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BOOK REVIEW

Speculating Posterity: Inventions, Initiatives, and Explorations

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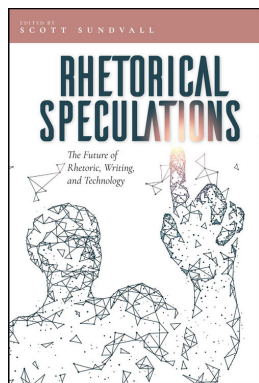
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Sundvall, Scott, ed. *Rhetorical Speculations: The Future of Rhetoric, Writing, and Technology*. Utah State University Press, 2019.



Will the future of rhetoric and writing technologies *happen*, or will its future *be made*? The difference between *possibility* (chance occurrence, passive development) and *potentiality* (deliberate intention, active invention) is an important one when considering where rhetoric, writing, and technology will go, and be going, in the futures that we make. Such is one lesson to be derived from Scott Sundvall's edited collection *Rhetorical Speculations: The Future of Rhetoric, Writing, and Technology*. Another, as Sid Dobrin points out in the book's compelling Afterward, is the increasingly-felt need for rhetoricians to eschew what has been our conventional habit of *reacting* to new technologies in our disciplinary habits, and instead to

more eagerly animate our practices with generative, inventive approaches to the rhetorics and technologies still to come.

Dobrin urges us to marshal our collective inventive capacities to take a far more *active* role in speculating—and then in *creating*— the *future-that-will-be* of writing technologies and technologies of writing. For Dobrin, rhetoricians have for too long “relied upon technologies emerging independent of disciplinary need, desire, or construction,” and therefore have become accustomed to working, practicing, and theorizing from what might be termed the vantage point of the spectator, of the passive bystander (300). Rhetoricians would be wise, he suggests, to “write our new technologies rather than wait for them to be written by others for purposes that we then adopt” (301). In the words of Sundvall and Joseph Weakland, rhetoric and writing studies too often “engages technological shifts reactively, after such technologies have already changed the production and reception of rhetoric and writing” (3). The future(s) of rhetoric, writing, and technology, then, will surely challenge invested stakeholders’ abilities to forgo *adapting* to new tools in favor of *inventing* them. We are challenged to *forge* future practices rather than *unearth* them, to *generate* the rhetorics of posterity rather than stumble into them. To answer this call, the essays assembled in this collection foreground speculation as a heuristic with which disciplinary stakeholders might catalyze the rhetorics of tomorrow as they germinate today. *Speculation*, the writers in the collection collectively surmise, is a valuable strategy with which RWS might begin to realize the questions from Victor Vitanza (1997) which open the collection: “What will have been . . . hysterics of rhetorics? What will have they looked, sounded, read like?” (22). To speculate is to productively probe, explore, and even multiply these questions without limiting them and confining them. As we cannot separate rhetoric and writing from technologies and from the ontological *technicity* of all rhetorics, speculation may be our best hope to envision a RWS that realizes Vitanza’s *future-perfect* tense question and more readily anticipates the suasive potentials unfurling now and in times to come.

Sundvall and Weakland’s Introduction asserts the values of working through technological innovations proactively rather than reactively in a number of different registers, with the collection’s most consistently maintained thread being the necessity of using a speculative model to invent RWS’ future rather than merely to receive it. The essays in the collection,

Sundvall and Weakland suggest, venture to “discover and invent the future itself— with technological machines that necessarily exceed our nostalgic coveting of literate antiquities,” suggesting even that discovery and invention “arise jointly, simultaneously, as inextricably co-born” (8). The relationship between rhetoric, writing, and technology, then, proves fundamental to not only where we are going, but also to where we are now: our pedagogies, our theoretical apparatus, our norms and the possibilities we’re able to conceive of. The collection as a whole affirms the inseparable connection between rhetorics and the technologies that help to call them into being, and provides a series of strategies derived through various forms of speculation which work *with* technological uncertainties, problematics, and puzzles to proactively engage future challenges in rhetoric while simultaneously expanding those present with us now. Speculation inherently engages with uncertainties, ambiguities, and unpredictabilities, and *Rhetorical Speculations* begins the endeavor of mobilizing these into directions that are productive and generative for rhetorics to come.

