

ONE

The Audiovisual Palimpsest

*Rhetoric, Poetics, and Heteroglossia in Mystery Science
Theater 3000*

Ben Wetherbee

Imagine, if you would, this chapter read aloud. Imagine, too, yourself sitting a row behind Crow, Servo, and Mike (or Joel if you prefer)¹ in an otherwise empty theater. The three of them, of course, take every opportunity, every pause between sentences, every prolonged breath, to interject and make light of my inflated academese, snicker every time a bookish buzzword like “hegemonic” or “problematize” crops up, and scoff at my very need to theorize a dumb TV show. They gleefully lampoon my writing style, my status as a scholar, even my masculinity. I can hear Crow wisecracking, “This guy really breaks down the nerd-geek binary.” Something like that.

If you’re a fan of *Mystery Science Theater 3000* (MST3K), I can assume not only that these circumstances feel familiar, but that you’d be more inclined to laugh along with Mike and the ‘bots than shush them. The game is rigged: Who would rather listen to a Foucault-citing blowhard who drops terms like “palimpsest” and “heteroglossia” than a trio of well-cultured but fun-loving quipsters? Who would prefer analysis to satire? Not an MST3K fan, that’s for sure.

In proposing this scenario, then, I disserve myself. If readers successfully imagine Mike and the ‘bots’ running commentary atop my own prose, my ethos, the performance of my own persuasive character, is shot. My rhetorical theory cannot compete with their wit, nor my erudition with their sense of humor. This reality, however, only confirms the

argument I wish to make, that *MST3K*'s form poses a beguiling rhetorical situation wherein the text itself comprises multiple voices but arranges these voices within a rhetorical hierarchy that anticipates audience sympathies. I may relegate myself to the low end of this hierarchy, but this self-subordination will demonstrate my arguments all the better, and perhaps provide a few laughs along the way. In the spirit of *MST3K*, and in recognition that academics need to laugh at themselves more often, that's a sacrifice I'm glad to make.

Let the heckling begin.

THE AUDIOVISUAL PALIMPSEST: *MST3K* AND THE QUESTION OF PRINT METAPHORS

This chapter seeks to examine the remarkably innovative form of *MST3K* through the lenses of rhetorical criticism and Mikhail Bakhtin's dialogics. I divide this study into four sections. This one, the first, supplies a lexical and conceptual framework for thinking about what characterizes *MST3K*'s form in the first place, and what makes it effective. The second introduces Bakhtin's concept of *heteroglossia* as a key tool for thinking about *MST3K*'s form, and its form in relation to other texts, and the third, which is the most theoretically substantial, extends the Bakhtinian reading of *MST3K* to consider intersections between rhetoric and poetics and to conduct a comparative analysis of *MST3K*'s rhetoric with that of Fyodor Dostoevsky, an author Bakhtin champions for his democratic form. In the conclusion, I consider the lessons learned from posing this odd juxtaposition between *MST3K* and Russian literature and pose several suggestions for rethinking the work of rhetorical criticism.

The title of this chapter stems from a simple observation: that even now, even in the digital age as many presage the death of the book, our thinking is still print based enough to necessitate linguistic and literary vocabulary in the discussion of audiovisual media. Despite critiques of auteur theory, filmgoers and critics still grant authorial clout to names like Federico Fellini and Martin Scorsese; scholars like David Bordwell and Seymour Chatman discuss film narration via the attention-focusing camera eye;² and others invoke ideas of "film language" as pioneered by Christian Metz and rooted in the linguistic theory of Ferdinand de Saussure. In college classrooms, teachers of writing and rhetoric use film and television pedagogically, while teachers of film still insist that their students write alphabetically about film and television.³ Roland Barthes, in a 1964 article, remarks that "today at the level of mass communications, it appears that the linguistic message is indeed present in every image: as title, caption, accompanying press article, film dialogue, comic strip balloon. Which shows that it is not very accurate to talk of a civilization of the image—we are still, more than ever, a civilization of writing."⁴ Over a

half century later, the paradigm remains. Film, television, and advertisements continue to couple images with verbal discourse, and newer modes like YouTube videos, blogs, and web-based news outlets only perpetuate the same trend in new settings. If anything, the proliferation of free, available web space for would-be authors around the globe has strengthened alphabetic writing's omnipresence; writing, in turn, continues to affect our thinking about television and film.

Nowhere is this fusion of verbal and imagistic discourse more apparent than in *MST3K*, but the show tends to confound the comparisons between written and audiovisual modes (the novel to the fiction film, the short film to the short story, the documentary to the argumentative essay, etc.). *MST3K*'s bizarre composition challenges rote comparisons between the written and audiovisual. Does *MST3K* even have a written analogue? And if so, how does one account for its hybridity?

Before addressing these questions directly, I want to recognize the importance of *MST3K*'s formal innovations, which deserve much of the credit for the show's many successes: its ten seasons of airplay on Comedy Central (1989–1996) and the Sci-Fi Channel (1997–1999), the feature film (*Mystery Science Theater 3000: The Movie*, 1996) inspired from the series, and its devout legions of fans who can quote from *Manos: The Hands of Fate* or *Space Mutiny* at will. The show's brilliance stems from its fusion of two distinct modes, a movie (usually a bad narrative fiction film) and an audio commentary track synced with three silhouettes in the corner. One silhouette is a human's—either the show's creator Joel Hodgson or his successor Mike Nelson—and two are of robots, Crow and Tom Servo. The show's overarching narrative confines Joel and later Mike to the Satellite of Love, a bone-shaped spacecraft equipped with a full-sized movie theater but no means of escape, wherein the protagonists are forced by the evil Dr. Forrester, and in later seasons his mother, Pearl, to watch one shoddy B movie after another as part of a diabolical experiment on the limits of human sanity. Neither Joel nor Mike can control when the movies start, the show's theme song explains, because Joel “used those special parts to make his robot friends.”⁵ How “special” these parts truly are remains in doubt, though, since Crow is built from a bowling pin and hockey mask webbing, among other knickknacks, while Servo's body was once a gumball machine.

