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Surprise. Aesthetics and Sensibilities of Rhetorics

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SURPRISE. AESTHETICS AND SENSIBILITIES OF RHETORICS

A Dissertation
Presented to
the Graduate School of
Clemson University

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Doctor of Philosophy
Rhetorics, Communication, and Information Design

by
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ABSTRACT

This dissertation investigates relationships scholars have with information and art associated with aesthetic and theoretical disruptions. Its governing metaphor is the surprise affect, figured as a rhetorical and aesthetic event. My purposes are to evaluate institutional and scholastic responses to both desirable and disastrous information-aesthetic liminalities, trial performative engagements with surprises, and propose viable ways of engaging “innovation” for writing instruction. It is argued that aesthetic (i.e., *relational* in the sense that it is not immediate), performative, and temporal engagements with surprising objects of study are relatively viable options when considered alongside the “critical” manuscript. While the aesthetic has sometimes occupied a minor and inferior position relative to codified and metricized intelligences, such relegation rests on false and pernicious but well known and persistent dichotomies including intelligibility v. sensibility, knowing v. feeling, thinking v. experiencing, and aesthetic v. epistemic. The intelligibility presupposed by the critical model, however, cannot achieve immediate engagement with its ostensible “object”; it therefore remains relational and aesthetic. Few would counter the claim, yet actual performances of relation are rare. To test its payoff, the dissertation performs two engagements with challenging objects associated with surprise: novelty or “the new” as such, and the currency of idiosyncrasy in the timbre of recent electronic music. While not incidental, novelty and timbre are examples in the project’s larger attempt to rethink not just any given surprise, but ways of treating and dealing with the inevitability of metaphysical shock and overhaul.

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PRELUDE

This is Surprise. The period in the title of the project is deliberate. It signifies the tendency, if not primary function, of scholarship to explain, control, and make known its putative objects of study. While this is not a counterproductive arrangement, as the sole modality of inquiry it can reinforce the myth that we may finally know and control even the catastrophic and the unimaginable. If such phenomena are “surprising” in the sense that their weight, trauma, effect, or affect are, at least temporarily, unintelligible or irreducible to articulation, explanations thereof are belated reintegrations of shock to the ordinary and manageable. Such accountancy cannot know a surprise. No one can. If they did, no surprise. Yet it is precisely these coarse divisions between known and unknown that are complicated in the following pages. My way of showing this is to maintain that *relational* modes of academic discourse are relatively viable options for engaging “surprises” when considered alongside the critical manuscript. The idea is that since learning and teaching are inventive, ongoing, and non-immediate processes of making legible worldly phenomena, I surmise that rhetoric should not only acknowledge this disjuncture, but perform it as well.

Of particular interest, then, is the question of *how*, in distinction from what, to know, do, and make of surprises. The project therefore hopes to surpass an account of noteworthy breakdowns, liminalities, wonders, excitations, and devastations, or bringing to light some *one* new or neglected object to the discourse for consideration. I do all the above, inevitably and necessarily, but I do not stop there. The project’s principle offering, instead, is best construed as a mood or a mode—a sensibility—for discoursing that seeks viable ways of bringing forth these phenomena into the domain of intelligibility that preserve epiphanic potential and

meaningful intellectual growth. The argument therefore has less to do with surprises themselves than with handling or treating surprises in scholarship.

The first chapter develops these prefatory remarks and then offers a selective review of one of the longest and most controversial dialectics in the history of Western thought: intelligibility and sensibility. Traditionally, the former has been associated with intellect, reason, and codification; the latter, with phenomenal experience, mood, emotion, and so on. As a disorientation, surprise seems to fit better with the merely sensible, but, as I will argue, this convenient categorization is rash and premature. Twin registers of experience, intelligibility and sensibility have since antiquity been contrasted against one another for ideological reasons and interests. While the project argues the value of keeping the two separated severely limits inquiry into one's relationship with information, these lines in the sands (and disciplines) are historical and persistent; a review is therefore appropriate and necessary. We check in with the Greeks and Germans, of course, but also with transdisciplinary contemporary theorists to learn how the issue has appeared in different guises for different reasons in more recent conversations. The project then situates itself within rhetorical studies debates on "aesthetics of rhetorics," whose origins are in still earlier scholarship on whether and the extent to which rhetoric is "epistemic." My move there is to position the aesthetic and the sensible not as *alternatives* to epistemic and "traditional" forms, but to see intelligibilities like the scholarly article as aesthetic or relational after all.

