

Faculty of Arts
Charles University
Department of Anglophone Literatures and Cultures

-Ms. Oksana Kozachukhnenko
-“The Force of Rhetoric: James Baldwin and the Era of Digital Media”
-MA Thesis
-Supervisor’s Report

Brief summary of subject: The thesis takes an interdisciplinary approach to the rhetorical operation in James Baldwin’s writings, and also projects this topic within the current epoch of digital culture and media. Thinkers such as J.F. Lyotard, J. Baudrillard, M. Foucault and F. Jameson, and any number of Baldwin critics, are also taken into account in the thesis.

Methodology and structure: The thesis contains an Introduction, four principal chapters, a Conclusion, a Bibliography, and an Abstract/Abstrakt in English and Czech respectively.

To be sure, as the candidate puts it in a Chapter 2 on “Methodology applied”, “This thesis statement has only support in the context of profound use of critical theory, as it is an integral part of the core of the critical framework used to contextualize the influence of rhetoric in the contemporary. The main thrust of my thesis is to reflect on the textual and intertextual connections among the chosen rhetorical devices and themes that have been appealing to the audience in the lat[t]er half of the twentieth century in contrast to the present moment, revealing in this comparative process the differences and changes that have taken place, and more importantly, which vectors of change will continue playing a key role in the formation of rhetoric in the future, perhaps shaping its value as an autonomous innovative interdisciplinary field more explicitly seen for its contribution to social sciences” (20).

Achievements: As a sample of the candidate’s high-quality discourse and aims we read at one point: “This Literature Review chapter is devoted to existing literature and research that covers three major topics: The classical approach to rhetoric, the significance of recent and contemporary cultural theory, and the analysis of the scope of James Baldwin’s work in the 1960s. It aims to provide an overview of both the Classical and original definitions of rhetoric, its growth into a discipline, and fast top-down integration into various levels of the society formations, critical to livelihood, communication, and negotiations. It examines how the shape of public discourse in its key features, realized through the legitimization of rhetoric, purposefully intersects with the construction of reality” (11). Non-verbal aspects of rhetoric too are discussed. A certain capacity for conceptual and speculative thinking are also performed at a high level in engaging Baldwin’s work.

Shortcomings: The Bibliography is not as extensive as it might be. Also some contemporary theory that might have been included such as that of Bernard Stiegler’s work on technology is not to be found in the thesis. In addition, there are five entries in the Bibliography that are not placed in correct alphabetical order, and there are some inconsistencies/omissions in

this section too that could be straightened out: e.g. with regard to spacing or to reference to 2

cities and states, and Foucault's *The Archaeology of Knowledge* should for example be fully italicized as *The Archaeology of Knowledge*.

Formal features (e.g., language & style, referencing, bibliography, formatting, abstracts): For the quality of the Bibliography, see the above-noted under "Shortcomings". The language is adequate, though the prose style could be better by producing shorter sentences from time to time for better precision and ease of legibility; also, better proofing would be of help on occasion. For example we read "pecial" on p. 24 which should be "special". On p. 54 "He gained audience's attention" is better as "He gained the audience's attention"; on p. 59 "one can not" is better as "one cannot". The other formal aspects are good.

Questions: First of all, what would be some of the key takeaways of the thesis in regard to the following statements from the Methodology section? "The purpose of this research is to argue that a combined intellectual, pragmatic, and critical approach to operating rhetoric can 'deweaponize' it to a versatile composition tool of effective representation and empowerment, conscious decision-making, and problem-solving, amplified by the potential of mass media technology and data literacy. There are minor supporting theses that I would like to argue alongside the main one. This thesis's major value is aimed to enrich the seemingly insufficient supply of critical theory in regard to the contemporary pressing issues in relation to the spheres of cutting-edge technology. The minor purpose is to contribute to the task of restructuring a critical social theory for the present which explores more positive opportunities for the freedom of speech and expression to be exercised in the contemporary digital society where culture and economy are arguably most prominently shaped by the technology of mass communications" (20).

Second area, as the candidate puts the matter at one point: "Baldwin's refusal to subscribe to any one single political ideology, that is, in other words, his refusal of labels and categorizations may be perceived as an attempt to create an objective position that would enable a more free conversation on the level of concepts instead of more subjective opinions. Unfortunately, his ambivalent position as an outsider, residing between and outside different political stances also seems to be one of the main reasons for the decline of his popularity and perceived significance in the later stages of his career" (23). In this light, and second question, what are some strategies that Baldwin, to your mind, might have mobilized and enacted?

Third question, in the context in which you frame rhetorical studies research in your thesis, what do you see as the future trends of this field with regard to a figure such as Baldwin?

Conclusion: I recommend the thesis for defense and propose a preliminary grade of 1.

Seattle, 19 viii 24
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