This story arc is so contrived, so self-consciously harebrained, that its real purpose becomes quite clear under any scrutiny: The narrative rationalizes Mike and the 'bots' place in the corner of the screen; it justifies the form. In most television, the inverse is true. Most shows adopt a conventional formal structure that allows for what Seymour Chatman calls the “narrative of resolution, [wherein] there is a sense of problem solving, of things being worked out.”⁶ Each episode poses a problem, which the characters have a half hour or hour to resolve before the credits roll.⁷ *MST3K*, by contrast, enacts what I'll call a narrative of *continuum*; it

concerns itself less with raising and resolving problems than with sustaining a certain form week after week. If shows like *Law and Order* and *The X-Files* emotionally gratify viewers by introducing and resolving one crime, puzzle, or other problem per episode, *MST3K* gratifies through the steadiness and longevity of its humor. This comic "metatheater," notes King, "makes us aware of how the very form of popular films and television tends to trivialize everything it touches."⁸ *MST3K*'s own form, in turn, trivializes the narrative forms of its pop cultural fodder: it sterilizes the narrative of resolution under a continuous bath of satire.

But, returning to literary analogies, the question of *MST3K*'s written analogue remains unanswered. At first impression, the show seems most like a novel—a bad one—peppered with sardonic annotations. Given perennial comparison of films with novels and *MST3K*'s reliance on film texts, the annotative analogy seems a logical step, and King agrees: "Joel and his robots are like living footnotes on the bottom of the screen, commenting on whatever film or television show we are watching them watch."⁹ It is this very *liveness*, though, that confounds the footnote metaphor. One can, and usually does, easily skip over footnotes, which stall and interrupt the flow of a written narrative; they are optional and leave the preexisting narrative structure intact. But watching *MST3K*, one can't very well "not read" the commentary. *MST3K*, thus, is more palimpsestic than annotative: the commentary is not written under or alongside the original text, but *over* it, effectively fusing the two modes into a single hybrid, multivoiced text. The metaphor even extends visually; the show projects the silhouettes of Mike and the 'bots not under but *over* the screen, where they often gesture at the *mise-en-scène* or pretend to reach out and prod characters on-screen. Thus, we can refer to the commentary and the movie each as separate *components* of an episode of *MST3K*, but not, since they form a simultaneous, unified audiovisual experience, as different *texts*. This biform composition that *MST3K* takes, the audiovisual palimpsest, deserves attention for its unique rhetorical assets. I will return to this topic below.

HETEROGLOSSIA IN *MST3K*

MST3K's palimpsestic form takes on especial significance when juxtaposed with the theory of Soviet linguist and literary critic Mikhail Bakhtin. Bakhtin's "thousands of astonishingly various yet curiously harmonious pages"¹⁰ of scholarship range in their subject matter from sociolinguistics to philosophy to metacriticism, from novelistic form to specific authors like Rabelais and Dostoevsky. Unsurprisingly, his work has attracted cross-disciplinary attention, and scholars in rhetoric, literature, communications, comparative religion, and elsewhere have appropriated Bakhtin's blanket theory of "dialogism," which sees language as net-

works of “utterances,” or individual speech acts by individual subjects, each of which “is a link in a very complexly organized chain of other utterances.”¹¹ Linguistic or literary form, for Bakhtin, is meaningless if divorced from its communicative function and ideological connotations.

This dialogic perspective transfers to Bakhtin’s criticism on the novel. The novel, for Bakhtin, dramatizes or performs the ideological tensions and interconnected voices at play in its society of origin: “Oppositions of individual wills and minds are submerged in *social* heteroglossia, they are reconceptualized through it. Oppositions between individuals [in the novel] are only surface upheavals of the untamed elements in social heteroglossia.”¹² Bakhtin coins this term, *heteroglossia*, to denote “a diversity of social speech types (sometimes even diversity of languages) and a diversity of individual voices” within a social plane; the novel, for Bakhtin, can be defined as “artistically arranged” heteroglossia, which emerges through authorial speech; narratorial exposition; characters’ dialogue; and “inserted genres” like letters, articles, and orations.¹³ Such modes stand in for their social counterparts, and their relative autonomy preempts authorial monologism.

One curiosity of Bakhtinian studies, though, is the dearth of scholarship applying concepts like *utterance* and *heteroglossia* to audiovisual media. Two notable exceptions are Robert Stam’s book *Subversive Pleasures: Bakhtin, Cultural Criticism, and Film* (1989) and Martin Flanagan’s *Bakhtin and the Movies: New Ways of Understanding Hollywood Film* (2009).¹⁴ Both authors make commonsensical but astute applications of Bakhtin’s writings to film theory. Flanagan explains that, for instance, “it is possible to speak of film as a kind of utterance because . . . it is not only the producer of meaning but also the site and recipient of meanings projected back onto it by its dialogic communicant and adversary, the spectator.”¹⁵ In a complementary analysis, Stam sums up Bakhtin’s link between social and novelistic heteroglossia, but includes other media in the equation: “A given linguistic community shares a common language, but different segments ‘live’ that common language diversely. The role of an artistic text, be it a novel, a play, or a film, is not to represent real life ‘existents’ but rather to stage the conflicts inherent in heteroglossia, the coincidences and competitions of languages and discourses.”¹⁶