Three attempts to do precisely this are developed across as many chapters. The first involves novelty or "the new" as such. Like surprise, the novel as a grammatical entity in this sentence cheats itself out of its own meaning. Most can relate to acquiring a new widget, traveling to a foreign place, or experiencing unfamiliar art works. But "the new" as referent seems to require and (or?) result in something recognizable, referential, and termed. It

thereby saws off the branch on which it supposedly rests. In this way, the new is like surprise in that everybody knows what “new” is, but nobody knows what it is. Necessarily. For this reason, the new is a favorite dead horse. Scholarly treatments of novelty typically resign themselves to bureaucratic accounts of self-proclaimed progressive artists, writers, and thinkers, and read their rhetorics as empty, cheap, commercial—a vain and delusional egotism at best. Yet, the material, affective, temporal, and existential dimensions of engaging art and information pose serious challenges for the rhetorical frame of accountancy seen in critiques of the new and, as the German philosopher Martin Heidegger has demonstrated, for metaphysics in general. Evaluated are Michael North’s *Novelty: A History of the New*, Boris Groys’ recently translated *On the New*, and Jacques Rancière’s *Aisthesis: Scenes from The Aesthetic Regime of Art* for their relative viability as means of engaging the new. From there, the chapter comports itself with an approach to aesthetics and rhetorics characterized by an “anxiety” (*angst*) with the “work of art” according to Heidegger.

The third movement lends an ear to renewed attentions for “sonic rhetorics,” taking experimental electronic music’s predilection for idiosyncratic texture and timbre as an opportunity to engage arts innovation. Chapter Three, “Drop,” takes up the problematics and excitations of relating to music in the media of alphabetic writing. Writing about music is notoriously difficult, and the inadequacies of transposition from one media to another are well known, but my suggestion here is that the problem is uniquely manifest in the aesthetics recent electronic dance music (EDM) and other experimental electronica. As a nod to the durational qualities of engaging sonic information, the dissertation’s trajectory is organized by the logic of a typical early 2010s electronic dance music production: meter, build, drop, interlude, and bridge. This music, known both for innovation in timbre and machinic regularity in meter, is an ideal candidate for inquiry into surprise because its effects are

temporal, transient, and affective. As it happens, a curious silence surrounds our relationship with sound. The terms “timbre” and “tone color” in music theory refer to the idiosyncratic character of different instruments playing the same note, which at once makes the concepts both singular and relative. Felt and heard in this chapter are the aesthetics of recent electronic dance music as well as experimental artists like Holly Herndon and Ryoji Ikeda. I argue the emphasis novel sonic and temporal affects in the work of these and other artists creates both renewed and unique challenges for scholars, who are scrambling to account for new sensibilities pioneered by these producers as they report, invent, and anticipate (a) new relations with digital information infrastructures. Fair use of audio clips are embedded right into the Portable Document Format file for the sonic experience of the “reader.”

The fourth act, an Interlude, slows the tempo and develops an aside on the case of Roland Barthes. This chapter compares the aesthetics and ethics of writing in his work alongside more recent thought in rhetoric, composition, and feminist theory. Although often remembered for his aesthetic jubinations of irrationality we might associate with surprise and the sensible, I work to recall another side of Barthes involving a veritable floundering *within* what he understood as the violence of structural, codified, and disciplinary ways of relating with the text. Discussed are the separate works of Lynn Worsham, Cynthia Haynes, and Gayatri Spivak, all of whom the dissertation argues are particularly adept at navigating and “negotiating structures of violence,” as Spivak would say. These writers along with Barthes are disciplinary “impostors” to their discourses; they work from within convention while at the same time revealing the inadequacy of these very mechanisms for knowledge production specific to their areas. Intelligibility and sensibility meet, merge, and dissolve into one another.

