

Reading the evolution of rhetorical theory through the imaginary helps to highlight a general unwillingness to let go of the Cartesian ego, the autonomous, humanist subject who claims mastery over the material world in conscious thought, in favor of a more contingent and fragmented understanding of individual subjectivity, community, and world (41-2).

Gunn believes SCT was “derailed by misjudgments concerning the role of the unconscious in rhetorical invention” (42). He believes imagination was part of the rhetorical canon of memory, then shifted to style, and then emerged as part of the concept of invention. Gunn suggests that “the key limitation of fantasy theme analysis was that symbolic convergence was defended as an entirely conscious endeavor” (52). Finally, Gunn asserts: “[U]ltimately, symbolic convergence is a theory of invention that posits the collective imaginary as the principal and primary locus of suasive movement” (49).

SCT is not a theory of invention. Invention is not a meta-theoretical concept that can house general theories of communication such as SCT; rather, invention is a concept that comes from (neo-)Aristotelian theory. If Gunn wants to reinvent the canon of invention, we invite him to do so, but he should not take a concept from one theory and try to subsume a general theory in it, which elevates invention to the meta-theoretical plane and is nonsensical. Conversely, SCT is a general theory of communication, but invention is not one of its concepts.

Gunn is convinced that without a psychoanalytic explanation for the imaginary that is consistent with the work of Althusser and Castoriadis, SCT is fatally flawed because of its reliance on a conscious agent. As Gunn states, SCT’s researchers have “refused to relinquish the romantic, creative productive imagination, which led to a number of internal contradictions that commentators and detractors were quick to recognize” (50). It is not a contradiction for SCT to posit fully conscious rhetors co-creating rhetorical visions when SCT’s grounding research provides a detailed explanation of how this creative process works. The essence of SCT’s research base is a theoretical explanation of how multiple rhetors use their conscious imaginations to create symbolic realities (rhetorical visions). This rhetorical process only appears contradictory if one lives in a non-permeable paradigm schema that characterizes human endeavor as pre-modern, modern, and post-modern and holds that rhetorical visions exist in the subconscious minds of rhetors. SCT offers a rich explanation of how rhetors use non-rational and rational components of language as they creatively produce their own symbolic reality.

SCT’s research program has always indicated that consciousness-creating, -raising, and -sustaining is a conscious, open, interactive process, directly observable in the rhetoric which, in turn, is wholly explainable and produces reliable predictions of human behavior. As SCT scholars, we have been working with an autonomous, humanistic rhetor for 33 years without finding research evidence that would lead to a different view of the rhetor’s imaginative process. A fair reading of the SCT literature
leads to the conclusion that there is no reason to believe, as Gunn asserts, that rhetorical fantasizing is taking place in an individual’s subconscious.34

Notes

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2As Gunn indicates, the essay is derived from his dissertation, Rhetorics of Darkness: Modern Occultism and the Popular Imaginary, Vol. 1–2 University of Minnesota, 2002. There Gunn identifies his critical rhetoric approach variously as theory, perspective, and “popular imaginary” paradigm. Gunn says: “I argue for what I term an ‘imaginary perspective of rhetoric,’ a welding of Marxian and psychoanalytic modes of criticism that attempts to preserve a philosophical commitment to a materialism while simultaneously defining suasion as a mental phenomenon … The ultimate aim of this section of the study is to develop a theory of rhetorical criticism that best reflects my theoretical commitments” (37–8).


6Bormann, Cragan, and Shields, in “Three Decades,” 271–313, review scores of studies supporting SCT. Gunn refers to just nine publications about SCT (two of those are Gerald P. Mohrmann’s 1982 criticisms).


See several social scientific studies following the sections entitled, "Using the Theory to Investigate Organizational Communication" and "Using the Theory to Conduct Marketing Research" in Applied Communication Research: A Dramatistic Approach, ed. John F. Cragan and Donald C. Shields (Prospect Heights, IL: Waveland Press, 1981), 217-18 and 311, respectively. For reviews of other studies, see Bormann, Cragan, and Shields, "Three Decades," 271-313; or Cragan and Shields, Symbolic Theories, 29-59, 161-90.