The relevance of Flanagan and Stam’s insights to *MST3K* is virtually self-evident. Mike and the ‘bots vocally embody Flanagan’s spectator as they “project” meaning back onto the movies screened before them, thus illustrating the thorniness inherent in any dialogic situation. In Bakhtin’s words, “The speaker [or filmmaker] strives to get a reading on his own word, and on his own conceptual system that determines this word, within the alien conceptual system of the understanding receiver.”¹⁷ Here, the commentators not only reject most movies’ utterances and “conceptual systems” wholesale, but they voice their own antagonistic utterances in reply, undercutting the movies’ intended meanings in favor

of their own ironic and satirical countermeanings. They prove that Flanagan is correct, potentially, to refer to the spectator as a film's "adversary." But with *MST3K*, this relationship only constitutes half the story. The show's grand irony is that, even as Mike and the 'bots ruthlessly malign these movies, as they joke that, for instance, the director's name is an anagram for "direct-to-video," or that the star is "a makeup-less clown,"¹⁸ the movies and commentators are codependent. They *need* each other. Without the movies, Mike and the 'bots' satirical utterances would have no dialogic referent—they would be incomprehensible and impossible—and without the apparatus of *MST3K*, these movies would drift into obscurity, their straggling VHS copies packed into the dusty corners of attics and used video emporiums. The commentators forge a paradoxical relationship, at once antagonistic and symbiotic—hostile but mutually beneficial.

This relationship depends on heteroglossia, and nowhere is heteroglossia more self-apparent than in *MST3K*. Novelistic multivoicedness, as Bakhtin demonstrates, can also be self-apparent—in characters' dialogue, for instance, or in epistolary exchanges—or it can be subtle and transparent when, for instance, Dickens inserts small ironies, parodies, and expressions of a character's consciousness into his otherwise straightforward narration, creating a "hybrid construction" that "belongs, by its grammatical (syntactic) and compositional markers, to a single speaker, but that actually contains mixed within it two utterances, two speech manners, two styles."¹⁹ *MST3K*, of course, creates its own breed of hybrid, but nothing so nuanced. The simultaneous utterances found in *MST3K*, again, belong not to a single grammatical structure like the narrated paragraph, but to a palimpsest; its multiple voices are easily discernable, but still inseparable from the composite text. Every movie comprises its own heteroglossia (though, in the case of most *MST3K* fodder, a poorly wrought one), a tangle of voices filtered through the screen "etiquette" filmmakers use to frame and organize their characters' utterances.²⁰ Atop that framework, *MST3K* places the satirical utterances of Mike, Crow, and Servo. Like novelistic heteroglossia, *MST3K*'s only makes sense as a reconceptualization of social heteroglossia; the movie, which usually antedates the commentary by decades, will reflect the social voices and ideological tensions of its time and culture of origin. A sci-fi yarn like *Prince of Space* (1959, aired on *MST3K* in 1997), cheesy as it is, reflects legitimate feelings of angst and exuberance toward the advent of space travel and the possibility of alien life. In hindsight, such emotional naivety seems as childish as the movie's dubbed dialogue and third-rate sets, which, as Crow mentions, curiously resemble those of the original *Star Trek*. The latter-day commentators' voices also stem ideologically from their own time; Mike and the 'bots, positioned nearly forty years in *Prince of Space*'s future, are more technologically cynical and mature than their dialogic victims, both in their understanding of space travel and

their cinematographic standards. They easily gain the edge in winning the viewers' favor. The composite text of *MST3K*: "Prince of Space" was aired, after all, in the 1990s, not the 1950s.²¹

RHETORIC AND POETICS, HIERARCHY AND POLYPHONY; OR, *MST3K* VS. DOSTOEVSKY

There is no doubt: *MST3K*'s is a rhetorical form. The savvy with which Mike and the 'bots elevate their own heteroglossic voices above those of the movies they watch, the way they capitalize on select viewers' amused condescension toward bad and dated movies, suggests rhetorical know-how of near-Ciceronian caliber. The rhetorical situations inherent in classical oratory and modern-day television, of course, differ enormously, but it is Cicero, the patriarch of Roman rhetoric, who writes that the ideal rhetor (rhetorical practitioner) must know when to, among other things, "divert the attention of the audience from the point at issue; [to] frequently provoke merriment and laughter; . . . [and to] put himself on terms of intimacy with his audience."²² Mike and the 'bots do nothing if not distract from any would-be seriousness in the movies they lampoon, "provoke" ample "merriment and laughter" in the process, and, above all, effortlessly identify themselves with their viewers on more intimate terms than almost any other television characters can muster. This final rhetorical maneuver is of no small importance according to Kenneth Burke, who writes, "You persuade a man only insofar as you can talk his language by speech, gesture, tonality, order, image, attitude, idea, *identifying* your ways with his."²³

I can attest. Not only am I a twenty-something male, ironic connoisseur of bad movies, and privy to most of the pop cultural references Mike and the 'bots scatter about their commentary; I am also, like Mike and Joel both, a Midwesterner and identify with their laid back, often deadpan humor. Mike, whose later seasons of *MST3K* I grew up watching, *speaks my language*; I *identify* with him. And though *MST3K* confounds more conventional rhetorical analysis—that is, it seems uninterested in *arguing* any specific thesis aside from a certain ironic attitude toward filmgoing—Mike has certainly persuaded me, over the years, to like him, to empathize with him and the 'bots, and, of course, to keep watching the show (religiously, in fact). I was surprised recently to learn that, unlike me, the "real" Mike Nelson votes Republican, reads the *National Review* "cover to cover," and considers *The Passion of the Christ* the best film of 2005.²⁴ Though perhaps unintentionally, Mike had duped me into believing we shared a common wavelength, a common set of blue-collar, Midwestern sensibilities that exceed the discursive space of *MST3K* to encompass politics, and certainly taste in movies. My error, though, reaffirms

the effectiveness of *MST3K*'s rhetoric. Despite actual differences between the flesh-and-blood Mike Nelson and myself, Mike's ethos won me over.

