

Reviews



Rhetorical Bodies, Jack Selzer and Sharon Crowley, eds. (Madison: U of Wisconsin P, 1999. 395 pages).

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Jack Selzer and Sharon Crowley's *Rhetorical Bodies* is one of the first books in rhetoric and composition studies to shift attention from written text to the concrete visual culture that pervades contemporary public discourse. The result of collaborative efforts at the 1997 Penn State Conference on Rhetoric and Composition, this collection of essays explores two related themes: the "rhetorical dimension in the material" and the "material dimension in rhetoric." Essays that explore the rhetorical dimension in the material examine some of the ways in which "things" (for example, bodies, monuments, and visual images) communicate rhetorical meaning. Essays that explore the material dimension in rhetoric focus on the physical existence of texts (broadly conceived) and the real contexts in which they are consumed. Overall, *Rhetorical Bodies* makes a strong contribution to existing scholarship in composition studies; however, its contributors ignore, for the most part, the fact that material rhetoric has been a prominent subject in other scholarly fields for decades. Also, they neglect the process of composing material rhetorics, limiting their contributions only to critical academic discourse.

Rhetorical Bodies arguably should be situated within the larger project of material rhetoric, which, in my view, is a response—though certainly not an oppositional one—to social constructionist rhetoric. Social constructionist rhetoric is a familiar subject and needs little explanation here. Its primary assumption, of course, is that the social world of discourse conditions human perceptions of reality—that is, the material world. While the material world may have some kind of existence outside the realm of human perception, it is wholly within human perception that this material world derives any meaning or significance.

In short, perception, understanding, and communication all proceed through the agencies and constraints of social discourse. Within this framework, “things” are not rhetorical; instead, people perform rhetorical acts *with* things.

In contrast, material rhetoric posits that things do indeed perform rhetorical acts. If we are to better understand the sense in which the material is rhetorical, I think it is useful to theorize two kinds of material rhetorics: “determinist” and “dialectical.” Determinist material rhetoric is not concerned with the social construction of reality; instead, it focuses on reality’s construction of the social. Determinist material rhetoric, then, is diametrically opposed to the social constructionist position. For example, in “economic determinism,” which is the most reductive manifestation of materialist methods, forces of the economy (the “base,” in Marxist terminology) are viewed as the ultimate cause, in a strictly one-way flow, of all aspects of the social world (the “superstructure”). The most effective political project within this framework is the transformation of the economic base (more specifically, the mode of production), which would, at least in theory, result in certain predictable transformations of the social superstructure. A more generalized determinism would broaden the scope of the base beyond economic forces, yet still restrict its “content” to material existence. Thus, determinist material rhetoric entails the critique of economic and material forces in the base that work to oppress certain classes of people in the social realm of the superstructure. The hope is that social transformation in the oppressive superstructure would result directly from (or be determined by) rhetorical performances aimed at real transformation in the material base. Of course, the limitations of determinist material rhetoric are many, since it denies any flow of influence from the social world of the superstructure to the material world of the base—a view that is simply untenable in a thoroughly postmodern media-saturated world.

Dialectical material rhetoric is simultaneously concerned with the social construction of reality and reality’s construction of the social. Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels often complained that their writings were misinterpreted as determinist rather than dialectical. In a letter to Joseph Bloch, penned in 1890, just five years before his death, Engels writes,

According to the materialist conception of history, the *ultimately* determining element in history is the production and reproduction of real life. More than this neither Marx nor I have ever asserted. Hence if somebody twists this into saying that the economic element is the *only* determining

one, he transforms that proposition into a meaningless, abstract, senseless phrase. The economic situation is the basis, but the various elements of the superstructure . . . also exercise their influence upon the course of the historical struggles and in many cases preponderate in determining their *form*.

While it is true, then, that economics (or, more generally, material existence) is perhaps the most important factor in dialectical materialism, it is certainly not the only factor. Social institutions (education, religion, law, philosophy, politics, to name just a few) also have tremendous impact on the very nature and function of the material world.

One of the many virtues of *Rhetorical Bodies* is that its contributors resist the temptation to treat their subjects in reductively determinist ways. Instead, as a “rhetorical body,” the collection explores the dialectical intersection of material and social worlds, often in the context of the theme of “writing the (human) body.” In the collection’s final essay, “The Materiality of Coding,” Celeste Condit argues compellingly that the material world is alive with energies—structuring yet ever-changing energies—that exist outside of human perception. These energies condition social knowledge, while at the same time social knowledge conditions human perception of the material world. Condit reads human DNA as a paradigmatic example of this dialectical interaction. In “Legible Bodies,” Susan Wells examines the ways in which the material fact of human dissection influenced the rhetorical lives of women physicians during the late nineteenth century. In “Conspicuous Consumption,” Christine De Vinne explores the famous Donner Party’s cannibalism as a rhetorical act; she also details the rhetorical context that validated the consumption of human flesh, a context that turned many members of the Donner Party into reluctant folk heroes. In “Autobiography after Prozac,” John Schilb suggests that the chemical changes in the minds of Prozac users alter their very subjectivities, transforming, in the process, the form and function of autobiography.