Before the curtains close, the fifth chapter develops a pedagogy of “information aesthetics” for writing instruction featuring not graphic or visual design per se, but rather the conceptual blur between phenomenal experience and reflective knowledge making. The focus is on the material, affective, and existential dimensions of engaging apparently “nonaesthetic” informations and wisdoms. The proposed instructional technique there nourishes understanding of the dynamic *relationships* between students and their supposed objects of perception, reflection, and study. The idea is to acknowledge and meaningfully integrate into the curriculum the relational quality of the interaction among writers and their so called “content,” data, or research. Too often the ideal academic writer is framed as a disaffected compiler or synthesizer, but arranging the already known in advantageous configurations is an apolitical proceduralism that downplays or erases aesthetic and inventional qualities of composing. However, learning is an affective event and teaching is a performative act that exceeds content delivery. Investigation of the manner and purposes with which arts practices can inform relational writing instruction is necessary to respond to well known issues in composition studies of student affect and engagement. The argument there is that bridges between contemporary arts and the practice of academic writing are untapped opportunities for developing meaningful relationships with information. Interestingly, however, teaching relationships with information requires neither experimental forms nor an emancipatory narrative for the a liberated student subject. Instead, arts integrated composition pedagogies encouraging alternative relations with even those forms dealing most steadfastly with “intelligibility” may well provide means by which to responsibly address the recent currency of “innovation” in higher education. Advanced in this final chapter are seeds for curricula designs fostering healthy, flexible, resilient relationships with information in a cultural moment when surprises of a certain type are in high demand.

CHAPTER ONE

METER

For if existent things are visible and audible and generally perceptible, which means that they are external substances, and of these things which are visible are perceived by the sight, those that are audible by the hearing, and not contrawise, how can these things be revealed to another person? For that by which we reveal is *logos*, but *logos* is not substances and existing things. —Gorgias¹

life's not a paragraph —e e cummings²

One of the most basic assumptions of Western cultures is that information is a good thing. Knowledge is power, a positive gain, or a desirable acquisition. Yet if “a way of seeing is also a way of not seeing,”³ and if any given perspective “reveals dominations and possibilities unimaginable from the other vantage point[s],”⁴ it is no stretch to say that information un-informs while informing. Knowings, perspectives, and understandings are as dangerous as useful—and the issue is by no means a purely theoretical one. From sophistic relativism to deconstructionist play, from the hermeneutics of suspicion to critiques of positivist Enlightenment mentalities—there is no shortage of lessons that information is only as good as the interpretation, reflection, and implementation it receives. The scholastic enterprise, endowed with its system of checks and balances, standards of rigor, and patient discipline in the treatment of its objects, might seem like the best bet when it comes to interacting with information. With its rubrics of clarity, comprehensiveness, replicability, or

¹ The first epigraph is recollected and attributed to Gorgias by Sextus in *Against the Schoolmasters*, excerpt trans. George Kennedy in *The Older Sophists*, ed. Rosamond Kent Sprague (Indianapolis: Hackett, 2001), DK82B3.

² e e cummings, “since feeling is first,” *Complete Poems: 1904-1962*, ed. George J. Firmage (New York: Liveright, 1991), 291.

³ Kenneth Burke, *Permanence and Change*, 3rd ed. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), 49.

⁴ Donna Haraway, *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women* (New York: Routledge, 1991), 154.

accountancy for the historical contingency of its claims, scholarly discourse is thought to be the highest caliber information available. I commence, however, with what might appear as a surprising claim: our relationship with information is dysfunctional.

