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Review: The Mystic Chords of Memory

Review of *The Great American Scaffold: Intertextuality and Identity in American Presidential Discourse*. Frank Austermühl, University of Auckland. John Benjamins Publishing Company, Amsterdam/Philadelphia – 2014.

It is hard to imagine an inaugural address by an American president that makes no mention of the Founding Fathers, the Constitution, or some other item of historic significance in American history. These references echo back to people and moments in time that still hold relevance for the present audience. Yet the words themselves used by presidents have also become important links to a common collective understanding of national identity for an American audience. President Abraham Lincoln's description of the United States as "the last, best hope of Earth," for instance, has in different forms been referenced by presidents ranging from John F. Kennedy to Ronald Reagan and onwards. On each occasion, the phrase gained significance in its parallel between the time of President Lincoln and the present.

This example is drawn from the 2014 book *The Great American Scaffold*. The author of the book, presidential scholar Frank Austermühl, has taken it upon himself to conduct a broad study of this presidential use of references with a sample of more than 220 presidential speeches spanning a period from 1790 and 2008. With this large corpus of presidential discourse, Austermühl aims to clarify the use of references in presidential speeches in a way that explains their significance for the office of the presidency. He does so by applying intertextual theory drawn from a well of scholars such as Julia Kristeva and Gérard Genette to establish a typology of the layers of presidential intertextuality found in the speeches.

Scaffolding as an Overall Term

Both the identity of the presidency and of the American people is often described in presidential speeches through references and allusions to historic role models and moments. Austermühl's research project focuses on how the use of these intertextual references is intended to establish a model for national identity. He presents a number of hypotheses, including a typology of five levels of presidential intertextuality. Essentially, Austermühl argues that the use of intertextuality serves a pragmatic function for the presidential speaker in establishing a national identity. This function has also led to a uniform identity of the modern presidency as portrayed by the speakers.

The term that Austermühl uses to tie the different aspects of his project together is that of a *scaffold*. This conjures up an image of presidential speeches as one grand structure in a perpetual process of construction, both aided and restricted by the many speeches that have gone before, which bolster the words of the current speaker in office. This resembles the approach of Kathleen Hall Jamieson and Karlyn Kohrs Campbell in their book *Deeds Done in Words* (1990) on presidential speech genres, where they speak of genres appearing out of necessity. The traits of these genres both help and challenge the current speaker at the bully pulpit. The image of the scaffold is also an example of how Austermühl's study is presented in a succinct manner that cuts to the point. The presentation of theory and its application to the corpus of speeches is lucid throughout the book.

The Five Layers of Intertextuality

In the results of Austermühl's findings, the typology of intertextual references is the most interesting point to reference here, in particular the five levels of intertextuality. Austermühl presents the five levels in a circular diagram, going from an outer core to a centre. Level Five, the outer core, is the discursive intertextuality, which focuses on specific structures in the speeches such as their total length, sentences, and the use of specific words such as 'I', 'we', and 'people' that have developed over time. Level Four is the generic intertextuality, which establishes specific formal procedures and functions of the speeches that have created genres over time. Level Three is described as thematic intertextuality, where major thematic clusters are identified, such as a 'Mission theme' that can be found in all of the speeches. Level Two is

described as hyper intertextuality, representing rhetorical templates that are established across speeches. 'Us vs. them', for instance, is a hypertext often drawn upon in crisis discourse, such as President George W. Bush's 'Axis of Evil' reference during his presidency. The central level and core of presidential intertextuality is, according to this study, material intertextuality, which is constituted by direct and 'visible' references or allusions to previous 'sacred texts' such as the Declaration of Independence, the Constitution, John Winthrop's Sermon, or references to other presidential speeches, anecdotes about presidents, or direct references to their words, such as the aforementioned Abraham Lincoln quote of "the last, best hope of Earth."

The levels of intertextuality also function as an organising principle for the book itself, with individual chapters dealing with the different levels. Chapter 1 places the study within the theoretical fields of intertextuality and presidential discourse. Chapter 2 focuses on examples of generic intertextuality, with an emphasis on the pragmatic use of words. Chapter 3 deals with thematic intertextuality that leads to recurring content in the speeches. Chapter 4 deals with hypertextuality, which Austerlühl describes as broader themes across speeches, for instance, the theme of 'us vs. them'. Chapter 5 focuses on allusions, that is, text-to-text references such as quotations and paraphrases. Finally, Chapter 6 summarises the research findings and discusses the purpose of intertextuality in presidential discourse.

According to Austerlühl, these different levels of presidential intertextuality function, first, to establish and affirm a national identity; second, to promote a strong and unilateral executive leadership; and third, to strengthen the individual president. Presidential intertextuality does this through the historical scaffolding, which supports new levels of rhetoric by the stabilising presence of the old – leading to the idea of 'The Great American Scaffold'.

The Value of the Scaffold Theory

How can we use the typology of intertextuality in the study of presidential discourse? For one thing, the study in and of itself is a well-documented presentation of the frequent historic references by American presidents. Austerlühl presents a credible explanation as to why the references have such a perpetual presence in the speeches and their function in presidential rhetoric.

While the typology of intertextual references can be seen as valuable when discussing how and why presidents use historic references, Austermühl focuses primarily on the stability that these references establish. With this focus, he does not address the more problematic aspect of these historic references, for instance, the manner in which this has long placed the identity of the presidents themselves up for grabs. President Abraham Lincoln as a person has been subject to many interpretations, which have changed over time. Was he the president who held the Union together? Or was he the liberator of slaves in the United States? The meaning of presidential words can be bended even further than the identity of the man who spoke them. President Ronald Reagan's use of President Franklin D. Roosevelt's rhetoric in Reagan's descriptions of the inherent problems with government comes to mind. These appropriations are also common in contemporary politics, with presidential candidate Mitt Romney seeking to embody the spirit of President Ronald Reagan and President Barack Obama focusing partially on Theodore Roosevelt's political agenda in the 2012 presidential campaign. Austermühl does deal with what he describes as a subversive strand in presidential discourse, but this focuses more on a critical discussion of race in the United States, which President Bill Clinton presented in his inaugurals, rather than on the volatility of the meaning of the references.

The point to make here in connection with Austermühl's study is that identities of the presidency, the individual men in office, and the words they uttered are perhaps not as set as the scaffold image suggests. They are more fluid, and the meaning of references can change over time in the same way as can the identity of individual presidents and the presidency itself.

This, however, is less of an objection than it is a suggestion for further investigation of the intertextual approach that Austermühl presents in this well-written and comprehensibly organised description of a significant aspect of presidential rhetoric. Anyone interested in picking up on the chords that American presidents strike when speaking of the United States' past will find it worthwhile to study the contents of *The Great American Scaffold*.

References:

Campbell, Karlyn Kohrs & Jamieson, Kathleen Hall. 1990. *Deeds done in Words. Presidential Rhetoric and the Genres of Governance*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press