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CMST 416: Rhetorical Criticism

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Rhetorical Criticism of *Trevor*

Released in 1994, the short film, *Trevor*, shares the story of a 13-year-old boy as he navigates the complexities of sexual orientation in America. Written by James Lecesne, the short film incorporates his personal experiences with growing up as a queer individual in the LGBTQ+ community and the socio-political concerns of rising suicide rates of LGBTQ+ youth.

Throughout the film, Trevor must traverse the intricacies of sexual orientation in 1981, while facing a lack of support from his parents, and harsh criticism from his friends and peers.

Trevor, as a rhetorical act, holds great significance in the United States with the advancement of LGBTQ+ rights and acceptance in society today. The film won the Academy Award for best short film in 1995 and with its creation launched the Trevor Project, a well-known LGBTQ+ initiative focused on suicide prevention and support for LGBTQ+ youths across the country. In the Trevor Project's recent 2021 study of LGBTQ+ youth mental health the organization found that "42% of LGBTQ+ youth seriously considered attempting suicide in the past year, including more than half of transgender and nonbinary youth" (The Trevor Project, 2021, pg.1). The significance of, *Trevor*, and its attempt to address LGBTQ+ support continues to impact the lives of LGBTQ+ youths through the efforts of The Trevor Project over the last two decades.

The following analysis investigates, how does the short film, *Trevor*, connect LGBTQ+ rights to a larger social movement for equality? First, I analyze the historical context and respective constraints of the rhetor, his audience, and the subject employed through this rhetorical act. Subsequently, I analyze the persuasive aspects of the short films discourse using descriptive analysis. Finally, after evaluating the effectiveness of the rhetorical act, I discuss the implications and possible alternative approaches to the short film's subject matter.

Historical Context

Rhetor

When analyzing, *Trevor*, a significant portion of its context as a rhetorical act stems from the writer, James Lecesne, and the incorporation of his own personal experiences and narrative in the short film. James Lecesne grew up navigating the complexities of identifying as queer and has encompassed these personal experiences into his writing, acting, and producing (Lecesne). In an interview with the New York Times (McElroy, 2015), Lecesne stated, “My social consciousness was forced to awaken, because I understood what was important in life as I saw people die around me” (para. 18). His prior ethos as a queer man and his history with LGBTQ+ rights and contexts surrounding LGBTQ+ suicide rates furthers his credibility for the film and the incorporation of his personal experiences.

As the rhetor he establishes *ethos* through this first-hand experience and his open approach to sharing how alone he felt throughout his childhood. This is reflected during the opening statements of the film, Trevor addresses the audience and describes the lack of care his parents show for his existence as a young queer boy (Rajski, 1994). Through identification with the LGBTQ+ community, Lecesne demonstrates his credibility in accurately portraying the experiences of being queer and attempts to share that identification with the audience. Implementing identification “requires the viewer/reader to feel as if they have *become* the character- suggesting a more immersive and less interactive type of experience” (Cohen, 2020, p.78). Embracing his queerness and projecting confidence through projects like, *Trevor*, especially during such a contentious time for the LGBTQ+ community, reinforces his trustworthiness as the rhetor as he attempts to exhibit identification with the audience.

Through Lecesne's creation of The Trevor Project, he created the expectation that LGBTQ+ lives should be important, and that representation can have a lasting impact due to "how powerful some stories can be, and how much good they do under the right circumstances" (Templeton, 2021, para. 13). His actions following the creation of the film acted as a bond between the rhetor and the LGBTQ+ community. However, his social power as a queer man was limited due to the contentious social environment in the 1990s and negative sentiment towards queerness. The biggest constraint for Lecesne, as the rhetor, was the misinterpretations of queerness in the 1990s and his association with the LGBTQ+ community.