Mike and company would do Cicero proud, too, in the area of rhetorical form. Cicero recommends that the rhetor invest herself in composing attractive parts, but an altogether more attractive whole: "If . . . anyone likes a loose style²⁵ let him by all means use it, but in the manner of one who should take apart the shield of Phidias: if anyone ever takes it apart, he destroys the beauty of the composition, but not the charm of the several pieces."²⁶ *MST3K*'s palimpsestic form, as I have said, owes its success both to its unity and biformity: the different "parts" are "charming" in their own way, the commentary for its wit, and the movie for the ironic pleasure one can take in its ineptitude. But they are not meant to be taken apart. The "beauty" lies in the whole, the fusion of the two, the strange antagonistic symbiosis of their marriage.

The relevance of Cicero and Burke's rhetorical theory to *MST3K* needs little further elucidation, but here I reach a conundrum as I return to Bakhtin. Cicero, a statesman and attorney, lived and breathed rhetoric. Burke made his mark reviving rhetorical criticism in the humanities. Bakhtin, by contrast, as an academic persecuted under Stalinist despotism and exiled for six years to the backwoods of Kazakhstan, saw rhetoric as the enemy.²⁷ In his writings, Bakhtin makes rhetoric the villain and poetics its heroic counterpart. This dualism dates back to Aristotle, whose *Rhetoric* and *Poetics* are often paired in one volume, but he, in contrast to Bakhtin's good-bad binary, saw the two as complementary. In book 3, chapter 11, of the *Rhetoric*, for instance, Aristotle quotes liberally from Homer to illustrate the power of "making [audiences] see" through kinetic imagery, similes, and metaphors;²⁸ here, the poet's tools may serve rhetoric, just as poets' figurative language may "succeed" or "fail" based on rhetorical execution.²⁹ Cicero, too, sees metrical propriety as integral to the "well-knit" speech and devotes the latter half of his treatise *Orator* to a discussion of rhythm, citing numerous poets as models.³⁰ Bakhtin, to be fair, also sees rhetoric and poetics as interlinked, though he sets up a discernible hierarchy between the two:

The novel, and artistic prose in general, has the closest genetic, family relationship to rhetorical forms. And throughout the entire development of the novel, its intimate interaction (both peaceful and hostile) with living rhetorical genres (journalistic, moral, philosophical, and others) has never ceased. . . . But in this uninterrupted relationship, novelistic discourse preserved its own qualitative uniqueness and was never reducible to rhetorical discourse.³¹

If Bakhtin's use of "reducible" hints at his pejorative definition of rhetoric, he makes the case more clearly several pages on in the same essay: "All rhetorical forms, *monologic* in their compositional structure, are oriented toward the listener and his answer."³² And elsewhere, finally,

he hammers in the last nail: "In rhetoric, there is the unconditionally innocent and the unconditionally guilty; there is complete victory and the destruction of the opponent. In dialogue the destruction of the opponent also destroys the very dialogic sphere where the word lives."³³ The binary Bakhtin erects, then, doesn't exactly divide rhetoric and poetics—the poetical novel, as he says, necessarily subsumes and artistically organizes rhetorical genres—but rather divides rhetoric and *dialogue*. The former, for Bakhtin, is militaristic, shortsighted, and "monologic," while the latter is diplomatic, enduring, and accounts for ideological diversity.

This division leads Bakhtin to valorize Dostoevsky as the paladin of what he calls the *polyphonic* novel. In the opening pages of *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, Bakhtin offers this summation of Dostoevskian heteroglossia:

The character is treated as ideologically autonomous and independent; he is perceived by the author as a fully weighted ideological conception of his own, and not the object of Dostoyevsky's finalizing artistic vision. In the consciousness of the critics, the direct and fully weighted signifying power of the characters' words destroys the monologic plane of the novel and calls forth an unmediated response—as if the character were not an object of authorial discourse, but rather a fully valid, autonomous carrier of his own individual word.³⁴

One page later, Bakhtin defines "a genuine polyphony" as "a plurality of independent and unmerged voices and consciousness";³⁵ polyphony, thus, is a special, egalitarian breed of heteroglossia that avoids subordinating its individual voices to the author's "finalizing artistic vision." The Dostoevskian novel, then, exemplifies dialogism par excellence; not only does it reject rhetorical finalism, it creates an even plane of discourse wherein the characters' utterances can hash out differences freely—free of authorial tampering, free to be plural, equal, and democratic.

But are Dostoevsky's novels really arhetorical? I will argue not. I want to note, first, that Bakhtin's distaste for rhetoric was culturally and historically specific. Kay Halasek observes,

Bakhtin cannot confine rhetoric to only conservative, polemic purposes, as his own historical poetics points out, for rhetorical texts have subverted and continue to subvert hegemonic social forces. In Russia during his day, however, the novel—not public oratory or debate—was the preeminent genre of such subversion, hence, Bakhtin's privileging of the novel.³⁶

Dostoevsky's is, of course, an epitomic literary voice of subversion. In his own time, Dostoevsky's intellectualism and heteroglossic pluralism was perceived as a threat to tsarist autocracy, and the Russian state forced its renowned novelist, like Bakhtin after him, into years of exile.³⁷ That Dostoevsky's novels influenced the social and public sphere might in itself, for some, classify them as rhetoric: no text bereft of persuasive power,

after all, will get its author banished to Siberia. Also, one must admit that any artistic arrangement of rhetorical forms, no matter how democratic or egalitarian, involves its own rhetorical decisions. If the effort to elevate some elements of heteroglossia and denigrate others, as we see to an extreme in *MST3K*, might persuade viewers or readers to identify selectively with these voices, efforts toward polyphony are equally rhetorical in their attempt to foster a holistic perspective and far-reaching empathy. This is true of film as well as literature. In his book, Flanagan devotes one chapter to a study of polyphony in David Mamet's *House of Games*, arguing persuasively that the movie grants ideological autonomy to its primary characters, thus inviting a plurality of interpretations and sympathies.³⁸ We might observe polyphony, too, in movies like *Traffic*, *Crash*, *Syriana*, and *Babel*, which divvy up the narrative space among a large cast of important characters.

