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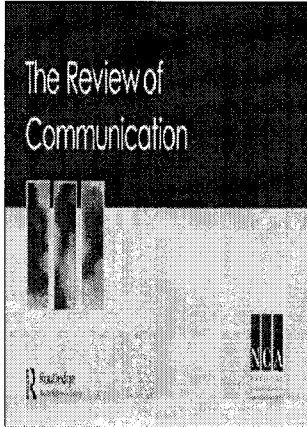
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Publisher: Routledge

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Review of Communication

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:
<http://www.informaworld.com/smpp/title~content=t713780320>

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To cite this Article: Meyer, Kevin R. , 'Appealing to and Excluding Audiences through the Rhetoric of Secrecy', Review of Communication, 7:1, 117 - 120

To link to this article: DOI: 10.1080/15358590701211365

URL: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/15358590701211365>

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Appealing to and Excluding Audiences through the Rhetoric of Secrecy

Kevin R. Meyer

Gunn, J. (2005). *Modern occult rhetoric: Mass media and the drama of secrecy in the twentieth century*. Tuscaloosa, AL: The University of Alabama Press. 376 pp. ISBN: 0-8173-1466-0. \$49.75 (cloth).

Joshua Gunn has crafted a fascinating book about the way language is used both to appeal to and to exclude audiences. Through his discussion of occult rhetoric, Gunn leads the reader on an intriguing adventure into the death of the modern occult and the subsequent emergence of what he terms the “contemporary occultic.” Along the journey, Gunn clearly and persuasively lays out his conception of rhetorical principles and thought. Although the focus of the book is on occult rhetoric, the reader is educated about rhetorical principles more generally and introduced to a variety of thought-provoking parallels between the two. In laying out his analysis and criticism of occultic discourse, Gunn draws upon Kenneth Burke, Jacques Derrida, Ludwig Wittgenstein, Richard Rorty, Roland Barthes, Jacques Lacan, and other theorists. The transformation of the modern occult into the contemporary occultic is then used to represent “the decentering of speech and text in our society of surveillance and publicity” (p. xxix) more generally. Rhetoricians and communication scholars, as well as those interested in the discourse of the academy more broadly, will profit from reading Gunn’s work. For instance, the implications of Gunn’s analysis should be of interest to those who are concerned with how occult leaders, religious figures, and even scholars use esoteric language or jargon.

The book begins by situating “the occultic as a distinctive mode of rhetoric” (p. xxii). Gunn defines the occult as “the study of secrets and practice of mysticism and magic” (p. xxii) which was typically the province of the wealthy. The first chapter uses the term “occultic” to refer to a larger category of which the “occult” is a smaller subset. Traditionally, occult texts were characterized by secrecy, esoteric and ironic language, and an interest in supernatural forces. These texts used esoteric language to guard secrets, thus separating insiders from outsiders. The meaning of “occultism,” however, changed over time as control over the term’s meaning was lost and it

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transformed into a more abstract and diffuse connotation; modern occultism was transformed into the postmodern occultic. Gunn argues that the occult died at the end of the twentieth century, due in part to depictions in the mass media that emphasized image and form over content. A combination of the failure of occult authority and media saturation led to an unstable and commodified term. Now, the lack of precise meaning has created a contemporary version of “the occultic” which has become associated with the lower and middle classes.

Occult language discriminates between those readers who are “in the know” and those who are not by using esoteric language to confuse and mislead those not in the know. Ironically, the occult needs those who are not in the know as much as it needs its followers. “Difficult language is used to divide and unite readers . . . it therefore participates in numerous circuits of power (authorial, authoritative, and otherwise)” (p. xx). The introduction to the book begins with four paragraphs that offer the reader a taste of how difficult the language of the occult is to decipher. The esoteric language used in occult rhetoric is ultimately a reflection of a belief in the ineffability of language. According to occult discourse, language is ineffable to the extent that it is incapable of expressing or describing human experience. Although modern occult leaders used the ineffability of language to create authority for themselves and draw converts, the ineffable nature of language ultimately created a problematic for the occult. “In each occultist’s delusional striving to establish his or her prophetic authority over others, in each occultist’s attempt to police meaning and interpretation, language outwits him or her by continually deferring the transcendental signified” (p. 213).