Audience

The most significant constraint to *Trevor* as a rhetorical act is Lecesne's fight to reach members of the audience who do not identify with the LGBTQ+ community due to misinterpretations and misconceptions about the community during the 1990s. During this time, "the AIDS epidemic was peaking, and the country became deeply divided politically over gay rights" creating a variety of misinterpretations and making it difficult for those to understand the true narrative of queerness (Cornish, 2021, para. 1). Lecesne attempts to reach this audience through Trevor's personal narrative and referral to the audience as "Dear Diary", and his humorous yet relatable infatuation with Diana Ross throughout the film (Rajski, 1994). This is an example of shared narrative, which applies shared identity development and shared narrative experience in a safe space to encompass a variety of audience members (Bates, 2020). Utilizing Trevor's monologue to the audience, Lecesne creates a shared human experience for those who may not fully understand the true narrative of the LGBTQ+ community. However, the misconceptions about the LGBTQ+ community and queerness were powerful during the 1990s, constraining how Lecesne was able to reach both of his desired audiences to show that

supporting LGBTQ+ youth is important. Despite controversy surrounding the support of LGBTQ+ youths in the short film, *Trevor*, it continues to establish a supportive audience for the community through the on-going efforts of The Trevor Project.

Subject

While the rhetor and the audience provide important context for the short film, the most intriguing contextual elements stem from Lecesne's purpose of instilling empathy in his audience for members of the LGBTQ+ community, more specifically its youth. The historical and cultural situation surrounding LGBTQ+ youth was controversial during the 1990s creating a high cost for the audience. According to the Chicago Tribune (Jones 2017), "...it still wasn't common to talk about budding sexuality of kids who were just 12 or 13 years old. It especially was not common for older gay men to bring up the topic in a public arena; it was widely perceived as a dangerous idea" (para. 8). This is reflected in the film when Trevor's classmates begin to isolate Trevor because of his queerness, leading to his attempted suicide at the end of the film (Rajski, 1994). The social pressures during the 1990s regarding queerness posed consequences for the audience and their understanding of stories like Trevor's. The perceived social costs of accepting the narrative that Lecesne employs in his short film is a major constraint on the purpose, as the audience may be conflicted by fears of rejection or ridicule from societal views about the LGBTQ+ community and its socio-economic history.

The circumstances in the 1990s and the cultural history of queerness created a taboo surrounding public discussion of the LGBTQ+ community. As explained by The Review of Communication (Jones, 2021), "Although "queer" has its roots in sexual minoritarian politics, queer theorists have used it to challenge normativity in a wide variety of social hierarchies while never becoming comfortable with itself as a sensibility" (pg. 83). Lecesne attempts to

breakthrough this taboo by sharing Trevor's personal narrative, specifically with his emotional Diary entry after being alienated by his best friend Pinky for being queer (Rajski, 1994). This tactic is known as Narrative Theory, which involves "identification with characters and emotional response to the narrative" to reveal and persuade the audience to consider "new information about people they may not encounter in their everyday lives" (Gillig, 2016, pg.3831). The taboo surrounding the historical context of LGBTQ+ youths creates resistance for the subject of the rhetorical act making it hard for the audience to comply with having empathy for the community. Through narrative, Lecesne attempts to make empathizing with the LGBTQ+ community more palatable and relatable. However, he also uses it as an opportunity to challenge the normativity that Trevor is faced with and how significant this is when considering the livelihood of LGBTQ+ youths.

Rhetorical Descriptive Analysis

Analyzing the historical context of, *Trevor*, is necessary to understanding its creation, and the constraints placed on the rhetor, audience, and subject. In addition, the components of descriptive analysis highlight the strategies used by Lecense to engage his effect and persuasive discourse throughout the film.

Audience

The immediate audience in, *Trevor*, is the LGBTQ+ community. The use of Trevor's inner monologue creates a shared experience with those in the LGBTQ+ community who have faced similar isolation from their family, friends, and authority figures. The main theme of the film, suicide prevention among LGBTQ+ youths, creates this immediate audience as this topic has impacted the community greatly. Towards the beginning of the film, Trevor explains his relationship with his parents, "I mean, unless I'm on the eleven-o'clock news, I really don't think

they'd care" (Rajski, 1994). Trevor speaks directly to the audience, in effect, Lecesne can address the LGBTQ+ community directly about this common sentiment to connect to shared experiences that other members of the LGBTQ+ community may have faced with their own unsupportive parents and/or family members.