The dissertation takes up an issue that is often bypassed or summarily dismissed. The topic is an experience or condition that has been historically construed as beyond, prior to, or in excess of knowledge that is knowable because it is codified or replicable. We live and communicate in discursive networks that rely on systematic operations, of course, but we also *relate* to discursive networks and their commonplaces, assumptions, and givens. This project explores the capacity of scholars and scholarship to relate to information in ways that exceed endorsement, rejection, and mixtures of these two frames in the forms of compromise or paradox.

The instability of relationality is ever present and indeed inescapable as a sort of analog constant when subjects approach objects. Yet it need not be consciously acknowledged, and is easily ignored or trivialized as wasteful, unlikely, temporary, or impossible to wield. Known only by belated translation, this “sensibility” nevertheless forms and is prerequisite for articulable rhetorical experience. This latency undeniably arises, however, in the experience of *surprise*—and especially surprises made manifest not only by the failure of expectations, but the rupture and dissolution of expectation and perspective altogether. The topic of the present writing is such a breakage figured as a rhetorical and aesthetic event. As an unforeseeable interjection, surprise seems to stand in a negative relationship with information. Yet it is only informational stimuli that surprises.

There are long and diverse tendencies of thinkers in a wide variety of discourses to seek out and push toward interpretive thresholds, aesthetic limits, margins of (in)comprehensibility, and affective boundaries. Surprises transcend disciplinary borders and show up as uninvited guests, paradigmatic breakthroughs, terrifying doomsdays, and

aesthetic ecstasies. The present text will treat surprise as a necessarily ephemeral, lived experience of novelty, wonder, awe, shock, or epiphany as events in reading, listening, writing, thinking, and living rhetorically. Such experiences, while they can be traumatic and debilitating, can also bear immense potentialities for alternative modes of existence. Surprises can be annoying, inconvenient, and even terrifying. They can also deliver heretofore unknown nectars in rhetoric and learning.

To the extent an inevitably inadequate operationalization of surprise is useful, the invention and reception of knowledge may be construed as something grander than mere data, mere content to be compiled, synthesized, and arranged advantageously. Alternatively, this project attempts to articulate a relational mode of scholastic inquiry: an epistemological project that would be an aesthetic project and vice versa. To get there, I will tour histories of related impulses and inklings heard in discourses of rhetoric, philosophy, aesthetics, art, music, and more with a certain attitude or state of mind that does not desire the closing of a circle, the cellophane wrapped ontological proposition, or advanced noticed of the precise trajectory between cause and effect.

Consider the Following.

The term “sensibility” is used in the following pages alongside “intelligibility” to indicate two modalities of relating to information. Although these terms are sometimes pitted against each other for polemic effect, the simple truth of the matter is that they are not contraries. The point is not to have the former negate the latter and win out in fulfillment of some grand emancipatory narrative. In fact, one of the purposes of the project is to demonstrate the inextricability of each contestant in this false and overrated dialectic. The terms are intertwined not simply because each depends upon its negative for conceptual identity, but because both experiential registers are simultaneously and ceaselessly

active in the continuity of being. But the pairing does indeed make what I hope will be a productive and provocative juxtaposition from which to begin a project that springs from an obsession with the ways humans and scholars in particular perceive and live their relationships with information and knowledge—including but, as we will see, not limited to surprises.

Related and similarly problematic dualisms include experiencing vs. knowing or feeling vs. meaning. Such negative differences are useful only insofar as they recall a too often neglected mode of relation to the world, art, argument, or information. In using these terministic pairs, this project does not pretend to toggle from one from side to the other at will. But if surprise is (im)precisely constituted or made manifest by an utter lack of relation, the failure of interpretation to assimilate experience to what made sense earlier, then it must be distinguished from an intelligible phenomenon.