Whether it constructs polyphony like Dostoevsky's or hierarchies like *MST3K*'s, I have alluded to a rhetorical force, an invisible hand that arranges heteroglossia, decides who will speak, when, and with what power. This concept closely resembles what Wayne Booth calls the "implied author," a term he coins in *The Rhetoric of Fiction* to carve out a middle space between the real flesh-and-blood author and her literary constructions—the narrator, characters, plot, and so forth. The implied author represents the rhetorical self-presentation of the real person; "[he] chooses, consciously or unconsciously, what we read; we infer him as an ideal, literary, created version of the real man; he is the sum of his choices."³⁹ And while Booth embraces the word "rhetoric" and Bakhtin resists it, the two seem to share a tacit understanding. What Bakhtin really admires in Dostoevsky, what fuels his nearly 300-page celebration of the author's poetics, is the creation of an implied author so egalitarian, so *fair* to his characters, that his own biases fade into the mixture of voices. Writing before Bakhtin's book on Dostoevsky was translated to English, Booth arrives at a similar conclusion: In *Crime and Punishment*,

we sympathize with Raskolnikov in a peculiarly intense fashion from beginning to end; we wish passionately, though without much hope, for his happiness and fear the punishment which our interest in cause-and-effect patterns demands. We sympathize with others, too, particularly Sonia. Those aesthetic frauds, tears of laughter, are prominent throughout, but we do not experience them as isolated, sentimental moments, divorced from our intellectual hungers and rewards.⁴⁰

Booth, like Bakhtin, admires the implied "Dostoevsky's" investment in multiple characters, but also in his successful manipulation of rhetorical forms, the "hungers and rewards" of raised and satisfied expectations. What perhaps neither Booth nor Bakhtin acknowledge adequately enough is that, if the reading of Dostoevsky is a rhetorical situation, it requires the right kind of receptive reader to accept the author's implied

self and his polyphonic rhetoric without protest. This helps explain why Vladimir Nabokov derides Dostoevsky as harshly as Tom Servo might a schlocky *Godzilla* clone, declaring, "His sensitive murders and soulful prostitutes are not to be endured for one moment—by this reader, anyway."⁴¹

Those who lionize Dostoevsky, though, will likely agree with Booth that "like the universally desirable 'sublime' pursued by Longinus, the quality pursued by Bakhtin is a kind of 'sublimity of freed perspectives' that will always, on all fictional occasions, be superior to every other."⁴² I buy this point happily, but I believe Longinus also helps explain the appeal of anti-polyphonic texts like *MST3K*. In *On the Sublime*, he writes, "For the true sublime naturally elevates us: uplifted with a sense of proud exaltation, we are filled with pride and joy, as if we ourselves had produced the very thing we heard."⁴³ Is *MST3K* sublime, then? The show's ironic spirit would resist the classical rhetorician's highfalutin praise, but die-hard fans of *MST3K* do receive a sense of joy equivalent to Longinus' final criterion: thanks to the metatheatrical "*mise en abyme* of watching someone on television watching a movie,"⁴⁴ as well as Mike and company's uncanny ability to identify themselves with a certain viewership, viewers tend to feel *in on it* when watching *MST3K*. Booth explicates this sort of rhetorical appeal in *A Rhetoric of Irony*: "Moments of this kind are possible when the [implied] author is sure that *we know that he knows that we know*—which is to say, the author and the audience stand together watching the characters from above as they make their mistakes."⁴⁵ Booth refers to novelistic irony here, but *MST3K*'s sense of irony is analogous. When Mike, for instance, repeatedly likens a photo of a character's dad in *The Final Sacrifice* to Miami Dolphins hall-of-fame running back Larry Csonka, and later, as the camera cuts to an analogue clock, comments, "Of course, the clock is set to *Miami* time," he invites the viewers up into a privileged, lofty space. Mike, the 'bots, and the audience share clandestine laughs about Larry Csonka while the movie plods on obliviously. The commentators and audience bond at the movie's expense.

My analysis so far, though, begs the question of where, if at all, we can even locate Booth's "implied author" in an audiovisual text. Auteur theory awards the director authorial status, but that way of thinking has crumbled under criticism from those like Barthes and Michel Foucault; the latter would assert that the director's function, like the print author's, is only to "characterize the existence, circulation, and operation of certain discourses in society," not to represent a true individual.⁴⁶ Where one assigns directorial status in *MST3K* remains unclear, anyway, because the movie lampooned in each episode has one director, and the episode itself another. Chatman, though, offers an enlightening synopsis: The implied author, who is "reconstructed by the [viewer] from the narrative," is always present, "though there may not be a single real author in the

ordinary sense: the narrative may have been composed by committee," as in most cinema.⁴⁷ In a separate study, Chatman maps out the authorship of John Huston's adaptation of *The Red Badge of Courage*, noting that the "real authors" include Huston, but also the MGM executives, producer, musical composer, and of course Stephen Crane—not to mention the actors, cinematographer, set designers, and others.⁴⁸ *MST3K*, to be sure, is a similar animal, especially if one accounts for the original filmmakers whose movies Mike and the 'bots lampoon. But in reconstructing the implied author from the text, as Chatman advises, we arrive at several definite conclusions: (1) because the show's form repudiates the narratives of the movies it uses, the implied author exists outside these movies; (2) in giving Mike and the 'bots the final word (they can respond to the movies, but the movies can't respond back), the implied author allies itself with the commentators; and (3) in pitting witty and likable heroes against these bad movies, it asks viewers to identify with the former. Booth himself suggests that "every *successful* film does have what might legitimately be called an 'implied author,' or if you prefer, an 'implied center'—that is, a creative voice uniting all of its choices."⁴⁹ In this respect, I think *MST3K* succeeds wonderfully. Episode after episode, it establishes a consistent "center," "author," ethos, heteroglossic hierarchy, or whichever term you prefer; its "character" and sense of humor are consistent, and it knows its audience.

