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Review Essay

Pushing the Boundaries of Rhetoric: Visual Materialism, Dialectics, and Hospitality

Still Life with Rhetoric: A New Materialist Approach for Visual Rhetorics

Laurie E. Gries

Logan: Utah State UP, 2015. 324 pp.

Dialectical Rhetoric

Bruce McComiskey

Logan: Utah State UP, 2015. 228 pp.

Hospitality and Authoring: An Essay for the English Profession

Richard Haswell and Janis Haswell

Logan: Utah State UP, 2015. 232 pp.

Working in academic roles can demand that scholars and administrators appear certain of our knowledge. The bureaucratic power of institutions can require a kind of unshakeable professionalism, as we seek credibility in the eyes of academic peers, higher education administrations, legislatures, and various publics. However, pushes to “name what we know,” while necessary and even useful in such situations, can limit how and where we draw

the boundaries of our field. Moreover, disciplinary certainty can overlook what drew me—and perhaps many of you readers—to the study of rhetoric and writing in the first place: those things we *don't* know, the questions we can't yet answer, the mysterious and complex ways that rhetoric and writing does “the work of the world” (Perelman).¹

The three books reviewed here all delve into different areas of rhetorical not-knowing and by doing so sketch a few gestural lines that suggest a more capacious—and perhaps messier—field of rhetorical study. All three were all published by Utah State University Press in 2015, showing the vision and commitment of Michael Spooner and others at the press to circulating deeply intellectual, challenging, and broad visions of rhetoric and writing studies. The field, as suggested by these three books, is deeply theoretical, committed to embracing uncertainty, and fundamentally hopeful about the value and utility of rhetorical studies. None of these books are easy or quick reads, nor do they offer specific answers or new certainties, but they do reward those willing to commit the time and energy. The first book explores how viral images call into question what rhetorical means and offers a new materialist methodology for rhetorical scholarship; the second tries to reconcile the concepts of rhetoric and dialectic to imagine an open-ended process for teaching and arguing; and the third book explores the concept of hospitality and how it could affect our teaching of writing and literature.

Laurie E. Gries's *Still Life with Rhetoric* is an ambitious work that could almost be considered two books. The first 132 pages are a dense and richly theoretical description of a new materialist rhetorical approach and methodology to analyzing visual rhetoric. The latter 164 pages of text are an in-depth and fascinating enactment of that methodology through a four-part case study of the Obama Hope image as it circulated in political and public life from 2006 onward. Either half of this book would be valuable and important, but together the work advances our field's approach to the rhetorical life of visual things, which interact with human and technical agents to circulate, change, and create in the world. Gries offers both a rich case study and a theorized yet empirical methodology for creating new materialist rhetorical scholarship.

Gries offers a compelling definition of rhetorical: all things and texts have the *potential* to become rhetorical (“something's ability to induce change in thought, feeling, and action; organize and maintain collective

formation; exert power, etc.”) but that potential is only realized once they “circulate, enter into relations, and generate material consequences” (11). This definition alone requires a radical rethinking of the teaching we do around rhetorical situations. Asking students to enter into hypothetical situations and create texts never meant to move into the world, for example, would not be considered rhetorical by this definition. Gries shows us that rhetoric is an event that continually unfolds in time and can’t be tied down or fully defined by individual texts or analyses. Gries’s goal is to give nonhuman things “their do” as rhetorical agents (she prefers the term *actant*) that move and change and have consequences in the world. She eloquently describes the agency of things, like images, via the metaphor of tumbleweeds, which can move, gather material, grow and diminish, and change their environment, even though technically they are not alive.

Gries stresses that in order to track the impact of visual rhetorical circulation in today’s media-driven, mediated world, one must become comfortable with “the uncertainty of not knowing where exactly the research will lead but also what consequences might unfold” (91). She acknowledges the artificial limitations a researcher places on a project, but warns that one should remain flexible and open to gather, categorize, and describe while seeking to “suspend judgment as long as possible” (100). Rhetoric is a process with no finite boundaries, no beginning or ends, which is always changing and moving, so any analysis needs to accept its own artificial limitations. But, to Gries, this doesn’t mean one can’t be meticulous and gather empirical evidence. Rather than merely saying an image has “gone viral,” Gries offers a detailed methodology that she calls “iconographic tracking.” This research strategy is based on six principles indicative of new materialist rhetorical approaches—becoming, transformation, consequentiality, vitality, agency, and virality (86–87). In other words, Gries wants to explore how things become rhetorical actants that “materialize, flow, and intra-act with a variety of entities in and across various assemblages” (88). To try to account for an image that is continuously changing and moving, her methodology privileges following the way the Obama Hope symbol formed, circulated, and created metacultures that celebrated, disparaged, and parodied the image and inspired others to organize politically in the United States and abroad. Iconographic tracking requires following the various ways the image flowed, while embracing uncertainty and openness—not rushing to analysis—and focusing deeply on description and interview of key human

actors. Gries describes her act of collecting a large data set, using software platforms like Zotero, assembling data into collections, looking for trends and collecting more data, and studying the images in terms of “seven interrelated material processes—composition, production, transformation, distribution, circulation, collectivity and consequentiality” (113).