The target audience of the film are individuals who do not identify as LGBTQ+, and more specifically those who may be the surrounding support system of these individuals. This can be seen through the opening line of the film, "Dear diary, I'm now like totally convinced that Mom and Dad could care less if I live or die" (Rajski, 1994). This first quote from Trevor gives us insight into his relationship with his parents and reveals his inner monologue, allowing the audience an inside look at the difficulties he is facing. The referral to the audience as "Dear diary" creates an appealing role for audience members as we share an interpersonal connection with the rhetor. This address, specifically to those who may not understand his perspective, empowers the audience to become agents of change as they see all aspects and complexities of Trevor's experiences.

Personae

Lecesne assumes the role of the victim and confidante through Trevor's experiences. After being exposed by his peers at school Trevor creates another diary entry, "Everybody at school's saying that I'm gay. It must be showing. But I look at myself and I don't see anything that's different" (Rajski, 1994). This prominent quote establishes Trevor's role as the victim, a boy just trying to be a boy while facing the scrutiny of his peers, parents, and authority figures. However, it also establishes that Trevor feels just like everyone else, in essence a confidante to those who may be in a similar situation and do not feel different because of their sexual orientation. Lecesne highlights these experiences from Trevor and creates a sense of tragedy as

his story evolves, while also constructing a connection through the secrets he shares directly with the audience.

Structure

The structure and organization of the film is chronological, presenting a unique narrative and climactic progression to illustrate Trevor's perspective and emotions throughout his story. In the beginning of the film Trevor explains his motivations and passions, "I've definitely decided to be Diana Ross for Halloween". However, the progression of the story notes criticisms Trevor receives. After being told he walks like a girl and that his peers have begun talking behind his back, Trevor states, "I've definitely decided not to be Diana Ross for Halloween" (Rajski, 1994). These quotations are structured chronologically showing how new ideas about Trevor and his sexual orientation have a major impact on his perspective and emotions. Lecesne's development of the narrative and the inclusion of Trevor's own internal summaries creates a relationship with the audience and the rhetor, reinforcing the idea that Trevor's experiences are complex and important for the audience to consider.

Tone

The film eloquently highlights the tone of the rhetor as conversational yet serious as Trevor speaks as a subordinate seeking support and guidance. The tone of the film is explained in this quote, "Dear diary, sometimes I imagine that I will lead an extremely glamorous life in the tropics... Sometimes I imagine that I will die an early death, and everyone will be sorry" (Rajski, 1994). Here, the rhetor is speaking as a human being with hopes and dreams, but one that is faced with the complexities of navigating the socio-political backlash of identifying as "different" or in this case as LGBTQ+. This attitude towards the audience, through its

conversational yet serious address, accentuates Trevor's need for help and support as a singled-out subordinate in his own narrative.

Trevor, also embraces a humorous tone to employ its rhetoric, providing comedic relief during the heartbreaking moments in the film. This can be seen through the previously cited textual evidence from the film regarding Trevor's wishes to be Diana Ross for Halloween. Another impactful moment that explains this humorous tone is during Trevor's suicide note to his parents where he writes, "Please give all my Diana Ross records and tapes to Christina Manistera, who happens to love Diana Ross as much as I do. And please, if it's possible, play Endless Love at my funeral" (Rajski, 1994). Lecesne utilizes this tone in the film to hold the attention of the audience during the painful and emotional moments in Trevor's narrative. This humorous tone produces a palatable result for the audience as they try to relate to and understand what Trevor is struggling with.

Evidence

For the duration of the film, Lecesne uses Trevor's anecdote as evidence to illustrate the trials and tribulations of growing up and being isolated due to your sexual orientation. Trevor attempts to contact his "best" friend, Pinky, to explain what he is going through. At lunch Trevor reveals his response, "It said that I was a fairy, a weak person, and maybe didn't even deserve to live" (Rajski, 1994). This vivid anecdotal evidence shows the audience how Trevor is treated by his friends for being "different" and how isolating this evidence is as it impacts LGBTQ+ youth. This evidence encourages the audience to relate to the rhetors narrative, emphasizing the tragedy and emotional appeal of Trevor's experiences.

