Culture +Rhetoric: Studies in Rhetoric and Culture (review)

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Culture +Rhetoric: Studies in Rhetoric and Culture edited by Ivo Streker and Stephen Tyler

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The publication two decades ago of a collection of essays on the "rhetorical turn" in the natural and social sciences consolidated what had already become a peculiar academic ritual, wherein discipline after discipline discovered, or found itself confronted by, the rhetorical foundations of its own knowledge claims (Simons 1990). The discovery should not have been as shocking as it was, since a robust if often dormant or suppressed tradition dating back to the Sophists had insisted, frequently against fashion, that all truth is the product of rhetorical operations. Nonetheless, the book's editor, Herbert Simons, and most of its contributors eagerly welcomed this belated but auspicious acknowledgment of rhetoric's primacy by its erstwhile rivals. Yet one dissenter, Dilip Gaonkar, expressed skepticism about the enthusiasm with which rhetoricians greeted the rhetorical turn (1990). For Gaonkar, the longing to be taken seriously by its adversaries betokened an anxiety that has plagued rhetoric since its birth as a vocation, the worry that rhetoric had no object, method, or content properly its own. Indeed, the price of this recognition, ironically, would be the confirmation that this anxiety

had been well-founded all along, since rhetoric in fact has no substance and thus cannot serve as the metadisciplinary heuristic framework for which the rhetorical turn was groping.

Gaonkar ventured the hypothesis that substantive disciplines tend to "discover" rhetoric at moments of internal crisis that raise questions about the solidity of their own conceptual foundations, so that rhetorical turns are typically transitory and destined to be repressed when the occasioning crisis passes. The advent of late modernity, however, appears to entail a "crisis" that extends far beyond academic inquiry. It is a commonplace that what might grandiosely be called "Western" (or even "global") culture seems afflicted by anxiety concerning the impossibility of grounding social life in anything more reliable than rhetorical processes. Situated within this context, the return of rhetoric as a metadiscourse could be regarded as an epochal transformation, a shift from the suffocating sterility and violence of Enlightenment rationality to "rhetorical culture" (Farrell 1993). Such a diagnosis, however, implies that some cultures or epochs are more (or less) rhetorical than others, a possibility at odds with rhetoric's claim to universal applicability. What, in other words, does it mean to speak of culture as rhetorical, and how must rhetoric be conceived to meet the diverging challenges of explaining culture "as such" and accounting for the variability of cultures in terms of their "rhetoricality"?

This is a fundamental dilemma implicit within the International Rhetoric Culture Project, a self-consciously multidisciplinary effort to deploy rhetoric as the paradigmatic heuristic for cross-cultural analysis. Designated by the shorthand "Rhetoric Culture," the project is rooted in the long-standing interest of its founders, anthropologists Stephen Tyler and Ivo Strecker, in the rhetorical aspects of cultural practices. While in Tyler's case, this interest dates back more than three decades, the project as such began with a conference workshop in 1998. Since then, a growing group of participants has been assembled; a series of Rhetoric Culture conferences has been held in Mainz, Germany; a website has been established; and a series of books has been planned under the rubric Studies in Rhetoric + Culture. The first volume in the series, the collection of fourteen essays titled *Culture + Rhetoric* edited by Strecker and Tyler under review here, came out in 2009. Contributors to the collection include eight anthropologists, four rhetoricians, a philosopher, a sociologist, and an independent literary scholar. The volume is divided into two parts, "The Chiasm of Rhetoric and Culture" and "Figuration—the Persuasive Power of Deeds and Tropes," each of which contains seven essays.

It may seem that Rhetoric Culture is yet another instance or extension of the rhetorical turn, most notably in anthropology. However, Tyler and Strecker distinguish their approach from the earlier turn to rhetoric spearheaded by James Clifford and George Marcus, who, in *Writing Culture* (1986), focused on the rhetoric of ethnographic method. By contrast, Rhetoric Culture aims to direct attention to the rhetorical dimensions of cultural practice itself. Laying out their agenda in the introduction, Strecker and Tyler propose that cultural anthropology should turn to rhetoric because it is the mode of analysis best suited to the task of explaining culture, given that rhetoric and culture stand in a chiastic relationship. By this they mean that, in a symmetrical inversion, each is founded in the other, although the avowed thrust of their exhortation is to "locate culture in the domain where it ultimately belongs—that is, rhetoric" (1). The reason is that "rhetoric . . . is the decisive factor in the emergence of cultural diversity past and present." (1) Since "rhetoric is . . . the means by which we *create culture*" (2), "real cultural events' are not as real as they may seem" (2), emerging as they do on the basis of what Dennis Tedlock and Bruce Mannheim called the "tacit collusion of the participants, who implicitly agree that they are interpreting the events within the same general framework" (3).