Rhetorical Speculations’ opening section Bodies introduces essays that speculate on technologies, both real and imagined, and the ways in which they might present models of rhetoric mostly unavailable in our current material, technological, and disciplinary environments. In Chapter One, Kristie S. Fleckenstein and Anna M. Worm propose two speculative models of rhetoric’s functional capacities derived from works of speculative fiction, models which they term *osmotic rhetoric* and *other rhetoric*. Foregrounding connection, togetherness, and harmony among rhetorical agents, *osmotic rhetoric* values ecological and community unity “wherein individuals become one with their environment through a species of pure communication” (29). *Osmotic rhetoric* views rhetorical energy as something that “flows, like osmosis,” from being to being with minimal hazard or blockage. As ethereal as osmotic rhetoric sounds to ears bound to our current material and technological present, by grounding their theories in speculative fiction, which necessarily hypothesizes how different material and technological infrastructures might inform and affect taken-for-granted notions (such as how we define and envision rhetoric), Fleckenstein and Worm are able to compellingly probe the speculative dimensions of rhetoric’s various relationships with technology in ways unbound by

typical academic scholarship. This hold true for Fleckenstein and Worm's notion of *other rhetoric*, a model which foregrounds respecting the realities of always-real differences as well as negotiating ways to empathize across them, provisionally allowing for communication through dissonance that still always verges on the edge of breakdown. Ultimately, Fleckenstein and Worm draw on the theories of Donna Haraway (1991; 2003) to speculate a possible "rhetoric of double perspectives" that might inform rhetorical action across *dreams of unity* and *realities of difference* alike, both in the imaginative technological-material realms informing the piece as well as in those elsewhere and still to come.

In similar fashion, attention to material networks in *Rhetorical Speculations* is felt in Alex Reid's "Composing with Deliberate Speed: Writing Humanity's Future Sensorium" and Steve Holmes' "The OOOculus Rift and the Canon of Style." Reid draws upon new materialist theory to contemplate implications for rhetoric stemming from what he calls a "glimpse" at "future cognitive networks" characterized by extended mind, distributed cognition, and the "fundamental premise that cognition is a networked activity crossing the imagined ontological boundaries of human and nonhuman spheres" (70). Reid explores and speculates upon these ideas through "glimpses" supplied by social media, smartphones, and wearable device technologies, including the Oculus Rift immersive virtual reality device Steve Holmes speculates on in the context of object-oriented ontologies in his contribution to the collection. For Holmes, Reid, Fleckenstein, and Worm, speculation about future modes of writing, rhetoric, and technology represent the probing of not only what will occur in times to come, but also into alternative ways of viewing what is occurring now, alternative ways of knowing which might additionally inform us as we begin to heed the calls of Sundvall, Weakland, and Dobrin to more actively invent *rhetorics-to-be* and *rhetorics-to-come*.

Rhetorical Speculations proves a valuable contribution toward speculating the future of digital pedagogies, too. Sarah J. Arroyo and Bahareh B. Alaei propose pedagogical strategies grounded in what they term "participatory popcycles." Arroyo and Alaei borrow from Gregory Ulmer (1985; 1994; 2003) and from their previous work (2015) to suggest strategies in which RWS students might learn to use video technologies to "negotiate and intervene in global problems" (278). Arroyo and