If I have any critique about this stunning book, it’s a minor one: the theoretical and methodological sections are so filled with key terms and ideas, I found it at times difficult to understand the terms’ relationships to one another. Gries provides a useful infographic that maps key terms of her method (290), but even that image contains only some of the many terms she uses. I think the reason for so much terminology is not theoretical uncertainty, however, but exactly the opposite: Gries seems committed to painstakingly explaining every idea that contributed to her project and its theoretical history, which causes her to raise and discuss many theoretical threads and tangents. But in the end, she maps out a coherent and challenging rationale and methodology for analyzing visual, digital rhetorical images.

While the first two parts of the book are deeply theoretical and somewhat challenging reading, part 3 is an accessible and informative description of the Obama Hope image, its creation by Shepard Fairey, its role in the 2008 election, the fights it engendered over fair use and copyright, the ways the image was satirized and parodied, and how it was (and continues to be) remixed and used in various ways, including global activism. If you’re someone not deeply schooled in materialist theory, you might consider reading the introduction and the Obama Hope case study chapters first, and then go back to read the theory and methodology chapters afterward. I found myself better synthesizing the terminology and theoretical thrust of her methodology after having read its enactment in the careful, detailed case studies.

This book has already been well received in the field, and deservedly so. It won both the 2016 CCCC Advancement of Knowledge Award and the 2016 CCCC Research Impact Award, a testament to the innovation and meticulous work of this book. I appreciate how Gries simultaneously embraces the uncertainty, mobility, and ultimate uncontainability of rhetoric, while committing to an empirical methodology that can imperfectly but instructively help us understand how rhetorical things do work in the world.

Like Gries, Bruce McComiskey is interested in how rhetorical study can intervene in the world, especially in those no-win, zero-sum debates where no common ground is apparent. In *Dialectical Rhetoric*, McComiskey seeks to rehistoricize rhetorical theory by returning the history of dialectic to the discussion, with a goal of envisioning rhetoric as a dialectical art that can “mediate orientations that, on the surface, appear opposed, irreconcilable, incommensurable” (143). McComiskey outlines a vision of rhetoric as a three-dimensional art that productively draws from and is in conversation with—rather than opposed to—the concept of dialectics. He borrows the concept of *dimensionality* from Herbert Marcuse’s *One-Dimensional Man* as a way to trace the changing historical relationship between rhetoric and dialectic. He details how rhetoric and dialectic have historically been defined in one of two ways: either as counterparts, expressing alternate views in conversation with one another (two-dimensional positions), as they were in Sophistic and Aristotelian views; or rather, as different means of articulating a true (one-dimensional) position, as in Platonic rhetoric and from the Middle Ages through the nineteenth century. McComiskey walks meticulously through Western rhetorical history to document the shifting meanings of both terms, rhetoric and dialectic, due to prevailing intellectual and social power.

After tracing the shifting history of rhetoric and dialectic, McComiskey turns to composition/rhetorical theory to trace the presence or absence of a discussion of dialectic. He argues that dialectic plays a small role in rhetorical theory and focuses on the handful of scholars who invoke the term. He credits Anne Berthoff for making dialectic central to her scholarship, but he characterizes it as a one-dimensional form that equates dialectic with metacognition. He views Marxist-informed scholarship—by writers like James Berlin, Alan France, Patricia Bizzell, and even Marcuse himself—as two dimensional in that it acknowledges competing truths and social orders but, he believes, relies too heavily on critique. McComiskey highlights the community-based scholarship of Linda Flower as exemplary of what he calls three-dimensional rhetoric. He also draws on the work of Byron Hawk, Victor Vitanza, and John Muckelbauer, by arguing that these scholars point to rhetoric as a three-dimensional dialectic as a strategic and topical art even though they reject the concept of dialectic itself.

