

Bc. Oksana Kozachukhnenko
The Force of Rhetoric: From James Baldwin to the Era of Digital Media
MA Thesis
Opponent's Report

As is suggested by the title of the thesis, its main preoccupation is rhetoric; specifically, Oksana Kozachukhnenko aims “to reflect on the textual and intertextual connections among the chosen rhetorical devices and themes that have been appealing to audiences in the latter half of the twentieth century in contrast to the present moment” (9). The writer whose rhetorical skills are utilized for illustration, as the title clarifies as well, is James Baldwin.

Whereas the first chapter begins as a sketch of the history of rhetoric since the times of Ancient Greece, which is followed with a brief exploration of the function of rhetoric in contemporary criticism and a brief introduction to Baldwin, the second chapter aims to sketch the methodology of the thesis. The first chapter is fine; the second, however, has two pages and it is for the most part a compilation (often verbatim) of statements that appear at other places (for example in chapter one and the abstract). Verbatim repetition is in fact a problem even in this short chapter, see for example the phrase “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” on page 20, which appears on page 21 with only minor alterations.

The third chapter, titled “Multiple applications of rhetoric as seen in the life work of James Baldwin,” mentions a selection of Baldwin’s essays, with the intention to highlight his rhetorical and literary skills. These include contrast, juxtaposition, irony, satire and direct personal address. Subsequently, the thesis turns to Baldwin’s fiction, notably the novel *Giovanni’s Room*, where further rhetorical aspects are identified: a stream-of-consciousness technique, parallelism and inversion, among others. In its review of the functions of rhetoric, the fourth chapter then returns to the beginning of the thesis, with occasional mentions of Baldwin; the latter half considers “rhetoric’s role in contemporary society structure and institutions, its relationship to power and knowledge, and its transformations in the postmodern digital era” (44), again with several somewhat disorienting remarks about Baldwin.

Interesting as the topic is, the thesis is rather uneven and unsystematic in its delivery of the main argument. The choice of Baldwin as a writer on whose oeuvre to illustrate the power of rhetoric and its presence in the digital age is not explained; moreover, there is little discussion of the distinction between (his) fiction and non-fiction. The underlying assumption appears to be that the main role of literary fiction is to persuade. In Kozachukhnenko’s view, does (Baldwin’s) fiction have other functions? The second question that the defense could discuss is the overall positive role that the thesis assigns to rhetoric. We read: “Dismissing the discipline of rhetoric can be equated to giving away the power to influence, operate knowledge, and control the valuable narratives and processes that settle the present” (10). Finally, right at the outset, Kozachukhnenko argues that “it is expected to be concluded that rhetoric amplified by the technology of media, regardless of the private or public nature of its content, can better serve rather than poorly govern” (10). Is this the conclusion that she reaches by the end? And what about negative roles of rhetoric, as they are explored for example by Audre Lorde’s poem “Power” with its well-known first line: “The difference between poetry and rhetoric / is being ready to kill / yourself / instead of your children.”

Proposed grade: dobře.



Pavla Veselá, PhD.
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