Surprises in this sense exhibit a sort of violence unto the interpreting subject, and it is precisely this trauma that warrants attention to the phenomena. Dauntingly inaccessible, impossible lines of inquiry are worth pursuing, ironically, for exactly this reason. Immense and radically incomprehensible topics such as The Holocaust, the complex emergence of pathogenic outbreaks, and school violence demand thought and discourse precisely because they cannot be adequately apprehended. In perhaps all knowings, but especially engagements with topics such as these, we must agree with Gorgias: experience and knowing, while not mutually exclusive, are not the same. On the other hand, this dissertation maintains that knowing is an experiential event and never fully rid of this vulnerability. If the material encounter or mere register of signals by the perceptual organs (including the brain) is something different than the assignment of linguistic operators to these signals, knowing is temporal, lived, embodied—an essentially creative act. We would seem to need a mode of inquiry broad enough to attend and respond to that which falls outside the purview of

rhetoric and communication as intentional, transmissive enterprises of transference and accounting. It is worth recalling that *aisthesis* from the Greek simply means “perceive” and carries no denotation of beauty, pleasure, or taste; the derivative “aesthetic” is a relatively recent invention more closely associated with formal recognition and identification of perception.⁵

“Aesthetic” is thus sometimes used interchangeably with “sensibility” in the following pages, and the term framed as such is to be distinguished from its canonical associations that persist in some contemporary usages. Instead, “aesthetic” is deployed in the Nietzschean sense for the sake of highlighting the material, embodied, and artistic dimensions of meaning making lurking in even the most stringently regulated and hyperinstitutionalized venues: “only by forgetting that he himself is an *artistically creating* subject . . . does man live with any repose, security and consistency.”⁶ His idea that perception itself—all cognition prior to, during, and (therefore) conscious recognition itself—is an artistic act jives with Gorgias’ proposition that “nothing can be known.” The connection is that retrospectively knowing an experience does not duplicate the experience. If this is true, “the adequate representation of an object in the subject⁷—is a contradictory impossibility. . . . [T]here is, at most, an *aesthetic* relation: I mean, a suggestive transference, a stammering translation into a completely foreign tongue.”⁷ Bypassing relation for

⁵ Jacques Rancière, *Aisthesis: Scenes from the Aesthetic Regime of Art*, trans. Zakir Paul (London: Verso, 2013), x.

⁶ Friedrich Nietzsche, “On Truth and Lies in a Nonmoral Sense,” trans. Daniel Breazeale in *The Rhetorical Tradition: Readings from Classical Times to the Present*, ed. Patricia Bizzell and Bruce Herzberg (Boston: Bedford, 2001), 1176 (emphasis in the translation). Hayden White makes the related point that not only language but perhaps conscious apprehension itself is inherently tropological: “[r]endering of the unfamiliar into the familiar is a troping that is generally figurative.” *Tropics of Discourse: Essays in Cultural Criticism*. (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978), 5.

⁷ Nietzsche, “Truth and Lies,” 1176. The Breazeale translation cited here includes the following note on the phrase “aesthetic relation”: “*ein ästhetisches Verhalten*. A more literal translation of *Verhalten* is ‘behavior,’ ‘attitude,’ or perhaps ‘disposition’” (Ibid., 1176n18). Less a deliberate approach than a physical, physiological, and existential situation, this “relation” in distinction (yet not opposition) to the security of stable, routinized engagements with objects is relatively open to surprises or alternative engagements with objects, arts, information, and so on.

identification is therefore an unacknowledged struggle of coercion, a forgotten erasure of envelopment.

Still, the challenge for the present writing is a double-bind of contending with surprises in scholarly writing. I think it can be claimed without much controversy that the general tone of the relations between scholars and their studies is basically regulatory. But the “characteristic” feature of surprises, if I may *hazard a generalization*, is being caught off guard: losing one’s head, composure, marbles, shit. *It happens*. Sometimes for the better; other times: catastrophe. Regardless, rupture, breakdown, and liminality have long and diverse genealogies in which these and related terms are valorized for any number of reasons: desire, engagement with Being, avant-garde potentiality—take your pick. One senses the problem. How to approach disruptive thinkers and artists who turn up, unleash, and dilate perceptual limits in a way that doesn’t amount to stamp collecting and lip service that would reduce the radical to anecdote? Can rhetorics somehow do a greater service to its noisy “objects”? How might one attempt to perform the aesthetic or affective dimensions of experiencing such disruptions?