As I praise *MST3K* for the successful hierarchy it erects between its movies and commentators, though, I want to avoid creating my *own* hierarchy. Rather than suggesting that a *MST3K*-style heteroglossia rhetorically surpasses polyphony, or vice versa, I want to position the two in a comparative heuristic for analyzing the rhetoric of narrative texts. The graph might look something like that in figure 1.1. Each pole has its rhetorical strengths. Polyphony, as Bakhtin says, excels in fragmenting the monologic plane of the novel or film; it allows characters to hash out their differences autonomously; it creates a balanced verisimilitude tailored to the complex dramatization of conflicts within social heteroglossia. It begets "serious" art. *Pure* polyphony may never truly exist—there will always be some hint of an ideologically motivated implied author at the helm—but Bakhtin is, in my view, correct to admire Dostoevsky's work, the rhetorical affordances of his style, and his democratic attitude toward his characters. *MST3K* yields a different pleasure, which I have already discussed in detail. It engages the viewer intimately, ushers her into a privileged space, and lets her "in on the joke." It pleases more immediately and humorously than the polyphonic text but is sometimes ill equipped to tackle "serious" subject matter. It begets parody and satire. These are two extremes, and most narrative texts fall somewhere in between. Such a rhetorical heuristic, I think, can help critics break free of such constricting binaries as "high" versus "low" and art versus kitsch, or pulp, popular culture—focusing not on what the text *is*, or how

“good” it is, according to a set of ideologically predefined criteria, but what it *does*, to and for its readers/viewers. As one who unapologetically prefers *MST3K* to Victorian literature, anyway, I find myself predisposed to value such a heuristic.

CONCLUSION: WHAT DOES *MST3K* TEACH US ABOUT RHETORICAL CRITICISM?

My own biases aside, rhetorical analysis of *MST3K* does seem to yield important lessons for rhetorical critics. Heretofore, the application of rhetorical criticism to audiovisual media has often led to lofty mission statements against the oppression of the masses by media conglomerates—statements epitomized, perhaps, by Janice Hocker Rushing and Thomas S. Frentz’s assertion that “to practice criticism from an ideological viewpoint . . . is to perform the morally significant act of fighting oppression by unmasking the rhetorical strategies that maintain it.”⁵⁰ I don’t disagree with Rushing and Frentz; indeed, if it acknowledges ideological contexts, rhetorical criticism cannot pretend to work in a moral vacuum. Often, though, rhetorical critics seem content to simply uproot a movie or television show’s “ideology” and then hold it up as a marker of whether the text in question is good or bad, right or wrong, “progressive” or “oppressive.” Such a method tends to oversimplify the nature of ideology—many movies and television shows, I would argue, evince a mixture of progressive and problematic ideological premises—and also tends to ignore the rhetorical mechanics that allow texts to evince ideological premises persuasively in the first place. For instance, the recent movie *Birdemic: Shock and Terror* (one lampooned to perfection by the *MST3K* alumni at RiffTrax), puts forward a clear “progressive” environmentalist message, but the movie’s script, acting, and special effects are so laughably bad that they quash any attempt at persuasion. We can point to *Birdemic*’s ideology, but so what? The movie will never persuade anybody of anything, except that amateur CGI is hilarious.

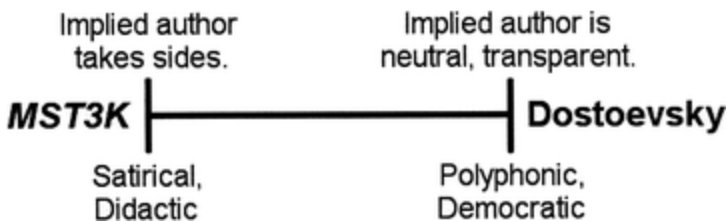


Figure 1.1. Comparison between *MST3K*’s and Dostoevskian Narrative Rhetorics

So, my concern here has been more with form than ideology or morality. Of course, both ideology and morality are themselves implicated in form, as Bakhtin demonstrates in his veneration of Dostoevsky's work for its democratic heteroglossia. Dostoevsky's is a *moral form*, Bakhtin would say. *MST3K*'s form is democratic in its own way, too, I would argue: Mike and the 'bots, by vocally antagonizing the movies they watch, animate the notion of active spectatorship in a way that can "liberate" *MST3K*'s viewers as they, in turn, feel entitled to riff over movies they watch. (I, anyway, can hardly sit through a movie without making a snide remark every ten minutes—thanks, *MST3K*.) The paradigm of the propagandistic media and the sedate, receptive masses, then, no longer holds in *MST3K*'s world. More to the point, though, I want to argue for the importance of analyzing how texts—be they *Crime and Punishment* or *MST3K*: "Space Mutiny," *Citizen Kane*, or an Obama campaign ad—compose persuasive rhetorical forms. This means looking past "what is this text arguing?" into the intricacies of "*how* is this text arguing?" A central question in such analysis, it would seem, is how the reader or viewer infers the implied author, and how (or if) the implied author wins acceptance or approval from its audience.

In the pursuit of such inquiry, finally, I think there are two binaries that we need to learn to resist, or at least complicate. The first is that which Bakhtin himself dubiously invokes—rhetoric versus poetics. This pair should not be seen as combatants but dialogic perspectives to be applied in juxtaposition and unison: we should think about the rhetoric *of* poetics, and the poetics *of* rhetoric, not just about rhetoric *and* poetics. This is an old discussion, and the likes of Booth, Stanley Fish, and Terry Eagleton have amply demonstrated the overlap between the pair. I merely want, here, to extend the same thinking toward audiovisual media.

