A Burkian Pentadic Analysis of MSU Riot Narratives

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Abstract

In the fall of 2003 a riot occurred very near the Minnesota State University,

Mankato campus and in its aftermath many different narratives emerged describing the

events. Using Kenneth Burke's pentad, this project examines those narratives in order to

discover how different groups construct their accounts and which narrative elements

different groups emphasize. By understanding how the narrative accounts given by these

agents are influenced by their situation, the research allows us to see how riots emerge

out of tensions within the conflicting productive contexts.

Introduction

Media narratives are able to control an event's description and for this reason we must understand how media is able to shape descriptions of specific events through its narratives. I will explain how the media described the MSU riots and how MSU students were allowed to corrupt the description of the riots. Using Kenneth Burke's Pentad I will show how MSU students involved were able to absolve themselves from blame.

The Pentad distinguishes communication as five distinct parts and develops relationships between the parts. These five parts are: act, what was the action; agent, who was involved in the action; agency, how did the agents commit the act; purpose, why did the agents act; scene, where did the act happen. The part of the Pentad a person chooses to include or neglect provides the audience with a subjective description of a situation. The relationship constructed between parts of the Pentad in the narrative provides the basis for understanding what is occurring in the narrative. For example, a scene/act relationship would place the act as a result of the scene in which the act occurs because of the scene the action takes place in. I will use these Pentadic relationships to explain how students were able to shift the blame away from themselves in eight different narratives I have placed in three categories. The categories include narratives intended for the general public, for MSU students as well as greater Mankato and exclusively for MSU students. The Pentadic relationships present in the narratives will explain a phenomenon that occurs in the MSU riot narratives. Since MSU students are able to control the riot descriptions given by media sources in Mankato they are able to effectively shift the blame for the riots entirely off themselves. I will begin with the narratives intended for the general public and progress to those intended exclusively for students.

National Articles

The first four articles are intended primarily for the general population outside of greater Mankato. Two of the narratives come from the Minneapolis and St. Paul, the *Minneapolis Star Tribune* and *St. Paul Pioneer Press* and two are from California, the *L.A. Times* and *The San Diego Union Tribune*. Both the *L.A. Times* and *The San Diego Union Tribune* provide an agent/act relationship that blames the act which occurred, the riot, solely on the agent. In both papers the article regarding the riot was published in the sports section of the paper. By publishing the article in the sports section the paper, a link is established between the homecoming loss and the riot, thereby shifting blame from the agents to the scene. Both papers inherently blamed the homecoming loss as the cause of the riot. This motive however was never mentioned in the *MSU Reporter* or *Mankato Free Press* as a possible cause. The *St. Paul Pioneer Press* and *Minneapolis Star Tribune* both provide for a scene/agent relationship which makes the agents a product of the scene. Both papers are far enough away to keep the student narratives from corrupting the narratives with subjective accounts, but the distance also means the papers must provide a great deal of emphasis on the scene to provide their audience with a vivid picture of the events. This emphasis on the scene indirectly absolves blame from the students. The students are not directly blaming the scene as the cause but are allowed to become products of the scene because of the distance both papers are from the events. Both articles establish the scene of the riots as context for the agents who, through their actions and purpose, created the scene. A scene/agent relationship gives the most amount of information to an uninformed audience making it useful to newspapers distanced from the action. These narratives do not provide a great deal of information to people because

of the distance from the riots which they are constructed, but are less likely to be influenced by subjective accounts.

Mankato Articles

"Mayhem erupts on hilltop" by Amanda Dyslin in the October 6, 2003 *Mankato Free Press* provides a scene/action relationship which places the action as a result of the scene. The students are allowed to control the narrative and make themselves the victims of the scene. Dyslin chose to focus on two MSU student interviews as well as a section devoted entirely to student reactions in her narrative thereby allowing the student voice to control the message in the narrative. The two student interviews attempt to shift the blame to both the scene and police interaction. Dyslin chooses only small interviews from Mankato polices Jim Franklin which do not provide any account of the riot but instead attempt to justify the police action. Dyslin also does not incorporate any interviews from University officials or Mankato residents. This demonstrates the amount of influence MSU students have on the news in Mankato. The voices of the students are represented by a number of students, whereas Mankato Police are represented by one voice, Jim Franklin. MSU students are allowed to alleviate the blame from themselves and create a scene/action relationship. The students can effectively shift the blame to the agents and agency in the riot when allowed this much influence to corrupt the narrative with their subjective accounts. With no agency or agent clearly defined, Dyslin naturally emphasizes the actions which occurred within the context of the scene.

MSU, Mankato Articles

The three narratives in category three are from the October 7, 2003 *MSU Reporter*. What is very interesting about the three articles is how each establishes a

different Pentadic relationship and each provides a different reason or cause for why the riots occurred. The first narrative, "They Never Imagined", by Kirsten Pritchard establishes a scene/agent relationship which blames the homecoming "Mardis Gras" theme, along with alcohol and fueled by illegal activity which was the result of the scene, as being the cause of the riot. Pritchard leaves out entirely in her narrative the police interaction and the student's riotous actions. Pritchard did not represent the actions, purpose or agency active in the riots in this narrative. This once again shifts blame to the scene, which was a result of the "Mardis Gras" themed homecoming week and alcohol consumption. These two factors created a scene which made rioting by the agents appear to be imminent.