Perhaps the trick is in the *relations* and *relationships* scholars have with information and art more so than information and art themselves. The focus is not on an ontology or even a genealogy of surprise (though both of these appear below). This project cannot help wondering *how*, in distinction from *what*—to know, do, and make of surprises. It therefore hopes to exceed a simple account of noteworthy breakdowns, liminalities, wonders, excitations, traumas, and so on. The project also attempts something grander than bringing some new or neglected object to the discourse for consideration. I will do all the above, inevitably and necessarily, but I won’t stop there. The project’s principle offering is best construed as a mood or a mode—a sensibility—for discoursing that seeks to engage *with* its texts and artworks as mutually- and co-productive constituents along with the subject in the

experiential event; the focus is neither content nor form, but precisely our *approach* or *relationship with* each of these variables in our scholastic-artistic activities. The claim therefore has less to do with surprises themselves than with handling or treating surprises in scholarship. My sense is that a composition on surprise ought to perform its approach, and that such a performance should strive for an aesthetic relation with its phenomena.

Tick Tock: Sensibility & Intelligibility.

Like meter, dialectical thinking and knowing function rhythmically, grounding our conceptual relation to that about which we discourse. Negative difference furnishes an apparent stability, but the web of negations implied in any identification suggests that polar thinking is not enough to engage the breadth and multiplicity of any one concept. Still, by invoking a distinction between intelligibility and sensibility, I make reference to one of the longest, most contentious, and vertiginous dialectics in the history of Western thought. While the sensible has been exalted as uniquely human, ethical, and aesthetically maximal, it has also been framed as dangerous, naively utopian, wasteful, bourgeois, solipsistic—even imaginary. As antinomies, these terms beget sweeping generalizations, careless dismissals, and blithe mis/understandings.

I use the term “sensibility” to signify a processual relation with an object, idea, text, or art work. Others have used different words for both related and unrelated purposes in accordance with their specific contexts, hopes, and desires. While an exhaustive treatment of relations between aesthetic thinkers and their epistemologies would require a dozen volumes, the following sections review aesthetics and sensibilities associated with surprise affects in the sense of rendering habits of understanding inapplicable, untenable, or inadequate. Reasonable and productive engagement with this pair of alleged antitheses is possible by focusing the analysis on those variations that concern surprise affects: loss of control,

grounding—even breath. I proceed thusly with the presumption that to engage surprise is to engage sensibility and the aesthetic relation.

Greek and German Origins: The Inferior Faculty.

Besides Gorgias, other Presocratics questioned the relationship between knowledge and the senses. Heraclitus, for instance, observes that humans “are at odds with the *logos*, with which above all they are in continuous contact, and the things they meet every day appear strange to them.”⁸ Heraclitus refers not to *logos* “the word” or language, of course, but rather a cosmological order. I am deliberately conflating *logos* as language and *logos* as a natural superstructure of the universe, however, to highlight their similarity in the sense of concealing themselves precisely at the point of their revelation. Meanwhile in Abdera, Protagoras is cooking up his infamous “man-measure” doctrine, which is thought to be the first instantiation of relative meaning. “He used to say that soul was nothing apart from the senses”—that the only conceivable reality was in perception—and in this way “everything is true,”⁹ new, and changing. More than a shortsighted anthropocentrism, it is Protagoras’ idea that all things are processually *becoming* rather than statically being that informs this apparently radical subjectivity. The human itself is in such a “flux” of becoming, a statelessness which coincides with the salient feature of sense impressions: change as a

⁸ Attributed to Heraclitus by Marcus Aurelius. *Meditations*, in *A Presocratics Reader: Selected Fragments and Testimonia*, trans. Richard D. McKirahan and Patricia Curd, ed. Patricia Curd, 2nd ed. (Indianapolis: Hackett, 2001), 27(B72). Fittingly, the Aurelius passage goes on to recall that Heraclitus rebuked and overreliance on received wisdoms: “we ought not, like children who learn from their parents, simply to act and speak as we have been taught.” *Meditations*, trans. George Long (London: The Chesterfield Society, 1890), IV xlvi.