The second binary I wish to unsettle is between "high" and "low" art. This chapter is, to my knowledge, the first (and likely last) to ever juxtapose *MST3K* with Dostoevsky; academics tend to consider nineteenth-century Russian literature and American comedic television worlds apart. Simply put, we don't slap nineteenth-century texts, pell-mell, alongside those composed over a century later in a different continent, and we certainly don't consider the "high" art of literature on the same plane as the "low" art of television.⁵¹ Yet I find the heuristic method that results from comparing the rhetorics of *MST3K* and Dostoevsky quite compelling. Rather than classifying texts in terms of refinement, or even their time of origin, I prefer a classification based on comparative analysis of rhetorical mechanics that accounts for *how* a text interacts with its audience, and in what contexts. Sometimes, it would seem, the most enlightening comparisons examine the most disparate texts.

NOTES

1. I am young enough to have grown up watching Mike's episodes of *MST3K*. Thus I'll refer to him by default.
2. See, in particular, Seymour Chatman, *Coming to Terms: The Rhetoric of Narrative in Fiction and Film* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1990).
3. See Ellen Bishop, ed., *Cinema-(to)-Graphy: Film and Writing in Contemporary Composition Courses* (Portsmouth, NH: Boynton/Cook, 1999) and Bronwyn T. Williams, *Tuned In: Television and the Teaching of Writing* (Portsmouth, NH: Boynton/Cook, 2002).
4. Roland Barthes, "The Rhetoric of the Image," in *Image—Music—Text*, trans. Stephen Heath (New York: Hill and Wang, 1978), 38.
5. Joel Hodgson and Josh Weinstein, "Mystery Science Theater 3000 Theme Song," 1988.
6. Seymour Chatman, *Story and Discourse: Narrative Structure in Fiction and Film* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1980), 148.
7. Bronwen T. Williams, *Tuned In*, 136–137.
8. John King, "Mystery Science Theater 3000, Media Consciousness, and the Post-modern Allegory of the Captive Audience," *Journal of Film and Video* 59, no. 4 (2007): 37–53.
9. King, "Mystery Science Theater 3000, Media Consciousness, and the Postmodern Allegory of the Captive Audience," 41.
10. Wayne C. Booth, introduction to *Problems in Dostoevsky's Poetics*, by M. M. Bakhtin, ed. and trans. Caryl Emerson, xiii–xxvii (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), xiii.
11. M. M. Bakhtin, *Speech Genres & Other Late Essays*, ed. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist, trans. Vern W. McGee (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2006), 71, 69.
12. Bakhtin, "Discourse in the Novel," in *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*, ed. Michael Holquist, trans. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist, 257–422 (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2004), 326. Italics Bakhtin's.
13. Bakhtin, "Discourse in the Novel," 262, 263.
14. Robert Stam, *Subversive Pleasures: Bakhtin, Cultural Criticism, and Film* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1989); Martin Flanagan, *Bakhtin and the Movies: New Ways of Understanding Hollywood Film* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009).
15. Flanagan, *Bakhtin and the Movies*, 21.
16. Stam, *Subversive Pleasures*, 50.
17. Bakhtin, "Discourse in the Novel," 282.
18. "The Final Sacrifice," *Mystery Science Theater 3000*, Sci-Fi Channel (25 July 1998), Netflix, 28 Apr. 2011.
19. Bakhtin, "Discourse in the Novel," 304.
20. Stam, *Subversive Pleasures*, 65.
21. "Prince of Space," *The Mystery Science Theater Collection*, Vol. 7, dir. Kevin Murphy (Los Angeles, CA: Rhino, 2005), DVD.
22. Marcus Tullius Cicero, *Orator*, trans. H. M. Hubbell, Loeb Classical Library 342, 295–509 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1942), 40.137.
23. Kenneth Burke, *A Rhetoric of Motives* (New York: Prentice Hall, 1952), 55. Italics Burke's.
24. "An Interview with Mike Nelson 2," *Mystery Science Theater 3000 Review*, <http://www.freerepublic.com/focus/fr/1145333/posts>. In the same interview, when asked about the absence of political humor in the show, Mike states, "Nothing would date the show more quickly than to include that. Plus, we had diverse viewpoints in the writing room, so we just steered away from it altogether."
25. Cicero preferred an impassioned, highly rhythmical style of oratory over the metrically "loose" and emotionally spare Attic style championed by Brutus and others. Cicero's *Orator*, addressed to Brutus, is a defense of his own style.
26. Cicero, *Orator*, 70.234.

