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To Do

### Using Comedy and Constraints to Overcome the Negative Treatment of LGBTQ Individuals

Rhetorical situations and rhetoric in general is a vast field of study. Many scholars have contributed academic works to the field, creating numerous theories on evaluating situations as well as competing definitions. This piece relies heavily upon Keith Grant-Davie's "Rhetorical Situations and Their Constituents" as a frame for evaluating the rhetorical situation of *Brooklyn 99*, season 5, episode 10. The episode, entitled, "Game Night," represents a larger discourse surrounding the treatment of non-heterosexual individuals in the United States in the 2010s. The show as a whole is a comedic work-place, docu-drama revolving around the antics of the 99th precinct of the NYPD in Brooklyn. Most of the characters are cops and most of the episodes are light-hearted. In "Game Night," one of the main characters comes out as bisexual, first to her squad, and then to her parents, receiving diametrically opposed responses. "Game Night," is rhetorically situated within an exigence where non-heterosexual individuals can experience a wide variety of responses from family and friends about their sexuality. The text utilizes its rhetors and constraints to overcome the exigence and create new audiences by giving watchers examples of how people should behave when encountering non-heterosexual identities, and illustrating the damage done by negative responses.

First, what is a rhetorical situation? Grant-Davie defines a rhetorical situation as a "situation where a speaker or writer sees a need to change reality and sees that the change may be effected by rhetorical discourse" (265). In other words, a rhetorical situation exists when there

is a coalescing of circumstances that allows for the creation and consumption of persuasive media, also referred to as text. These situations “involve a set of related factors whose interaction creates and controls a discourse,” (265). These factors include exigence, audience, rhetors, and constraints.

Grant-Davie defines an exigence as “Some kind of need or problem that can be addressed and solved through rhetorical discourse” (265). First, we look at the fact and definition of the text (267). Here, the exigence that “Game Night” is attempting to resolve is the negative treatment of non-heterosexual individuals. In other words, the discourse is about non-heteronormativity within a specific place, Brooklyn, during a specific time, the late 2010s. Next, we must ask, why the discourse is needed. In this case, the answer is that a group is marginalized and that marginalization often impacts personal relationships. In the episode, when Rosa comes out to her parents as bisexual, both parents reject her personal identification and make numerous comments widely recognized to be stereotypical and hurtful including, “it’s just a phase” (14:32-15:15). The episode ends with the relationship between Rosa and her father in state of healing and acceptance, but her relationship with her mother in shambles. Her father comes to her at work to say, “I accept you for who you are and I love you very, very much.” (18:40-19:00). Rosa asks where her mom is at and her father responds that she needs a little more time. Rosa comments that “family game night will be a little weird,” and her father responds that they better put it on hold for a while (19:10-19:24). Rosa is visibly distressed by her mother’s rejection, while she’s empowered and happy with the acceptance of her father and squad, illustrating the effects of both responses upon members of the LGBTQ community.

Finally, we must ask what the discourse should accomplish. In this case, the discourse is attempting to and should accomplish the goal of educating the audience on how to respond to

non-hetero sexual identities in a positive and supportive way by offering examples of both positive and negative reactions along with the consequences of those reactions. For example, the Squad is open and accepting of Rosa from the start, while her parents struggle. The acceptance of the squad shows the effects of positivity on Rosa and her friends. Captain Holt states, “every time someone stands up and says who they are, the world becomes a better, more interesting place” (21:08). The episode is attempting to accomplish the goal of helping audience members understand why acceptance is better than rejection.

While different scholars define the rhetor and the rhetor’s role differently, Grant-Davie defines the rhetor(s) as “those people, real or imagined, responsible for the discourse and its authorial voice” (269). In the case of *Brooklyn 99*, there are the writers who worked on episode 10. The cast also lends their voice to the discourse and are also part of the text. The fact that the some of the rhetors make up the text as actors, illustrates how they utilize themselves to overcome the exigence and create new audiences. Some people watch certain shows or movies because a specific actor is involved. This gives actors as rhetors and as part of the text, a certain degree of influence. Here the actors use that influence to address the exigence that gave rise to “Game Night.” However, the actors do not make up the entirety of the rhetors. There are crew members who make choices about lighting, props, costumes, camera angles, etc. all of which impact the final text available to audiences. Editors choose what to cut and what to leave in. The abundance of rhetors and the participation of some of them as actors creates a more rhetorically powerfully text.

Grant-Davies makes the argument that all of the factors for evaluation-- audience, rhetor, exigence, and constraints-- are capable of being plural. The audience can be defined as “those persons who could be influenced by the rhetoric to help resolve the exigence” (266). Audiences

can involve specifically targeted audiences. In other words, the text was created for them. They can also include, any person who happens to interact with the discourse, a set of people who form part of an external rhetorical situation, or the audience roles suggested by the discourse itself. (Grant-Davie, 270 and 270). *Brooklyn 99* is targeted individuals interested in lighthearted entertainment, who are pro-LGBTQ. The show is first and foremost a comedy, in line with shows like *Parks and Rec*. However, the Captain, introduced in the pilot is openly gay from the beginning. Non-heterosexuality is a common theme throughout the show, though the show does not tackle the concept of coming out until, “Game Night.” These are also the individuals most likely to be interested in and capable of effecting change in how members of the LGBTQ community are treated because they are both aware of the issue and already inclined to respond positively and get others to respond positively.

The show does not simply cater to its intended audience. *Brooklyn 99* is available on Hulu, Amazon Prime, and in some countries, on Netflix. It is broadcast on NBC. The text is such that it can be paused, consumed easily with friends, watched at a later date, re-watched, and is primarily designed for entertainment. In other words, it is basically open to the public with a very low barrier to accessibility, making it available to the audience the rhetors likely had in mind, but also making it available to others. Its availability and use of comedy make it possible to communicate the social-justice based exigence of “Game Night” in a way that makes an audience out of individuals who might not otherwise be interested in changing the problem of how members of the LGBTQ are treated.

Constraints include “persons, objects, events, and relations that are part of the situation and are capable of constraining the decisions and actions that could modify the exigence” (Grant-Davie, 266). The rhetors were constrained by the 23-minute episode length. Not only is the

timeline of presentation limiting, but the timeframe for writing and shooting is also limited on the creation of any TV show or movie. Further, the cast and crew had to be aware that unanticipated audiences will be able to access this piece for the foreseeable future, meaning there might have been a certain pressure to be particularly mindful of future interpretations. There are story telling constraints in that they writers and directors could not venture outside the set scope of the established show. There are also censorship laws that impact what people can say on TV. There are societal constraints in terms of what an audience will accept. The show could not tell certain jokes without risking losing their audience or receiving backlash. However, due to the abundance of constraints, *Brooklyn 99* delivered a highly-focused, comedy-based text that balanced accessibility with a firm position on a pressing social justice issue.

*Brooklyn 99* relies on comedy to entertain. However, every once in a while, the show produces an episode like “Game Night,” where the rhetors utilize themselves as part of the text and the pressures of constraints to engage with a social problem or tension. In the case of season 5, episode 10, the rhetors as actors together with the constraints overcome the exigence by giving audience members examples of how people should behave when encountering LGBTQ identities, and illustrating the damage done by negative responses.

Works Cited

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