

Reflective Essay on “Materiality v. Language”

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I’ll begin with the confession that I’ve resisted the recent wave of interest in “material rhetoric,” partly because I remain committed to what I see as its contrary, the idea that rhetoric is symbolic in essence, and partly because I haven’t been able to figure out what it means. At times, and in some hands, material rhetoric seems to refer to the rhetorical effects that material objects and environments can have on us and at times to the effects that rhetoric has on people and events in the material world. The first is a useful expansion of rhetoric from linguistic to other symbolic systems, but it remains in the realm of the symbolic; the second is just what the point of rhetoric has been from the beginning: we’ve known at least since Gorgias (not to mention Callicles) that symbolic systems intersect with the material world in ways that can make a difference. Rhetoric’s long juxtaposition with violence, on the one hand, and with seduction, on the other, is perhaps the extreme manifestation of its imbrication with the material world, but this isn’t new, though perhaps we’re paying renewed attention .

Something that *is* new—and that might help explain some angles of interest in materiality—is the attention to the media of rhetorical expression that technological change has made difficult to ignore. The medium—whether print, speech, designed space, painting, etc.—is that which materializes rhetoric, that which turns the symbolic into physical form.

As Bolter noted in 1993, the new media invite a new attention to rhetorical delivery ; Bolter was talking specifically about hypertext, but the point is generalizable. This attention to delivery is new in part because so little attention had been paid to it for so long, a situation that Ong attributes to the Ramist curricular reforms of the 16th century, another time of technological change. According to Ong, “The major (but not the only) underpinning of the new Ramist mindset turned out to have been print technology” .

The Ramist reforms, as you’ll recall, reconfigured the rhetorical canon, assigning invention and disposition to logic and style and delivery to rhetoric. The canon embeds the basic distinction between substance and medium, between what should be said and how it should be said, a distinction that forms, as Fortenbaugh points out, a basic “framework which shapes rhetorical theory” . The Ramist bifurcation reinforces this distinction for modernity. Invention and judgment, the subjects of dialectic, are the substantive arts, which provide the content of our messages; style and delivery, the subjects of Ramist rhetoric, are the formal arts, which transmit messages; they concern the communication medium.

Classical treatments of delivery discuss speech as a medium; in fact, “delivery” *means* “oral delivery,” and the ancient texts focus on the management of voice and gesture, the auditory and visual dimensions of the live performance. More than any other canon, delivery is in the realm of practice; it is where the

materiality and force of the event press into the future and test the limits of the possible. In the tradition of practical oratory, delivery is valued for its power to connect with the audience; the story of Demosthenes claiming that the three most important things in oratory are delivery, delivery, and delivery is repeated approvingly by Cicero and Quintilian, who both offer extensive discussions of vocal tone, pitch, pace, movement, and gesture, particularly as they affect emotional expression.

Ramism reproduces and reinforces the substance/medium distinction that is naturalized in the classical tradition, but the new media context of the sixteenth century gave it a completely new twist. To the Ramist mind, as Ong understands it, “speech is no longer a medium in which the human mind and sensibility lives [sic]. It is resented, rather, as an accretion to thought, hereupon imagined as ranging noiseless concepts or ‘ideas’ in a silent field of mental space”. Ramism is oriented “toward an object world (associated with visual perception) rather than toward a person world (associated with voice and auditory perception)”. In the context of the print medium, which was by then a century old, Ramist treatments of oral delivery are understandably anemic and sometimes omitted altogether. In fact, all the energy of delivery flows to *dispositio*—how thoughts are spatialized on the page—but *dispositio* is now a part of dialectic, not rhetoric. Print *silences* delivery, and in so doing seriously weakens rhetoric.

Subsequent centuries didn’t change this aspect of the Ramist/Gutenberg galaxy much. Theoretical rhetorics had next to nothing to say about delivery. Practical oral rhetorics enjoyed a revival in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries with the elocution movement, which emphasized gesture and dramatic self-presentation arising from the needs of those who found themselves socially mobile, but practical rhetorics of print followed Ramus in their emphasis on *dispositio* and style and their silence on delivery. A few attempts have been made to connect delivery to the details of typography and page design, but these seem more like admissions of defeat than anything else. I believe that our inability to incorporate delivery under the regime of print is due to the advantage that this silence gives us.

