



Rhetorical Landscapes in America: Variations on a Theme from Kenneth Burke

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Gregory Clark points out that Kenneth Burke wanted to remind us “barnyard” residents to stop and ponder those intersections of identification that relate to self and to country (152). In this post 9/11 world we, as Americans, are once again asked to re-imagine what it means to identify ourselves as “American,” and part of this process is found in understanding how American nationhood was rhetorically created. Clark argues that our collective identity as Americans was developed through shared understanding as gained by experiencing the landscape, vicariously and physically, as a national civic identity. This construction of American identity can be understood through Burke’s expanded notion of rhetoric as identification, which widens the notion of “persuasion” to include verbal and nonverbal transformative symbols. Identification built through American landscapes allows us to rhetorically transcend our individual selves for a collective identity by creating *public experiences*, the “common imaginary and shared sense of being at home” in America (26).

For Clark, shared experiences rather than shared ideals are what help us “imagine” nationhood, in the sense that Benedict Anderson argues for imagined communities. Thus, the tourist experience and itinerary/travel literature offers a Burkean understanding of epideictic rhetoric as a “representative anecdote,” which demonstrates how an individual is able to transform, to create a *public identity* through shared landscape experiences. Clark successfully argues, by offering up five instances of “representative anecdotes of civic tourism” (26), that the shared experience of civic education can be had through the process of merging our personal experiences with a national identity – the American landscape. Each stop on Clark’s tour of symbolic landscapes is accompanied by a Burkean excursion where our understanding of identification in relation to the landscape is explored through some of the most pivotal concepts in the Burkean lexicon.

Clark's first historical stop takes us on a tour of children's picturesque and travel literature of nineteenth century New York City, where he demonstrates the rhetorical power found in a Burkean "scene." Here, New York becomes a representative anecdote for "America," because the city is felt to symbolically represent the nation. It is here that the beauty and danger found in America could be understood by examining the symbolic landscape of New York. These books, such as the 1830's [*New-York Scenes: Designed for the Entertainment and Instruction of Children of City and Country*](#), not only offered a tour of New York, but these itineraries also presented rhetorical civic lessons on citizenship and what it means to be American.

The building of American identity can also be understood through the aesthetic portrayals of Shaker settlements. Clark reminds us that Burke, in *Counter Statement*, argued that the aesthetic is rhetorical in that it works to transform identity. Thus, by "touring" aesthetically framed Shaker settlements, we, the spectator, become united in nationhood by viewing those who live outside our experience. Clark, however, becomes particularly potent when he examines how nationhood is built through a Burkean transcendence as found through the rhetorical power of [Yellowstone](#) National Park. Clark insightfully explores how *publically* held national parks provide citizens the ability to transcend their individual identities and form, if briefly, a national "communion."

"Communion" is best experienced through what Burke calls "revelatory ritual," and what Clark terms a "public experience" (94), which was had by Americans as they climbed into their automobiles and experienced the American landscape on the first national thoroughfare—Lincoln Highway. Lincoln Highway was completed in time to accommodate Americans wanting to travel to San Francisco to participate in the Panama-Pacific International Exposition of 1915, which is the last stop on Clark's tour. The world's fair, a celebration of a national event, becomes a symbolic "landscape" experience that takes on the same *constitutive* power of identity transformation as is found in religion. As Burke might argue along with Clark, both provide the "widest and deepest possible scope" (126), while working symbolically to transform our identities from individuals to a congregation . . . indeed a nation.

Rhetorical Landscapes in America successfully demonstrates the rhetorical, symbolic, power of landscapes to transform identity and, as Clark expresses, the rhetorical power of Kenneth Burke's theories that allow for an understanding of such transformations. As such, *Landscapes* provide an interdisciplinary journey that will successfully engage those in rhetorical, cultural, and American studies. Further, students of Kenneth Burke will find in this work the inspiration to apply Burkean theory in new and uncharted areas of our ever evolving rhetorical landscape.