The editors proceed to open part 1 of the collection with "The Rhetoric Culture Project," a short essay in which they extend the argument they make in the introduction—anthropology should turn to rhetoric for a vocabulary and conceptual framework capable of explaining culture in its multifarious manifestations. Invoking Tyler's previous work, the authors assert that "cultures are interactive, autopoetic, self-organized configurations" whose "components are simultaneously cause and effect[,] . . . co-constructed, co-dependent, and co-determined" (25). Accordingly, cultures are characterized by what John Bender and David Wellbery call "rhetoricality," that is, grounded in nothing other than their own communicative practices and forms which serve as the enabling constraints that both produce and transform cultures (26). To demonstrate the rhetorical autopoesis of culture, Tyler and Strecker marshal Don Quixote as an allegory of the process whereby reality is founded in fantasy. This chiasm between cause and effect effaces the difference between them and so, the authors conclude, renders the Rhetoric Culture project itself quixotic in a double sense, both an inquiry into the chiasm and an instance of it.

Put another way, the conceptual and methodological construction of the relationship between culture and rhetoric as chiasmic allegorizes what it stipulates this relationship to be. Consequently, the short circuit between

cause and effect supposed to characterize cultural self-fashioning also characterizes the project of Rhetoric Culture itself, insofar as the figure of chiasmus postulates, as a precondition of any possible analysis, a fundamental congruence between rhetorical operations and cultural processes. This feedback loop between the premises and findings of Rhetoric Culture returns in various forms as a topic or subtext in all but three of the essays collected in the book, some of which question or complicate the assumption that rhetoric and culture are congruent and some of which seek to clarify the order of causation between them. In what follows, I focus on these essays.

Among the most prominent figures working in the German *rhetorische Anthropologie* tradition, philosopher Peter Oesterreich begins his essay, "Homo Rhetoricus," by endorsing the ancient thesis that rhetoric is fundamental to the constitution of the human species, insofar as rhetorical processes shape both the human mind and human culture. His contribution is to identify overlaps between the categories of classical rhetorical theory and findings in such fields as the sociology of knowledge, linguistics, cognitive psychology, and philosophy. Specifically, he argues that the procedures of *inventio*, *dispositio*, *elocutio*, *memoria*, and *action* comprise the elementary operations of cognition, rendering that process thereby inextricably both psychological and social. Accordingly, rhetorical operations both supply the radically contextual forms of knowledge underpinning cognitive, communicative, and social competencies and engender the variations among them that differentiate both cultures and their members. Oesterreich concludes by suggesting that the Rhetoric Culture project itself is the fruit of a culture that is highly reflexive about the role of rhetoric in its own subsistence and thus well-positioned to benefit from the lessons offered by the rhetorical tradition.

This optimistic view of cultural reflexivity is not shared by Daniel Gross, who, in "Listening Culture," expresses reservations about the existing record of convergence between rhetoric and anthropology. As one of the few rhetoricians contributing to this volume, Gross takes up the challenge of approaching rhetoric anthropologically by drawing on models of comparative cultural analysis to identify what could be called the contemporary Western ideology of listening. For Gross, a listening culture is rhetorical in a chiasmic double sense: on the one hand, it construes listening in a specific way; on the other hand, this construal constrains the very rhetorical operations by which particular forms of listening are produced. Thus a listening culture is both a cause and an effect, and this poses methodological

challenges for both rhetoric and anthropology, both of which risk their identities in their mutual encounter. As an example, Gross offers a rapid survey of *rhetorische Anthropologie*, identifying in it two contrary animating impulses, those of universalism and particularism, or scientific foundationalism and antiessentialist historicism. Gross proposes that *rhetorische Anthropologie* ought not confine itself to these alternatives but should shift its mode of inquiry to that of skeptical critique, thus following the model of rhetoric so as to remodel it. Accordingly, "listening culture" becomes a case study in the prospect of rethinking both rhetoric and culture by approaching them from the perspective of the auditor. Surveying seventeenth-century religious sermons on hearing, Gross sketches a cultural history of listening that differs markedly from the conception that tacitly informs rhetorical studies today. Staging a critical comparison between the Puritan "public ear" and the contemporary Western ideology of listening, Gross enacts the mode of inquiry he thinks best captures the aspirations of the Rhetoric Culture project.