McComiskey’s goal is to define and exemplify three-dimensional rhetoric, which he sees as more exploratory and less teleological than the

two-dimensional works he critiques. He describes the methods of three-dimensional rhetoric as deconstruction, dialogue, identification, critique, and juxtaposition. Deconstruction, to be three dimensional, seeks an alternate concept to complicate or throw into crisis competing terms (116). Dialogue must be informed by “other orientations, creating a shared understanding that can serve as a foundation for productive communication” (125). Identification, he contends, seeks to connect or reconnect disparate ideas to create a new view or orientation (131). Even though he considers critique to be a limiting problematic of two-dimensional rhetoric, McComiskey includes it as a three-dimensional method when it is used “not as a polemical tool but an appropriative tool,” in essence, choosing what is useful from all sides of an argument (136). Juxtaposition is used to defamiliarize ideas or information by placing differing discourses adjacent to one another to illuminate cultural contradictions or ideas without comment.

I appreciate how generously McComiskey forwards the work of scholars who disavow dialectic (like Hawk, Vitanza and Muckelbauer) but whose work he sees as contributing to the range of communication technologies that make up three-dimensional rhetoric as he sees it. He also notes the necessity of one- and two-dimensional rhetorics in certain situations. I would have appreciated a similar generosity when evaluating the work of Marcuse, Berlin, France, and other Marxist-inspired writers, whom he dismisses as too focused on critique to imagine affirmative views. While *One-Dimensional Man* functions as the antithesis to Marcuse’s earlier *Eros and Civilization* and represents Marcuse’s critique at its sharpest, other work by Marcuse embraces utopian thinking to imagine not-yet-imaginable ideas and worlds. His *Essay on Liberation* probably best represents that impulse of envisioning new possibilities. Also, I think there is much creative pedagogical potential relevant to three-dimensional rhetoric especially in the later articles by Alan France and much of the work by Patricia Bizzell and James Berlin. I would hate to see our field dismiss its social turn as too polemical to provide useful guidance for us now. As McComiskey himself usefully asserts, a three-dimensional approach takes what it needs, wherever it can find it, with a spirit of openness and generosity. I embrace that idea and appreciate the usefulness he finds in Marxist scholars like Marcuse, whose writings offer much promise to our field that has not yet been plumbed.

To illustrate his theory of three-dimensional dialectical rhetoric, McComiskey usefully provides a student essay to correspond to each

methodological point he raises (deconstruction, dialogue, etc). The student essays are useful and engaging, but they each exemplify a single aspect of three-dimensional dialectical rhetoric. I would love to learn more about McComiskey's pedagogy of dialectical rhetoric and how he presents its values to students. In the final chapter, he discusses aspects of the digital world that he feels exemplify the values of dialectical rhetoric, namely "difference (not opposition), expansion (not negation), process (not object), mediation (not determinism), and collaboration (not monologue)" (151). His focus on technology is optimistic (there is no discussion of the trolling and angry negation that has become central to social media), revealing it as a model of the open-ended rhetoric he imagines, which helps make his theorizing timely and relevant.

McComiskey's book is thoroughly researched as it argues that three-dimensional rhetoric is necessary for allowing increasing complexity for rhetorical subjects, responses, and orientations. I appreciate how he incorporates student writing as a means to his own theory making about how dialectic and rhetoric can inform each other in both rhetorical theory and practice. For those interested in the history of rhetoric and its connection to contemporary composition theory and pedagogy, this book is essential reading.

While McComiskey incorporates student writing, *Hospitality and Authoring: An Essay for the Profession* by Richard Haswell and Janis Haswell is deeply interested in student writing and teachers' orientations to our students. The co-writers describe the book as "one long essay," but it instead reads like eleven separate essays (nine co-written by the Haswells and one written by Richard and one by Janis) that together form a meditation on the theoretical concept of hospitality, its history, its imaginary limits, and its connection to being a reader, writer, and teacher. The book begins from the premise that three criteria are necessary for successful writing: potentiality, singularity, and hospitality; the first two criteria—potentiality (a writer's motivation to keep on writing) and singularity (each person's uniqueness in terms of history, experience, biology, etc.)—form the topic of the Haswells' 2010 book *Authoring*, while hospitality becomes the focus of this book. Hospitality is a concept that resonates with religious and historical connotations, and in the first essays the Haswells explore the theoretical and historical roots of the concept, drawing especially on the Homeric, Judeo-Christian, and Central and Eastern Asian traditions.