For reviews of other studies, see Bormann, Cragan, and Shields, "An Expansion of the Rhetorical Vision of Jack Kerouac" (Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 2000), 217-18 and 311, respectively. For reviews of other studies, see Bormann, Cragan, and Shields, "Defense," 269-75.

For reviews of other studies, see Bormann, Cragan, and Shields, Symbolic Theories, 29-59, 161-90.


Impotantly, Gunns problem with understanding Freud begins with his selection of the Strachey translation about which a number of Freudian scholars have complained. See, for example, Jeffrey M. Masson, Against Therapy: Emotional Tyranny and the Myth of Psychological Healing (New York: Macmillan Publishing Company, 1988), 48. The Freud-approved translation was made by Brill, who indicates that an analyst is interpreting the symbolic relation between the dream per se and the psychoanalytic problem the dream represents and not the pictorial value of each drawing in the rubric. See Dr. A. A. Brills translation from the German of Sigmund Freud, The Interpretation of Dreams (New York: Random House, 1994; originally translated and published in 1915), 174-5.

For reviews of other studies, see Bormann, Cragan, and Shields, Defense, 269-75; and their "Three Decades," 299; also see, Cragan and Shields, Symbolic Theories, 195-4; and their Communication Theory, 118-9.

SCT is not a suasory theory. Brock, Scott, and Chesebro note that the term "suasory" is code for a politically persuasive ideological theory through which criticism is directed toward explicit political ends. See Methods of Rhetorical Criticism: A Twentieth-Century Perspective, 3rd ed., ed. Bernard L. Brock, Robert L. Scott, and James W. Chesebro (Detroit, MI: Wayne State University Press, 1989), 21.

For a discussion of levels of theoretical vocabulary, see Bormann, Cragan, and Shields, Defense, 284-87; and Cragan and Shields, Communication Theory, 6-8.

Ernest G. Bormann, John F. Cragan, and Donald C. Shields, "An Expansion of the Rhetorical Vision

33 Notwithstanding the ideological turn in U.S. rhetorical scholarship, many critical theorists and cultural critics view rhetors as autonomous and rhetoric as co-created. Although we are indebted to Herb Simons for this argument (he saw it as highly ironic and contradictory in the writings of Gaonker) and to Karlyn Campbell for reminding us of it, we believe the widespread practice merely highlights the triviality of seeing mixed paradigms in another’s work. See Herbert W. Simons, “Review Essay: Rhetorical Hermeneutics and the Project of Globalization,” Quarterly Journal of Speech 85 (1999): 86–100.

34 Bormann, Knutson, and Musolf, for example, used Q-type factor analysis to answer the question, “What accounts for fantasy sharing?” They indicated that by “building on the work of Cragan and Shields and McIlwraith and Schallow, we suggest that one possible explanation for the tendency for people to share fantasies lies either in a learned (nurtured) or a congenital (natural) preference for certain kinds of narratives. For example, an individual might prefer narratives that are sad or violent or bizarre science fiction. Another individual might prefer non-fiction narratives.” They report factor analytic data that indicates in a “full-headed” way “that people imaginatively generate their own fantasies” (272). They also report that the generated fantasies reflect either a righteous, social, or pragmatic cast, and they confirm that this finding holds true cross-culturally by comparing their U.S. results to those of a similar study in Japan. See Ernest G. Bormann, Roxann L. Knutson, and Karen Musolf, “Why Do People Share Fantasies? An Empirical Investigation of a Basic Tenet of the Symbolic Convergence Communication Theory,” Communication Studies 48 (1997): 254–76; and Ernest G. Bormann and Yoshihisa Itaba, “Why Do People Share Fantasies? An Empirical Investigation of the Symbolic Convergence Theory in a Sample of Japanese Subjects,” Human Communication Studies 20 (1992): 1–25. Also, their findings are consistent with those of non-Freudian psychologists. See, for example, Robert D. McIlwraith and John R. Schallow, “Adult Fantasy Life and Patterns of Media Use,” Journal of Communication 33 (1983): 78–91.