Just as Gross attends to a methodological challenge posed by the convergence of cause and effect entailed by the chiasmus of rhetoric culture, Vincenzo Cannada Bartoli pursues a version of the same problem in "Practice of Rhetoric, Rhetoric of Practice" by inquiring into "the relevance of rhetoric for a study of practice" (74). A basic dilemma impels and inhibits the search for a rhetoric of practice, one neatly expressed by the chiasmus between *ethos* and *kairos*. The very concept of practice encodes a tension between agentive performance and social constraint, a tension that likewise haunts rhetoric. How, then, can rhetoric help to explain the double valence of practice as at once its own cause and effect? Cannada Bartoli glimpses a possible answer in rhetoric's reflexive attention to the irreducible indeterminacy that it presupposes. He notes that the strategic dimension of action designated by *kairos* implies a gap between social actors and social norms that opens a space of radical ambiguity that neither can master. As an example, he offers a brief description of an ethnographic encounter with a woman in an Italian village who resorted to a physical gesture the kairotic ambiguity of which "created a space for a possible overlap of meanings and addresses" that contested the "implicature" of ethnography itself as a "rhetoric of practice" (82–83).

This positioning of anthropology as a rhetoric raises uncomfortable questions for Boris Wiseman, which he takes up in his contribution, "Chiastic Thought and Culture: A Reading of Claude Lévi-Strauss." Performing an elegant tropological analysis of the founding figure of

structural anthropology, Wiseman examines the rhetoric of ethnography itself, arguing that anthropology creates and determines its object—that is, culture—by means of figuration. Wiseman's aim is to interrogate the epistemological presuppositions implied by chiasmus and even to reverse them. The risk implied by the chiastic formula of "rhetoric culture" is not only that ethnography might (pre)figure its objects but also that it could read them as rhetorical performances by presuming that it has in rhetoric a universal heuristic frame. Thus for Wiseman, "the ethnography of rhetorical practices calls for a critique of rhetoric as a meta-discourse and of the system of values that support its framing concepts" (86). The encounter between rhetoric and anthropology thus ought to transform both modes of inquiry. For Lévi-Strauss, chiasmus supplies a tacit formal schema that enables him to reconcile a diversity of cultural elements into a coherent system. But more importantly, this figure structures the anthropologist's relationship to the culture being analyzed, conjoining participation and observation in an inverted symmetry that mediates the tension between difference and familiarity implicit in ethnographic research. The problem, then, is not that structuralism turns out to be figural rather than scientific; it is that the rhetoric of chiasmus operates in structuralism to efface the very difference it aims to understand.

Alan Rumsey opens part 2 of the collection with "Rhetoric, Truth, and the Work of Trope," one of the longest and most astute essays in the book. The essay addresses the problem raised by Wiseman by calling into question the category of "rhetoric" as a metadiscourse capable of grasping cultural difference. The problem concerns the operation of language ideologies as constitutive dimensions of rhetorical practices characteristic of specific cultures. Rhetoric itself emerges out of a particular history and presupposes or corresponds to what Rumsey has in his earlier work called "Standard Average European linguistic ideology," which limits its usefulness for cross-cultural analysis. Indeed, this history puts rhetoric at odds with recent developments in linguistic theory and cross-cultural studies, from Wittgenstein and Austin to Michael Silverstein. Meanwhile, contemporary rhetorical theory from Burke onward has increasingly distanced itself from this older model but at the price of undermining the discrete identity of rhetoric itself. Thus the shift from rhetoric as a specific mode of social action to rhetoric as a general condition of social ontology undermines the explanatory power of rhetorical categories. Still, he concludes that the classical rhetorical tradition remains useful insofar as it provides productive concepts and modes of analysis, such as the notions of tropes

and figures as epistemic structures. As such, the work of trope is central to the project of cross-cultural analysis.