27. Michael Holquist, introduction to *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*, by M. M. Bakhtin, ed. Michael Holquist, trans. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist, xv–xxxiii (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2004), xxiv.
28. Aristotle, *Rhetoric*, trans. W. Rhys Roberts, Modern Library 246, 1–218 (New York: Random House, 1954), 1411b–25.
29. Aristotle, *Rhetoric*, 1413a–10.
30. Cicero, *Orator*, 70.232.
31. Bakhtin, “Discourse in the Novel,” 269.
32. Bakhtin, “Discourse in the Novel,” 280. Emphasis mine.
33. Bakhtin, *Speech Genres & Other Late Essays*, 150.
34. M. M. Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics*, ed. and trans. Caryl Emerson (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), 5.
35. Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics*, 6.
36. Kay Halasek, “Starting the Dialogue: What Can We Do about Bakhtin’s Ambivalence toward Rhetoric?” *Rhetoric Society Quarterly* 22, no. 4 (1992): 1–9.
37. “Dostoyevsky, Fyodor Mikhailovich,” in *The Reader’s Encyclopedia*, ed. Katherine Baker Siepmann, 3rd ed., 270–272 (New York: Harper Perennial, 1987), 270.
38. Flanagan, *Bakhtin and the Movies*.
39. Wayne Booth, *The Rhetoric of Fiction*, 2nd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983), 74–75.
40. Booth, *The Rhetoric of Fiction*, 134.
41. Vladimir Nabokov, *Strong Opinions* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1973), 42.
42. Booth, introduction to *Problems in Dostoevsky’s Poetics*, xx.
43. Longinus, *On the Sublime*, trans. W. H. Fyfe and Rev. Donald Russell, Loeb Classical Library 199, 143–307 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2005), chap. 7.
44. King, “Mystery Science Theater 3000, Media Consciousness, and the Postmodern Allegory of the Captive Audience,” 40.
45. Wayne Booth, *A Rhetoric of Irony* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1974), 255.
46. Michel Foucault, “What Is an Author?” in *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice*, ed. Donald F. Bouchard, 113–138 (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1980), 124.
47. Chatman, *Story and Discourse*, 148, 149.
48. Seymour Chatman, *Coming to Terms: The Rhetoric of Narrative in Fiction and Film* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1990), 92–94.
49. Wayne Booth, “Is There an ‘Implied’ Author in Every Film?” *College Literature* 29, no. 2 (2002): 124–131. Italics Booth’s.
50. Janice Hocker Rushing and Thomas S. Frenzt, “Integrating Ideology and Archetype into Rhetorical Criticism,” *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 77, no. 4 (1991): 385–406.
51. For an in-depth study of the class-demarcating reasons behind such divisions, see Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*, trans. Richard Nice (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1984), especially his discussion of cinemagoing (26–28).

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Aristotle. *Rhetoric*. Translated by W. Rhys Roberts. Modern Library 246, 2–218. New York: Random House, 1954.
- Bakhtin, M. M. “Discourse in the Novel.” In *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*, edited by Michael Holquist, translated by Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist, 257–422. Austin: University of Texas Press, 2004.
- . *Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics*. Edited and translated by Caryl Emerson. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984.
- . *Speech Genres & Other Late Essays*. Edited by Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist. Translated by Vern W. McGee. Austin: University of Texas Press, 2006.

- Barthes, Roland. "The Rhetoric of the Image." In *Image—Music—Text*, translated by Stephen Heath, 32–51. New York: Hill and Wang, 1978.
- Bishop, Ellen, ed. *Cinema-(to)-Graphy: Film and Writing in Contemporary Composition Courses*. Portsmouth, NH: Boynton/Cook, 1999.
- Booth, Wayne C. Introduction to *Problems in Dostoevsky's Poetics*, by M. M. Bakhtin. Edited and translated by Caryl Emerson, xiii–xxvii. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984.
- . "Is There an 'Implied' Author in Every Film?" *College Literature* 29, no. 2 (2002): 124–131.
- . *The Rhetoric of Fiction*. 2nd ed. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983.
- . *A Rhetoric of Irony*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1974.
- Bourdieu, Pierre. *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*. Translated by Richard Nice. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1984.
- Burke, Kenneth. *A Rhetoric of Motives*. New York: Prentice Hall, 1952.
- Chatman, Seymour. *Coming to Terms: The Rhetoric of Narrative in Fiction and Film*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1990.
- . *Story and Discourse: Narrative Structure in Fiction and Film*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1980.
- Cicero, Marcus Tullius. *Orator*. Translated by H. M. Hubbell. Loeb Classical Library 342, 295–509. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1942.
- "Dostoyevsky, Fyodor Mikhailovich." In *The Reader's Encyclopedia*, edited by Katherine Baker Siepmann, 3rd ed., 270–272. New York: Harper Perennial, 1987.
- "The Final Sacrifice." *Mystery Science Theater 3000*. Sci-Fi Channel, 25 July 1998. Netflix, 28 April 2011.
- Flanagan, Martin. *Bakhtin and the Movies: New Ways of Understanding Hollywood Film*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009.
- Foucault, Michel. "What Is an Author?" In *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice*, edited by Donald F. Bouchard, 113–138. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1980.
- Halasek, Kay. "Starting the Dialogue: What Can We Do about Bakhtin's Ambivalence toward Rhetoric?" *Rhetoric Society Quarterly* 22, no. 4 (1992): 1–9.
- Hodgson, Joel, and Josh Weinstein. "Mystery Science Theater 3000 Theme Song." Music by Joel Hodgson and Charles Erickson, 1988.
- Holquist, Michael. Introduction to *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*, by M. M. Bakhtin. Edited by Michael Holquist, translated by Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist, xv–xxxiii. Austin: University of Texas Press, 2004.
- "An Interview with Mike Nelson 2." *Mystery Science Theater 3000 Review*. <http://www.freerepublic.com/focus/fr/1145333/posts>.
- King, John. "Mystery Science Theater 3000, Media Consciousness, and the Postmodern Allegory of the Captive Audience." *Journal of Film and Video* 59, no. 4 (2007): 37–53.
- Longinus. *On the Sublime*. Translated by W. H. Fyfe and Rev. Donald Russell. Loeb Classical Library 199, 143–307. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2005.
- Nabokov, Vladimir. *Strong Opinions*. New York: McGraw-Hill, 1973.
- "Prince of Space." *The Mystery Science Theater 3000 Collection*, Vol. 7. Directed by Kevin Murphy. Los Angeles, CA: Rhino, 2005. DVD.
- Rushing, Janice Hocker, and Thomas S. Frentz. "Integrating Ideology and Archetype into Rhetorical Criticism." *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 77, no. 4 (1991): 385–406.
- Stam, Robert. *Subversive Pleasures: Bakhtin, Cultural Criticism, and Film*. Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1989.
- Williams, Bronwyn T. *Tuned In: Television and the Teaching of Writing*. Portsmouth, NH: Boynton/Cook, 2002.