Other essays in the collection focus on different kinds of bodies (that is, inanimate bodies) as rhetorical sites; yet, within the framework of material rhetoric, these bodies are no less rhetorical than human bodies. In “Contemporary U.S. Memorial Sites as Exemplars of Rhetoric’s Materiality,” Carole Blair focuses on the rhetorical nature of a given monument’s physical existence, both by itself and in relation to other monuments. She also acknowledges the very (human) institutional origins of these monuments and the contexts in which they are erected. In

“Disintegrating Bodies of Knowledge,” Wendy Sharer argues that the economics and pragmatics of archival storage are endangering primary research in rhetoric and composition, even as the discipline is just coming to a full understanding of the immense importance of this work. According to Sharer, limited space, lack of scholarly attention, and the physical deterioration of aging texts are making archival research more and more difficult.

One important component of the argument implicit throughout *Rhetorical Bodies* is that a new material rhetoric also requires new ways of “reading” the discourse about material existence. In “Material of Desire,” Karyn Hollis describes the distinctly materialist poetry written by working-class women at the Bryn Mawr Summer School from 1921 to 1938. Peter Mortensen’s “Figuring Illiteracy” argues that the material existence of rural people has contributed in some ways to their lack of print literacy, but it also explores the ways in which the very stereotypes associated with rural life have led to erroneous judgments of illiteracy. In “Materializing Public and Private,” Christina Haas explores how a single text—a permanent injunction limiting protest outside an abortion clinic—actually defined the physical realms of public and private space surrounding the clinic. Moreover, she points out that these kinds of readings (readings that account for texts’ influences in the material world) are becoming increasingly important.

Several of the essays in the collection also address the difficult issue of reading images, or visual signs, intended to communicate rhetorically. In “Material Literacy and Visual Design,” Lester Faigley argues that new paradigm shifts in literacy—from oral to print or print to image—always involve the incorporation, rather than the complete overthrow, of previous paradigms. This is especially true for postmodern visual culture, including the design practices common among Web page authors. Finally, Melissa Hardie explores the rhetorical phenomenon of the “beard,” an individual whose primarily “visual” function is to disguise the sexuality of another, while Barbara Dickson reads the *Vanity Fair* cover photo of a very pregnant Demi Moore as a potential challenge to the dominant discourse on the pregnant body.

Rhetorical Bodies is a remarkable collection that draws together diverse issues and objects for a single purpose: the exploration of material rhetoric. Throughout all of these very different essays, there is assumed a dialectic between matter, mind, and meaning—between thing, thought, and text—a dialectic that affirms a social constructionist view of discourse, while simultaneously extending it into the world of material

existence. Yet, we must also ask what the collection lacks and where we might go next.

For example, I am disappointed that this collection does not acknowledge, in a more significant way, the long tradition of material rhetoric that has been so prominent in the work produced by scholars in other academic fields. Jack Selzer’s introduction does indeed lead readers in the general direction of this tradition, yet his discussion is quite brief. Furthermore, although some scholarship in cultural studies, semiotics, and feminist media studies is cited in a few of the essays, there is little clear sense of each essay’s contribution to a larger body of existing scholarship on material rhetoric. A firm location within the existing traditions of material rhetoric—those established by members of the Frankfurt Institute of Social Research and the Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies, as well as recent work in feminist media studies, critical pedagogy, social semiotics, and critical discourse analysis—would provide readers with a better sense of the book’s history and context and, I believe, lend greater significance and weight to the important scholarship in each contribution to the collection.

I am also disappointed that there is little attention paid to the actual composition of material rhetoric. In “Theses on Feuerbach,” Marx addresses the problem of limiting oneself to critical discourse, asserting that “The philosophers have only *interpreted* the world, in various ways; the point, however, is to *change* it.” If the discourse on material rhetoric remains critical (or philosophical, in Marx’s terms), then the vital knowledge gained through this critical material rhetoric will necessarily perish in the silence of its knower. Rhetoric and composition is primarily a productive art, an art aimed at the invention, arrangement, and delivery of cultural meaning—whether through voice, text, or image. Critical knowledge is “good” only insofar as it is “useful,” and it is useful only insofar as it leads to positive rhetorical interventions into the material and discursive processes of oppressive political formations.

Despite these two limitations, *Rhetorical Bodies* is a strong contribution to a growing interest in rhetoric and composition scholarship. While I occasionally longed for a clearer sense of the book’s own history and greater attention to the composition of material rhetoric, I am certain that *Rhetorical Bodies* will change the way that many of us view the very discipline we study and teach. Few books in the history of rhetoric and composition studies can claim this degree of disciplinary influence; hence, *Rhetorical Bodies* should be required reading.