Lecesne also uses anecdotal evidence to demonstrate Trevor's difficulties with his parents. After an unsuccessful attempt at running away, and finding out that his parents read his

diary, Trevor remarks, “To whom this may concern, I’m now like a prisoner in my own life...I am now a person with no future, a past too horrible to think about” (Rajski, 1994). This anecdotal evidence from Trevor’s experiences with family and friends illustrates to the audience that Trevor is trapped in the world of “others” who do not want his perspective about queerness or support his aspirations. The rhetor’s progression of the story, through Trevor’s narrative, keeps the audience entangled with his isolation as he faces criticism from the most important figures around him.

Strategies

Lecesne uses specific anecdotal evidence and dialogue to adapt to his target audience, and appeal to their cultural values regarding sexual orientation. Towards the middle of the film, Trevor is set up with Father Joe to speak about his sexual orientation. During the uncomfortable encounter, Father Joe proposes, “Trevor, have you ever had desire, and I’m talking about sexual desires, for another boy? ... Did you ever, for example, want to touch another boy, like, And I’m not trying to suggest anything here, but like, Pinky Farraday?” (Rajski, 1994). Lecesne’s use of Father Joe’s dialogue presents an adaption to the narrative animating how someone in authority and a religious position may respond to the question of sexual orientation among youth. This strategy is used to show how, despite wanting to support Trevor through his struggles, Father Joe perpetuates Trevor’s isolation through the perspective that his sexual orientation is “wrong”. This anecdotal evidence with Father Joe is the only influential character dialogue outside of Trevor’s inner monologue, strategically addressing the religious agitations surrounding Trevor’s experiences as a young gay boy.

Another strategy utilized by Lecesne to target his audience is identification. Throughout the film, Lecesne refers to the audience as, “Dear Diary”. This is expressed whenever Trevor is

addressing the audience regarding his thoughts and emotions, for example, “Dear Diary, Today I practiced for my funeral. It has been that kind of a day” (Rajski, 1994). Lecesne utilizes the strategy of identification to create a shared feeling of attitudes and values between the audience and Trevor. This specific use of language reflects the relationship between the rhetor and the audience as he attempts to make them interested in Trevor’s narrative and the emotional moments he shares.

Purpose

Lecesne’s central idea as the rhetor is to emphasize the importance of supporting LGBTQ+ youth, and in effect his purpose seeks to gain empathy from the audience while they contemplate Trevor’s narrative. The climax of the film shows Trevor’s attempted suicide in response to the criticism he has faced from family, friends, and authority figures. After waking up in the hospital he meets Jack, a caregiver, who offers him support and tickets to a Diana Ross concert. In the last line of the film Trevor asserts, “Okay, so I don’t know if it’s the tickets, or if it’s Jack, but I’ve definitely decided to live, through tomorrow” (Rajski, 1994). This quote from Trevor highlights the purpose of this discourse in emphasizing that what Trevor really needed was someone to understand his perspective and motivations as a 13-year-old boy. Lecesne desires for the audience to empathize with Trevor’s narrative to understand what support looks like for LGBTQ+ youth, and why this type of support can be pivotal when navigating the complexities and surrounding discourse of sexual orientation.

Evaluation and Conclusion

When analyzing the rhetorical act, *Trevor*, it is essential to consider both the historical context, as well as the components of descriptive analysis to truly understand the persuasive rhetorical elements of the film. These aspects of the rhetoric are profound; however, it is

important to consider, how the short film, *Trevor*, connects LGBTQ+ rights to a larger social movement for equality to evaluate its effectiveness as a rhetorical act.

First, through evaluating the artistic standard of the film, *Trevor*, creatively responds to potential constraints while encouraging participation and identification through its original and powerful story. In Trevor's suicide note he addresses his parents, "Dear Mom and Dad, I don't want you to think that I haven't given this a lot of thought, but I have. I tried to cure myself, but nothing worked. Don't think it's your fault, it just happens" (Rajski, 1994). Lecesne uses soliloquy and an emotional tone as Trevor reflects on his thoughts with himself and the target audience. Given the rhetorical context surrounding queerness in the 1990s, Lecesne elegantly uses Trevor's narrative language to create a deeply moving story that some audiences may not have perceived in the 1990s. This artistic approach, effectively poetic and timeless, invites the audience to participate in the narrative of the LGBTQ+ community and maintains this attention as Trevor's story evolves.