Alaei use ISIS propaganda video productions to explore various ways parody and satire can work as a form of civic engagement functioning across space, bodies, and technologies to disturb ideologies of violence and terrorism as articulated through online video forums. They suggest “participatory popcycles” as one strategy with which students in RWS courses might use brief, intense, circulation-friendly video productions to engage, probe, and respond to videos of public trauma such as those produced by ISIS. In a somewhat similar vein, Halcyon M. Lawrence, in “Beyond the Graphic User Interface: Speculations on the Future of Speech Technology and the Role of the Technical Communicator,” speculates on potential benefits increased engagement with speech-language technologies might provide to courses in technical writing and communication. Lawrence proposes that the pervasiveness and near-ubiquity of speech-using voice-user interfaces (VUIs) within mobile and other technological devices creates an exigence that technical communication courses are uniquely equipped to address: the as-yet unresolved question of “what the future of rhetoric and technical communication” *will be* “within the domain of speech technology” (227). VUIs and other speech technologies help address challenges concerning accessibility, as well as providing valuable learning experiences for budding technical communicators along lines of audience analysis, information design, user-centered design, and usability testing. Here, it is Lawrence’s speculation that in some important ways “technology shapes rhetorical outcomes” in exigencies that may be uniquely suitable for the academy to pursue unburdened by profit motives or by proprietary concerns (242). She asserts that “the role of the academy is needed more than ever to investigate and articulate a direction for the development” of technologies geared to improve life for “underrepresented and marginalized populations” (243). For Lawrence, speculation is not limited to metaphysical calls for new understandings and recognitions, but is also tied to on-the-ground techno-material changes that can be enacted in classrooms with tangible, embodied outcomes.

Speculating in a another direction, electracy is foregrounded in Rhetorical Speculations’ closing chapters, including the penultimate essay, Gregory L. Ulmer’s “Konsult- Electrate Justice.” Here, Ulmer extends his long-theorized concept of *electracy* into a newer dimension, which he calls *konsult*. He does so by examining narratives of violence, specifically those

associated with the Taliban and the group's provocative relationships with oral, literate, and electrated ways of knowing. Importantly, Ulmer situates *terror* within the context of his larger body of work by directly coupling it to the shift from an oral and literate cultural apparatus to one characterized by electrated modes of thinking, reasoning, and knowledge building. He writes "there is a name for a byproduct of apparatus adjustment: terror. Must this movement from one epoch and one apparatus to the next always require and promulgate violence?" (253). Speculating on the startling and unanticipated consequences of mutating collective and cultural identities associated with the shift from literate societies to societies dominated by electrated modes, Ulmer hypothesizes that the partially-unforeseeable metaphysics of electracity may be increasingly implicated in crises of justice evolving within the emerging, but as of yet unknowable, political dimensions of electracity. In an attempt to partially address these concerns, Ulmer introduces the concept of *konsult*, revising electrated metaphysics to conceive desire as ontological, as "the order of being" (270). Ulmer's primary investment here for electracity is to embrace "the challenge of konsult," to "design and construct in the apparatus a genre within which literate students convert to electracity" (275). Here, students might begin perhaps to *speculate themselves* on what *justice* and a proposed "fifth estate" in electracity might do to respond to violences that are global and which span time, apparatus, and *theopraxis* (what Ulmer terms the attempted syncretism of capacities such as *theoria*, *praxis*, and *poiesis*). In this sense, Ulmer speculates similarly to Kristine L. Blair, who writes in "Gendered Technologies of the Self(ie), or Why We Really Need to 'Keep Up' with the Kardashians" that with digital technologies, and especially within the apparatus of electracity, the speculative hope for a future digital justice performance will need to include production, rather than just consumption, of texts in an effort to develop a multimodal citizenry. Blair introduces the notion of *gender electracity*, which moves the understandings of electracity as practiced by students and by instructors toward "merely functional literate consumption and production of technologized selves... to a more critically, rhetorically, and, I would add, ethically self-aware identity performance online" (113). Both Blair and Ulmer venture to speculate toward progressive dimensions of electracity that not only build upon the project of mapping and surveying where electracies are likely to evolve

toward, but also proactively *create* and *invent* these *new* dimensions of electracy in doing so.

As electracies expand and continue to amplify their affects in diverse dimensions of our lives, the value of speculating about what is happening, what has happened before, and what is still to come for rhetoric will only grow in value. The collection *Rhetorical Speculations: The Future of Rhetoric, Writing, and Technology* marshals an array of varied takes concerned with exploring what it will mean for rhetoric, forever fused to technologies and to their invention, to truly engage the apparatus unfolding within electracy. If we pursue Vitanza's *future-perfect* question of what rhetorics of the future will *look like*, will *sound like*, will *read like*, we nourish the opportunity to speculate into dimensions unknowable to us now. Such speculations, the writers in this collection contend, are well worth pursuing.

For Further Reading

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