This thesis is further elaborated and substantiated in Philippe-Joseph Salazar's essay, "Figuration, a Common Ground of Rhetoric and Anthropology." As the title clearly indicates, Salazar seeks to show that rhetoric and anthropology are both animated by a steadfast attentiveness to the role of figuration in social action. While rhetoric has had to respond to ceaseless attacks claiming that figural language undermines truth, anthropology has noted the social productivity of tropes, at least since Durkheim and Mauss. For Salazar, figuration mediates the transformation of fundamental social distinctions and enables the emergence of fictional scenarios as grounds for collective participation. To illustrate this, he offers a brief analysis of South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission, in which a reflexive drama of apology and forgiveness takes the place of juridical prosecutions and vengeful violence. Thus the "truth" of reconciliation is precisely that it supplants the truth procedures of the law and social recriminations with an overtly fictional performance capable of accomplishing what those procedures cannot. Though he does not make use of the term, Salazar is describing the social and political productivity of allegory, a figure whose singular importance is specified by Robert Hariman in the volume's concluding essay.

In consonance with Wiseman and Rumsey, James Fernandez devotes his essay, "Tropical Foundations and Foundational Tropes of Culture," to the investigation of the double valence of tropology as an inquiry into the organizing power of tropes in social life and as a dimension of cultural analysis itself. Just as cultures turn to tropes to secure their own foundations, cultural analysis turns to them to secure its own coherence. From the pre-Socratics and Quintillian to Vico and Bakhtin, structural linguistics to psychoanalysis, Pepper's "root hypotheses" to Lakoff and Johnson's metaphoric cognition, Fernandez delineates the historical recurrence and concurrence of tropes as both foundations of social order and foundational categories governing the explanation of social processes. His narrative raises the vexing question of whether the postmodern turn is as antifoundationalist as it is claimed to be, since it has recourse to the tropological view as conclusive proof that foundations don't exist. That is, it is not only particular tropes that serve as foundations; the very concept of tropology can do so as well. Accordingly, Fernandez notes that "our inquiry itself is an instantiation of the problem we are examining and seeking to resolve" (178). The solution, if

there is one, would consist in shifting focus from the foundational role of tropes to their play, both within culture and within anthropology itself.

Joining the chorus of contributors preoccupied with the epistemological and political implications of the chiasmic linking of rhetoric and culture, Michael Herzfeld, in "Convictions: Embodied Rhetorics of Earnest Belief," interrogates the implications of the locution "rhetoric culture," expressing concern that it implies the possibility of a nonrhetorical culture and raising the question of what it means to assert that culture is rhetorical in the absence of such an alternative. Unlike the other essays in this section of the book, Herzfeld's does not engage the tropological dimension of rhetoric and culture but focuses instead on social performance in its relation to language ideology. His argument proceeds by reference to his own studies of political corruption, which serve to demonstrate the normative irony underpinning the effective performance of sincerity. He relies on this demonstration in turn to illustrate his thesis that precisely because culture is necessarily rhetorical, actual cultures differ in terms of the normative use they make of this fact. Thus the colloquial Greek and Italian assumptions that mental states are inherently inscrutable warrant the valorization of skillful performances of sincerity, precisely because such performances legitimate official rules of conduct by stipulating their explicitly conventional character. From this vantage, Herzfeld's own term, "social poetics," recommends itself as a way of distinguishing and analyzing different "rhetoric cultures" by attending not to the universal rhetorical features shaping every culture but to the rhetorical ideologies to which these features are submitted.

Approaching the pervasive topic of epistemology from an entirely different direction, Pierre Maranda's brief and somewhat perfunctory provocation, "An Epistemological Query," raises the crucial but overlooked question concerning a possible asymmetry or incommensurability between the two terms, rhetoric and culture, that the editors and most contributors figure as mutually implicated and overlapping to the point of redundancy. The problem is that, while all culture is rhetorical, the possibility that rhetoric may not be confined to culture (or that its influence may be detected "outside" the usual markers of culture) requires that the scope of "culture" be expanded beyond any usable limit. So, for example, if rhetoric (say, in its guise as trope) is understood as a constitutive feature of signification in general, its operations can at least in principle be distinguished from cultural processes. Such a thesis would not be welcomed by many of the other contributors, who insist that language is rhetorical

because it is profoundly social and thus can only signify on condition of radical contextual embeddedness. Though Maranda does not pursue the far-reaching implications of this insight, it represents perhaps the most serious conceptual challenge confronting the Rhetoric Culture project. I return to this issue shortly.