The first part of the book traces the historical dimensions of the occult through the medieval period, the Renaissance, the Reformation, the Enlightenment, and modernity. Gunn marks Eliphas Levi’s writings as the beginning of the modern occult. In historical periods of prosperity and social crises, popular culture noticed and, to some extent, embraced the occult. But, in times of hardship, the occult was forced underground. Interestingly, the occult was not associated with magic until the practice and its followers were persecuted. Magi intentionally used rhetorical blinds, or feigned religious conviction, in their “occult poetics” to mislead readers. The enthymematic and esoteric language of occult leaders served to establish their authority since they alone could determine the meaning of occult texts. A case study of H. P. Blavatsky is used to illustrate modern occult discourse.

The second part of the book traces the fragmentation of the occult tradition. Economic reasons, such as the desire to sell newspapers and tabloids by way of stories covering occultism, led to a link between “evil” and occultism. The authority of occultist leaders is discussed in terms of the dialectic of control over texts. The dialectic of control is explained by Gunn as the tension between the reader’s autonomy and the dependence of the reader on the authority of the magus. Charismatic magi used tautology, or self-evidence, and suspicion or doubt to create a self-sealing argument. A “hermeneutic of authority” was used by the magi. However, language and symbol logic ultimately undermined the authority of the magi; their secret language backfired and eventually crippled their authority. Occult texts, which

are characterized by unstable ironies, lead readers to contextualize meaning. A second case study, of Aleister Crowley, the most famous twentieth-century magus, is used to follow the unraveling of the hermeneutic of authority for the Great Magus. Gunn also credits the fragmentation of occult tradition to coverage by the mass media. Mass media misunderstand the occultist's irony and use the process of fetishization to focus on imagery, thereby ignoring the content or use-value of the term "occult." The rhetoric of rumor panic, and specifically the Satanic panic, focused on the imagery of occultism as the practice of blood rituals and sacrifice, despite the fact that postmodern occultism, a theological form, does not profess secrets or deal with the supernatural. The visual tropes created by Anton LaVey are used to track the co-option of the contemporary occultic by the mass media. Thus, the second part of Gunn's book examines how economic reasons, the hermeneutic of authority, and the mass media led to the fragmentation of the occult tradition.

The book's analysis of the transformation of the modern occult into the contemporary occultic demonstrates the power of rhetorical discourse "to frame and mediate our relationship to the past and render our experience of reality as something meaningful" (p. 174). Interestingly, in the last chapter Gunn discusses briefly how issues of patriarchy and racism are manifested in contemporary occult texts. Specifically, he suggests that witches may represent a means of empowerment. Gunn also argues that modern occultic discourse and the rhetoric of race function in similar discriminating ways. In slightly more depth, Gunn also draws a parallel between the decline of modern occultism and that of religious discourse. "Modern occultism is a snapshot of religion on its way to secularism" (p. 228). Thus, he contends that modern occultism, like religion, has followed a path of decline but the public decline of each is by no means complete; religion and modern occultism will assume different forms, but never disappear entirely. Gunn concludes that the "religious discourse of secrecy is everywhere" (p. 229). Finally, in discussing the problematic nature and fluidity of language, Gunn likens academic language to the occultic in its ability to discriminate among insiders and outsiders.

The implications of his study of occult rhetoric for issues of patriarchy, racism, religion, and academia leave the reader longing for an extended discussion of these topics. Although it is clear that Gunn connects his study of occult rhetoric to these various topics in the final pages of his book in order to demonstrate the far-ranging implications of his study, he could delve further into each of these topics and more fully develop his analysis. In some cases, Gunn leaves the analysis of these implications undone. For instance, he problematizes academic language without offering solutions or suggesting approaches to balance better the ability of academic discourse to include as well as exclude audiences. Greater attention to strategies for making the language of the academy more accessible to those within as well as those outside its walls would strengthen Gunn's argument.

Essentially, Gunn addresses the way language is used both to include and to exclude audiences. Although his book concerns how occult rhetoric discriminates among audiences, the implications of his work are far more encompassing. Not only does he introduce and investigate a fascinating subject, but through the course of his

analysis he examines the relationship between theories of language and theories of communication. In the epilogue, Gunn returns to the dialectic relationship of revelation and secrecy when expertly connecting his study of occult rhetoric to the language of the academy. Although his conclusion is that the inevitable creation of new and challenging jargon is helpful, he also cautions that academicians would do well to heed the lessons associated with the decline of the magi. Gunn's ability to draw connections between his study of occult rhetoric and issues of concern to modern academicians is insightful and thought provoking. Communication scholars, rhetoricians, linguists, and academicians will profit from reading this book. As the academy continues to face criticism regarding its application to the real world and its use of obscure language from students and popular culture, the ideas discussed by Gunn take on a new significance. The parallels between academic discourse and occult rhetoric provide an opportunity to rethink the ways that we use language as a right of passage within academia as well as within the media and public at large.