⁹ Diogenes Laertius, *Lives of Eminent Philosophers*, trans. R. D. Hicks (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1972), IX viii. Socrates can hardly believe it. Let me get this straight, he asks, “[t]hings appear, or may be supposed to be, to each one such as he perceives them? . . . Perception is always of existence, and being the same as knowledge is unerring?” Plato, *Theaetetus*, in *The Dialogs of Plato*, trans. Benjamin Jowett, 3rd ed., vol. 4 (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1892), 152a-153a.

constant.¹⁰ In each case—Gorgias, Heraclitus, and Protagoras—what is involved is making articulable the experience of phenomena, a slippery activity of rendering sense information conceptual that occupies many Presocratics.¹¹

Although Plato's banishment of the poets from his ideal society¹² is the commonly cited emblem of the rift between a truth seeking philosophy and a merely imitative poetry, the closing scene of the *Symposium* better enacts the issue because the dialog involves an essential fusion of beauty and wisdom. Late into the night, Alcibiades stumbles into the gathering in honor of Agathon's poetic successes. Sloppy, the party crasher professes his sexual frustration with Socrates, who seduces his students in "philosophic frenzy" with words alone but never shows lust himself.¹³ The contrast between Socrates' claim to "mere truth," the means to an impersonal, unceasing, and essential beauty atop the ladder of love,¹⁴ and the stupor of Alcibiades is gratuitous. Plato takes great pains to figure ideal beauty in distinction from worldly, material, and bodily pleasures; the former is "pure and unalloyed; not infected with the flesh and color of humanity," whereas the latter is epitomized by the naivety and animality of the drunken guest. Elsewhere, as we know, Plato indicates that sensuous experience is not even to be trusted precisely because they report a perpetual flux while the realm of ideas is unchanging.¹⁵

¹⁰ Mario Untersteiner, *The Sophists*, trans. Kathleen Freeman (New York: Philosophical Library, 1954), 46.

¹¹ James Porter, *Origins of Aesthetic Thought in Ancient Greece: Matter, Sensation, and Experience* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 47-48. On other early thought concerning the intelligible and sensible, see also Catherine Osborn, "Reality and Appearance: More Adventures in Metaphysics," in *Presocratic Philosophy: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 61-79.

¹² Plato associates poetry with pleasure, the body, and charm—all threats to reason, habit, and composure. *Republic*, trans. Paul Shorey (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1930), 606a-608a.

¹³ Plato, *Symposium*, trans. Harold N. Fowler (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1925), 218b. Alcibiades likens the words of Socrates to music, which Plato memorably frowns upon because of its affective indeterminacies. Thomas Rickert, "Language's Duality and the Rhetorical Problem of Music," in *Rhetorical Agendas: Political, Ethical, Spiritual*, ed. Patricia Bizzell (New York: Routledge, 2010), 158.

¹⁴ Plato, *Symposium*, 199b; 210c-212d.

¹⁵ Michael North, *Novelty: A History of the New* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013), 23.