Treatments of delivery make the medium of communication visible.¹ But all our beliefs about media—our investment in Ramist logic, in the modernist priority of substance—rest on an assumption that a medium must be transparent, invisible. The term George Campbell used in the eighteenth century to describe the most essential quality of language was “perspicuity,” which he defined as “*transparency*, such as may be ascribed to air, glass, water, or any other medium through which material objects are viewed”. Rhetorical critics in much of the twentieth century maintained what Gaonkar has referred to as the “transparency thesis,” the assumption that oratory is uninterestingly determined by its content, that it is a “mirror” of its object. When words and things correspond, language itself becomes a perfect medium, and no rhetoric need be involved; facts, beliefs, and intentions are revealed by the language itself. Philosophers have long hoped for such a language: the correspondence theory of truth, in which statements and

¹ This is also true of the canon of style, as the work of Lanham makes abundantly clear.

facts can be matched up together, has its roots in Plato and Aristotle but extends to Bertrand Russell and others in the early twentieth century who sought a theory-neutral observation language . Francis Bacon had advocated purifying the language of the “marketplace” in favor of terms that are close to observation, Thomas Sprat urged scientists to “return back to the primitive purity, and shortness, when men deliver'd so many things, almost in an equal number of words,” and scientists like Linnaeus, Lavoisier, and Whewell spent no little effort attempting to control the vocabulary of science . With the application of the 1948 Shannon-Weaver engineering model of communication to human interaction, the noise-free channel became the diagrammatic realization of the transparent medium .

We need to believe that media are transparent because in a configuration that segregates substance, ideation, thought, content from the materiality of engagement, we have no other defense against competition, manipulation, and deception. In order to trust and be trusted, we need to draw attention away from the possibilities of imperfect transmission, to conceal our strategies, to offer our language up as transparent and our self as sincere. We need our audience to look *through* our discourse, not *at* it, to use Lanham’s phrase.² And we need to be able to believe in the apparent clarity and sincerity of others. If we understand social relations as adversarial, or if we even fear that they might be, then we need the transparency thesis.³

There is another, more academic consequence of doing without the transparency thesis. If language, and other media by which we supposedly transmit substance to each other, cannot be perfect conduits, then we would seem to have a determinist theory of technology, a specter that has haunted recent discussions of communication media and has made it awkward to take an interest in delivery. It would seem that we have to choose between transparency and determinism, and for many the choice has been an easy one in favor of transparency. Innis, McLuhan, and Ong, in particular, are often charged with determinism for their claims that communication media transform consciousness or condition social and political systems . This debate, about whether technology is a neutral tool that can be put to good or evil uses by human agents or “has politics,” in Langdon Winner’s phrase, that is, inherent social or psychic effects, has deep roots in the rhetorical tradition, with perhaps its first expression in Plato’s *Gorgias*. In that dialogue, the question is raised whether rhetoric by its nature is deceptive and corrupted or whether it is a blameless tool, in other words, a transparent, and therefore innocent, medium .

If we reject the transparency thesis, and I think we should,⁴ then we must be prepared for a little determinism and admit that the medium is at least part of the message. But I think we can handle that. In adopting the concept of

² Also see Bolter’s discussion of the oscillating rhythm of hypertext, which he suggests requires a reader to become conscious of the text in making of decisions about links; he thus suggests that hypertext rejects the transparency thesis .

³ I have discussed this dilemma in more detail elsewhere .

⁴ See Condit’s excellent discussion of the post-structuralist rejection of the theory of reference .

“affordances” from psychology, media theorists have already found a useful way to talk about the capabilities and limitations of a medium that give it shaping power over social relations and psychic landscapes. An affordance, or a suite of affordances, is *directional*, it *appeals* to us—in the case of a communication medium by making some forms of communicative interaction possible or easy and others difficult or impossible, by leading us to engage in or to attempt certain kinds of rhetorical actions rather than others. For example, the affordances of blog hosting sites led many people in the years after 1999 to act as though they really *did* want to create public online diaries, a conclusion that few might have reached in the absence of the technology.

In short, the thesis that I am trying to develop is that rhetoric materializes for us in the medium of communication, which is described by the canon of delivery. This thesis incorporates both of the approaches to materiality that I noted in the beginning: if material objects and environments have rhetorical effects, we can see them as media, that is, as the materialization of symbolic expression; if rhetoric has real effects on people and events in the material world, it does so precisely by mediating the symbolic and the material. We should thus approach the material, not as I was initially inclined to do, by seeing it as somehow contrary to the symbolic, but by seeing both as essential aspects of the rhetorical, as two necessary, contributory conditions, *sine qua non*.

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