Hospitality, as the Haswells define it, requires risk and radical openness as two parties come together to exchange gifts and time. They draw on the theoretical work of the post–World War II philosopher Emmanuel Levinas to further define hospitality as the opposite of war:

In sum, for Levinas the process of war represents the iron fist of *totality*, the assumption that life is objective, calculable, codifiable and therefore controllable. By contrast the process of hospitality is a radical relation with the Other, a face-to-face encounter—creative, uncontrollable, and therefore understandable only as *infinity*. In the hospitable encounter lies the root of ethics, whereas war pursues winning by any means and thus stands outside of morality. . . war undermines hospitality, which is open-handed, freely chosen, and receptive to critique. Within hospitality, war is always a possibility, but only hospitality can prevent war. (31–32)

The Haswells conclude that chapter with perhaps their strongest argument: that education in English classrooms, which tend toward models of totality, would benefit by moving toward conditions of infinity, in other words, to shift from “modes of hostility to modes of hospitality” (47). They point out a deep contradiction in our culture between the drive toward infinity that college education should encourage and the totalizing methods inculcated in college. They argue that students and teachers need to open themselves up to “the incomplete, unsure and infinite” rather than seek completion and certainty (47).

When they turn to the English classroom they argue that it “can both be *like* hospitable space and *be* a hospitable space” (30), despite many scenarios, which they outline, that can undermine attempts at hospitality, such as the teacher acting as a caretaker with specific goals in mind, or the students seeing themselves as consumers, not open to change. Additionally, the Haswells acknowledge the difficulty of building more hospitable spaces in higher education, which they see as “profoundly antihospitable” in that it encourages all readers to be “trained more in suspicion rather than in respect” (8).

In several essays, they focus on inhospitality in literary criticism, arguing that works of literature, in the hand of literary critics, cease to be works of art and “become the pawn[s] of a factional argumentative game” (67). Literary criticism doesn’t seek to respond hospitably to a writer’s text but rather to colonize it for the critic’s purpose (67). Such a critique of literary reading practices certainly rings true, given that the idea of “being

critical” becomes the default approach by which students and critics alike tend to approach a new text. While I value the Haswells’ critique, I was disheartened that the only examples of “colonial criticism” they offer are by women critics of color—Arun Mukherjee and Sangeeta Ray (69–74) critiquing Michael Ondaatje. The relevant question to me isn’t whether these two writers are or are not guilty of inhospitable reading, but rather what does it mean to use *only* these two women as a synecdoche of the whole enterprise of literary criticism? Their argument would be more persuasive if applied to a broader range of literary approaches and not just postcolonial ones.

The chapter “Hospitable Reception: Reading in Student Writing” asks what it would mean to become hospitable readers of student writing. While the Haswells raise more questions than they answer, the questions resonate importantly: What might it mean or look like for student writers to ask something of their readers? What would surrendered reading look like? Are teachers the host or guest when relating to student essays? I love the thought experiment of imagining what being a hospitable teacher would look like, while realizing that institutional demands might make the openness required of hospitality perhaps too risky or undesirable: if a student wants to write in a genre or situation far different from what the course asks, how do we receive that writing and respond to it?

In “Ten Students Reflect on Their Independent Authoring,” the Haswells argue that when students write self-sponsored works, they escape “an academic ethos . . . that invades the students” and instead write for their own purposes, which is more organic and shaped by the writer’s “druthers” than a preexisting agenda or assignment (115). They see in these writers “a drive to author, a hunger to articulate their insights and express their views,” which is often lacking in required writing courses (116). And a question left lingering is, Can such an ethos be brought into writing classrooms, or is it the fact of its extracurricular status that makes this writing so exciting to students?

The book contains other essays—on the rereading of literature, on the desire not to write, on novels as moral dialogues, and on tropes and metaphors for discussing learning reworked to include hospitable metaphors. The concluding chapter doesn’t land on a system or program for hospitality but rather asks how our classes would change if we saw our students as authors and responded to their texts more hospitably than we do, which seems an essential question no matter how one answers it. The Haswells

argue that to commit to hospitality would require more investment from both students and teachers but could lead to more fulfilling classes and relationships that could possibly move beyond hospitality—toward friendship or other deeper meaning.

Before reading this book I had never read or thought much about the concept of hospitality as a theoretical one, and since I have read it, I will admit the question of whether and how I can be a more hospitable reader has influenced my thinking, especially as I write here: How does one give a hospitable but honest book review? What does a hospitable reader do with questions or reservations that arise while reading? Will the writers I profile here see my reviews as hospitable, because I intend them to be so? Plus, as a writer, I would want my published work to be greeted on its own terms and explored as a welcomed stranger, as the Haswells suggest.

I thank the Haswells for raising these questions for me, and for all the questions and ideas raised and tentatively answered by Gries and McComiskey as well. Together these works attest to the belief that it is the questions we ask—more than certain answers—that will sustain us as scholars and teachers of rhetoric.

Notes

1. Les Perelman, personal conversation with author, 18 July 2016.

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