In the final essay in the volume, "Future Imperfect: Imagining Rhetorical Culture Theory," Robert Hariman offers a playfully ingenious response to the unavoidably hyperbolic aspirations of the Rhetoric Culture project. For Hariman, these aspirations correspond to the excess that generates the objects of inquiry for rhetoric and anthropology alike. Both culture and rhetoric are forms of surplus that respond to a fundamental deficit driving social life. The fields of rhetoric and anthropology must strive to explain the unlimited variety of social forms and practices, because the carefully delimited objects they invent for themselves expand beyond every boundary designed to define them.

What, then, to do with all this excess? Since it is not possible either to accommodate or to evade it, Hariman proposes a turn to allegory as the trope that can transform excess from an epistemological problem into an inventional resource. Like metaphor or irony but capable of encompassing them both in a complex self-referential architecture, "allegory recognizes a surplus of signs and shifts in perspective, and it also allows a wider range of invention and interpretation," marking "the fact that reality always exceeds the means of representation and that interpretation is necessary to complete any representation" (226). As such, allegory is a suitable master trope for the Rhetoric Culture project, since it "offers a perspective for understanding how rhetoric and culture alike are created and maintained by practices that are at their core excessive expenditures of social energy" (227).

The structural incongruence between representation and reality requires that cultural codes be both revisable and capable of securing social integration. Yet these requirements will often conflict, inciting ever more rhetorical and cultural production. From this vantage, the signature merit of the Rhetoric Culture project is its unabashed postmodernism, or its recognition that social life both requires and precludes recourse to universal foundations. Thus work in Rhetoric Culture should seek to understand how this impasse is imaginatively accommodated in any given case.

As Harmian astutely demonstrates, the allegorical perspective foregrounds the "reflexive iteration of multiple codes" through which cultures reproduce and transform themselves—or fail to do so. In other words,

allegory is both a reflexive figure and a figure of reflexivity, whether scholarly, cultural, or political.[1] As such, it opens the question of whether an allegorical perspective is adopted—strategically, fortuitously, or otherwise—within a given cultural space or comes to structure this space for reasons that exceed or escape the reach of cultural practices. This is another way of posing the question of congruence between rhetoric and culture: does cultural difference correspond to the variability in the deployment of rhetorical devices, or is it also, or primarily, a function of the normative relation established between cultural practices and their rhetorical conditions of possibility? As several of the essays in the book confirm, the former alternative seems to be privileged by the "rhetoric culture" chiasmus, insofar as it prefigures rhetoric, particularly as tropology, as a metadiscursive frame of cultural analysis. The latter alternative, however, may be more likely to elude the question begging such prefiguration engenders by shifting the focus from the rhetorical pragmatics of cultural practices to the rhetorical norms implicit in the institutions, politics, representations, and social forms that both confer and reflect cultural specificity. If rhetoric is to function as a metadiscourse for cross-cultural analysis, it will need to be theorized as the complex operation of this feedback loop.

Let's briefly consider a familiar example. If one accepts for the sake of argument Niklas Luhmann's description of Western modernity as the effect of systems differentiation, it is not hard to see the sorts of societies in which anthropology is institutionalized as structurally allegorical in the sense Hariman describes.[2] As social systems observe each other's operations, they render visible the contingency of these operations; but more to the point, they function and reproduce themselves precisely by proliferating contingency. Thus the market economy depends on making explicit the conventional character of money and other commodities, while the liberal state legitimates itself by construing political power itself as per se suspect. Similarly, the rise of identity politics can be viewed as an instance of the normative force of the allegorical imperative, wherein cultural codes are explicitly regarded as both artificial and more consequential than any reality to which they appear to refer. What matters about such a culture is not that it persistently deploys allegory but rather that allegory structures the culture as such. Accordingly, this culture is "rhetorical" not simply in the sense that, like any other, it is created by rhetorical operations, nor just in the sense that it reflexively marks its rhetorical character but also in the sense that "rhetoric" denotes the ubiquity of the problem of normativity

itself as a constitutive cultural feature. The Rhetoric Culture Project stands to make an enormous contribution to both cultural and rhetorical theory if it undertakes to investigate this connotation of its defining chiasmus.

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NOTES

1. Which is why for Hariman it subsumes irony and metaphor, among other tropes. See Hariman 2003.

2. Although Hariman himself regards irony as the master trope of contemporary liberal culture.

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