Second, and more importantly, through utilizing the effect standard, one can conclude that, *Trevor*, is a pragmatic and effective rhetorical act. The short film, in effect, led to the creation of The Trevor Project, the world's largest suicide prevention initiative and hotline for LGBTQ+ youth. The CEO of The Trevor Project, Amit Paley, states, "Today, we remain determined in our pursuit to live in a world where every LGBTQ young person can see a bright future for themselves and feel accepted for who they are" (Paley, 2021, para. 3). As seen by the success of The Trevor Project, the film encouraged the response needed to support LGBTQ+ youths and further the progress of LGBTQ+ rights to a larger social movement for equality. As The Trevor Project preserves the ethical purpose of the film, the rhetoric continues to interact

with its audience as positive sentiments towards queerness and the LGBTQ+ community become more socially accepted in the United States.

Implications

Lecesne's purpose of encouraging support for the LGBTQ+ community has had long-term implications, sustained by the extended efforts of The Trevor Project. Public discourse surrounding the LGBTQ+ community and queerness have shifted since the 1990s.

Misinterpretation and misconceptions about LGBTQ+ narratives continue to be challenged as organizations like The Trevor Project "inform the evolution" of LGBTQ+ identities (Paley, 2021, para. 4). In referring to the film, after Trevor is criticized by his family, friends, and authority figures for identifying as gay, he states, "No one understands" (Rajski, 1994). This rhetorical act has encouraged social change in the United States, to be more supportive of LGBTQ+ youths, so that teenagers like Trevor can feel understood, rather than criticized for their sexual orientation.

The theoretical implications of the short film, *Trevor*, also hold significance to the rhetorical act. Lecesne's utilization of Narrative theory, to create "identification with characters and emotional response to the narrative" in Trevor's story, exposed audiences in the 1990s to consider "new information about people they may not encounter in their everyday lives" which has proven to be an effective rhetorical strategy in spreading specific discourse about the LGBTQ+ community (Gillig, 2016, pg. 3831). Despite the constraints that Lecesne faced, he was able to strategize and effectively persuade an audience to support the LGBTQ+ community using this rhetoric.

Alternatives

Due to the complexities in negotiating narratives in the LGBTQ+ community, Lecesne could have implemented more evidence throughout the film to challenge long-term misconceptions about queerness and the LGBTQ+ community. For example, it would have been interesting to see more development between Trevor, and his hospital caregiver, Jack. This relationship could have developed more to give an in-depth example of the kind of support needed to foster growth for LGBTQ+ youths and the social acceptance of the LGBTQ+ community at large. Lecesne could have done a better job at sharing his personal experiences past childhood to provide the audience with a larger understanding of the criticisms that the LGBTQ+ community still faces today.

In conclusion, through the process of rhetorical analysis, viewers can gain a deeper understanding of the purpose and effectiveness of the short film, *Trevor*. Contextual elements like, rhetor, audience, and purpose, allow Lecesne to address his audience in a unique and original manner, adapting to constraints and obstacles presented in the 1990s. These adaptations, highlighted by descriptive analysis, include persuasive strategies Lecesne used to employ his rhetoric effectively given the historical context. Furthermore, connecting these elements of the rhetorical act clarify the long-term implications of the short film, and potential alternatives that could have been used. Overall, this rhetorical act should be considered a success given the ongoing efforts of The Trevor Project and the evolving social acceptance for LGBTQ+ identities. The strategies employed through this rhetorical act have long-term implications for the social acceptance of the LGBTQ+ community as well as future narrative rhetorical acts regarding the community and how LGBTQ+ youths communicate their identity. Lecesne invited the audience to engage with Trevor's narrative, inspired by his personal experiences, to save the lives of

LGBTQ+ youth across the United States by encouraging them to consider the importance of being supportive friends, mentors, and parents regardless of sexual orientation.

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