Abstract

The dissertation is a meta-critical inquiry into the theoretical foundations of evaluative criteria in rhetorical criticism. The dissertation proposes an answer to the questions of the origins of evaluative criteria in rhetorical criticism and how their appropriateness in relation to rhetorical objects can be justified. In order to answer these questions, the dissertation discusses historical, theoretical/methodological, and analytical issues.

The historical part of the dissertation investigates a claim by several prominent rhetoricians about a decline in evaluative rhetorical criticism during the twentieth century. It is concluded that a conception of rhetorical criticism without evaluation at its center seems to arise around 1970, but also that rhetorical scholars since Wichelns may have emphasized evaluation more in their programmatic writings than in actual critical practice. It is also argued that a solid theoretical basis for evaluative rhetorical criticism is a necessary condition for its legitimacy in an academic context.

The theoretical/methodological part of the dissertation proposes that ‘function’ and related notions may explain the origin and appropriateness of evaluative criteria in rhetorical criticism. It further proposes that ‘rational reconstruction’ is a suitable methodological approach for examining how the concept of function may be used to solve the problems of origin and appropriateness.

The analytical part of the dissertation examines how four critics/theorists (Wichelns, Auer, Kock, Patterson) base their evaluative reasoning on four difference conceptions of function, which they use to derive evaluative criteria and justify the appropriateness of these criteria.

The dissertation concludes that the concept of function constitutes one key notion in the pursuit of answers to some foundational questions in rhetorical criticism: Where evaluative criteria come from and how their appropriateness can be justified.