The second narrative, "Rioter's Wreak Havoc, Epitomize lawlessness", by Kail Decker established a scene/act relationship which blamed the escalation of the violence at the scene for being the cause of the students' reactions. Decker's narrative inherently creates a scene wherein an inevitably riotous situation is imminent. However, how the scene was created was entirely overlooked. Decker excludes mentioning alcohol, police interaction or the homecoming theme as a cause for the riot. Decker chose to interview only students who were present during the riots for his narrative. This choice allows students who were present to make themselves victims of the scene instead of instigators of the riots. Decker's narrative uses distancing as a tactic for absolving student involvement. The students become a product of the scene when using this tactic and are no longer active in creating the scene. In Decker's narrative students "watched the flames" and "watched things being thrown" instead of starting fires and throwing objects. Decker denies there was any real purpose or objective to the riots by titling his narrative

"Rioter's wreak havoc, epitomize lawlessness". The scene absolves the agents from being the cause of the riots and naturally makes them victims of the present conditions.

The third narrative, "Area Police Respond Forcefully to Riot", by Brian Boothe establishes an act/agent relationship which blames police interaction for causing the students' actions. Boothe makes no mention as to why the police initially showed up or the police's purposes for acting as they did. Boothe's narrative contains no mention of the rioters or students being present during the riots, only the police in riot gear who acted aggressively toward students. Boothe's entire narrative describes students' actions as being a reaction to police involvement and never gives any justifiable reason for why the police reacted the way they did. All Boothe's interviews push the blame onto police, freeing students from blame for their actions. No mention is made about drunkenness, alcohol, the homecoming theme, or the football game in this narrative. The scene is never developed outside of the affirmative police action taken against the *innocent* students. A very biased interview sums up much of the articles message by describing how the police instigated the students by throwing OC (pepper spray) at them which *then* made students react by throwing rocks and objects back at police.

All three narratives share a common theme of absolving guilt from the students involved and displacing it elsewhere. This occurs even when the intended audience is fellow students and there is no need for these tactics. It is less shocking that students controlled the narratives then the fact that the newspapers did not give any students not present during the riots an opportunity to comment.

Conclusion

In analyzing narratives describing the MSU riot, I have found the closer the media source was to the riot the greater the tendency was to allow the agents to absolve themselves of their guilt. The *MSU Reporter* places the least amount of guilt on the students, primarily because it is students who are writing the narratives and students who are the intended audience. In the *Reporter* an overwhelming emphasis places the scene as the cause for the riots, although Boothe broke away and chose to place all blame on the act, which, for him, was the police action against students. Following closely behind the *Reporter* was the *Mankato Free Press*. Students controlled Dyslin's narrative and created a scene/action relationship which once again absolved guilt from students involved and portrayed their actions as products of the scene. As the distance increased to Minneapolis/St. Paul and further to California, a shift in where the blame was placed occurs. No longer do the students have a voice in the matter and therefore they were not able to absolve their own guilt directly. The, guilt, however was absolved indirectly. In the *L.A. Times* and *San Diego Union Tribune* an agent/act relationship is developed and the students are depicted as being responsible for their actions which caused the riots to occur. Since the source was so distanced and the narrative was in the sports section little blame remains attached to the students. The *Pioneer Press* and *Star Tribune* maintain a scene/agent relationship. This occurs when attempting to provide the best overall description of the situation as well as possible to the more distanced audience. This is the phenomenon present in the narratives describing the MSU riot: When the source is in close proximity to the riots the narrative does not have to provide as much description of the scene for background understanding. The narrative is then so largely corrupted by the student's narratives portraying themselves as products of the scene. Adversely, as the

narrative becomes distanced from the event but still remains close enough to provide an understanding of the event, as in the *Pioneer Press* and *Star Tribune*, the narratives are forced to provide enough of the scene to give people an understanding of the event. This indirectly absolves the agents from guilt. The *L.A. Times* or *San Diego Union Tribune*, because of there distance, narratives no longer have any interest in describing the scene in detail and can place blame on the agents and their actions. But because of the narratives distance from the event this blame has no effect on the regional audience's opinions and therefore still, at least indirectly, frees the agents from blame.

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Author Biography:

Joseph C. Mohrfeld is a senior Philosophy and Speech Communications student at MSU, Mankato. A Ronald E. McNair Post Baccalaureate Achievement Program Scholar, he has completed his most recent research project "Accepting the Absurd", a defense of S. Kierkegaard's teleological suspension of the ethical, primarily from *Fear and Trembling*, and will present the research at the Ronald E. McNair summer research conference in July 2004. Mohrfeld was invited and inducted into Phi Kappa Phi national honor society and Golden Key national honor society during his junior year. In the following year Mohrfeld will be conducting research involving environmental ethics under the guidance of Dr. Richard Liebendorfer, MSU Philosophy department chair. Mohrfeld will also be researching the works of S. Kierkegaard under the guidance of Dr. Craig Mataresse, professor of philosophy at MSU, and will present his research at the 2005 URC.

Faculty Mentor Biography:

James Dimock graduated from Black Hills State University in 1996 with majors in Speech Communication and History and in 2000 he completed his Master of Arts in Communication Studies at the University of South Dakota. A member of the faculty in the Speech Communication Department at Minnesota State University, Mankato, he has

taught public speaking, interpersonal communication, introduction to communication study and a special topics course focusing on the rhetoric and leadership of Abraham Lincoln. With respect to research and scholarship, Jim's primary interest is in argumentation and specifically the ethics of argumentation but he has also presented papers and participated on panels on a diverse range of topics including the use of fear appeals, the rhetoric of the anti-nuclear movement in the 1980's and the rhetorical and ethical theory of Richard M. Weaver, the propaganda and the rhetoric of militarism. Outside of academia, Jim works to promote public dialogue on political and social issues, advance peace and social justice and coaches' pre-kindergarten t-ball.