

**A Response to Maggie MacAulay, Kendra Magnusson,
Christopher Schiffmann, Jennifer Hamm, and Arlen Kasdorf**

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In their article “From Souvenir to Social Movement: PostSecret, Art, and Politics,” Maggie MacAulay, Kendra Magnusson, Christopher Schiffmann, Jennifer Hamm, and Arlen Kasdorf analyze the rhetoric surrounding the contemporary art project PostSecret and come to the conclusion that, due largely to the consequences entailed by anonymity, PostSecret should best be understood as “a cultural trend as opposed to an artistic and political revolution” (98). MacAulay et al. base much of their argument on Stuart Hall’s notion of “the popular.” Hall writes, “Transformations are at the heart of the study of popular culture” (228), and while MacAulay et al. agree that PostSecret has become a part of popular culture, they contend that it “ultimately fails to challenge and subvert oppressive social structures,” and thus does not elicit any true form of social transformation (98). While MacAulay et al. make valid points about some of PostSecret’s shortcomings as a medium for social change, I argue that by incorporating Aristotle’s notion of truth, one may view PostSecret not only as an effective means to instigate change, but also as a rhetorical tool that can help elicit a greater understanding of what is true and moral in today’s society.

Aristotle argues that discussion and debate are two of the most important tools we have to achieve a more accurate sense of truth (Grimaldi 173). In a passage from the *Rhetoric*, Aristotle asserts, “Rhetoric is useful because things that are true and things that are just have a natural tendency to prevail over their opposites” (qtd. in Grimaldi 173). If this claim is indeed an accurate representation of rhetoric, it may also be applied to Hall’s notion of popular culture to lead us to the conclusion that forms of rhetoric in popular culture should eventually move society to a greater understanding of what is true and just. Thus, because PostSecret is a part of our modern popular culture, its rhetoric should be carefully examined and analyzed to understand its purposes and its ultimate effects on its audience members.

MacAulay et al. focus on the rhetoric of the postcards themselves, but there is also much rhetoric within the “PostSecret Community.” One of the most important aspects of the PostSecret project is the accompanying message boards on which members of the PostSecret Community can share opinions, experiences, or more secrets. Although MacAulay et al. argue that the anonymity of the secrets leaves the audience “disengaged from collective action” (92), the PostSecret message boards do provide audience members with a way to act through discussion. In this way, each member who has his or her secret posted on the Web site (or in one the PostSecret books or at an art exhibit) or who posts a message on the message boards essentially becomes a legitimized rhetor, just as MacAulay et al. claim that such members become legitimized artists through PostSecret’s form of high art (93). Likewise, audience members become rhetoric “connoisseurs who are legit-

imized through their emotional reactions” (94). These rhetors and audience members can thus use their rhetoric to “establish a common moral perspective upon which cooperative behavior can be based” (Johnstone 16). So despite the fact that the rhetors of the postcards and the message boards remain anonymous, their discussions and rhetoric are not hindered—they can still build a more cohesive and united understanding of what is true and just.

Indeed, in their book *Communication Technology and Social Change*, Carolyn A. Lin and David J. Atkin indicate that online communication, despite the anonymity of its users, has effected much social change. For example, Lin and Atkin cite research that has found that because of the “increased anonymity and increased social distance” that the Internet provides, people are less likely to perceive social threats when discussing stigmatized issues such as racism, homosexuality, or feminism (48). Because online communication offers less threatening social situations, its anonymity also increases the chances of intimate self-disclosure between people (44). This heightened understanding of others and of what should be considered right or wrong inspires people to act on their beliefs, thus producing social change. PostSecret offers this type of online community, and because many of the posted secrets often deal with stigmatized issues, these topics are brought to the forefront of discussion.

MacAulay et al. analyze the negative aspects of the anonymity that PostSecret provides in inducing social change, and they introduce many valid points about some of PostSecret’s limitations as a potential social movement. However, by taking a neo-Aristotelian approach, we can see how anonymity in online communities such as the PostSecret Community actually fosters more genuine and intimate conversations, which can then help people collectively reach a more developed and balanced understanding of truth and morality. Using Hall’s notion of popular culture, we can then conclude that the people’s beliefs of truth and morality will elicit social transformation by first transforming what is accepted as popular culture.

Indeed, PostSecret may not classify as a social movement according to traditional standards—but then again, PostSecret is not traditional in any way. Its unique and unconventional ways of bringing people together through anonymously made postcards and an ever-growing online community may instead suggest that PostSecret is not meant to be grouped into any existing social classification. Thus, although PostSecret may not fully qualify as a full-fledged social movement, it nonetheless foments social change.

Works Cited

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