One way of reading the *Symposium* is to conclude that Alcibiades is a bad student like the antihero Max Fischer in Wes Anderson's film *Rushmore*. An enthusiastic but underperforming student at a prestigious prep school, the brace faced Fischer is enamored with the aesthetics of academic life, but shuns the labor of study. His résumé features a goofy array of extracurricular padding—to wit: Stamp & Coin Club Veep, Kite Flying Society, Model United Nations (Russian delegate), President of Rushmore Bee Keepers, and so on—but he is ultimately kicked out for poor marks. Tears fall on his blazer embroidered with Rushmore's seal during the expulsion proceedings.¹⁶ This kind of hankering to be a part of the team, the institution, or the elite duplicates Alcibiades' immaturity, stuck as he is in the excitation of worldly experience. But one could also say that Socrates' cerebral resignation is itself an aesthetic relation to the ideas about which he seems to discourse so coolly. Let us be reminded: there is pathos in logos. Hence, while one could read the memory of Socrates frozen in place for an entire day contemplating an especially challenging problem as an indication of his godlike intellectual dexterity,¹⁷ one could just as easily read the episode as a “hysterical seizure” or “traumatic intrusion of something New”¹⁸ prior to apprehension.

Learning is surprising.

Aristotle's remarks in the opening pages of *Metaphysics* are also telling in this regard. The sensory apparatus of the body can be appreciated for its own sake, he says, but without memory these senses are “mere experience” and cannot produce knowledge.¹⁹ The function of memory here is to equalize the multitude of recurring experiences in our days, professions, and lives: to “produce the effect of a single experience,”²⁰ thereby eliminating

¹⁶ *Rushmore*, directed by Wes Anderson (1998; New York: The Criterion Collection, 2011), Blu-ray.

¹⁷ Plato, *Symposium*, 220c-220d.

¹⁸ Slavoj Žižek, *Event: A Philosophical Journey through a Concept* (Brooklyn: Melville House, 2014), 70-71 (original capitalization).

¹⁹ Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, trans. Hugh Tredennick (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1933), 981a.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 980b-981a.

surprise. Causality, of course, is the currency backing Aristotle's metaphysics, and, lest there remain any confusion, "sense-perception . . . has nothing to do with Wisdom" precisely because it does not involve contemplation or explanation for sensed phenomena.²¹ It's true that the third installment in his epistemic triad—knowing, doing, and making—requires improvisation as a sort of craft or art (*techne*). However, for Aristotle there is no relationality to universals *or* particulars, and he frames *techne* as an activity essentially driven by reasoning based on past experience.²²

Plotinus, too, pits "the Intellectual against the sensible," and declares it "better for the Soul to dwell in the Intellectual, but, given its proper nature, it is under compulsion to participate in the sense-realm also."²³ Alexander Gottlieb Baumgarten cites precisely this passage in his attempt to legitimate the sensate faculties as a veritable area for inquiry for a context of rationalism, yet in *Reflections on Poetry* he nevertheless works with the tired hierarchy and identifies the sensible as "lower" relative to the intellectual: "things known are to be known by the superior faculty as the object of logic; things perceived [are to be known by the inferior faculty, as the object] of the science of perception, or aesthetic."²⁴ Immanuel Kant, for his part, famously asserts a radical subjectivity that would seem compatible with sensibility, but the fierce criticism he inspired with what sounds like a universal beautiful

²¹ Ibid., 982a.

²² Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. Terence Irwin, 2nd ed. (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1999), 1140a.

²³ Plotinus, *The Enneads*, trans. Stephen MacKenna, 2nd rev. ed. by B. S. Page (London: Faber and Faber, 1956), 363.

²⁴ Alexander Gottlieb Baumgarten, *Reflections on Poetry*, trans. Karl Aschenbrenner and William B. Holther (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1954), 78 (brackets in the translation).

makes recouping his project tricky.²⁵ However, it is worth noting this supposed universality is only so if communicated successfully, which tempers at least to some degree the typical tsk-tsking Kant receives. Judgments might be radically subjective, but expression of judgments implies such assessments can (and should) be shared.²⁶

In any case, the real surprise for Kant is the sublime. Unlike the charming beautiful, the sublime “arises only indirectly” and evokes both “limitlessness” and “totality,”²⁷ which at once approximates the sublime with everything and nothing in particular. A series of overwhelming spatial qualities—greatness, vastness, and magnitude—are tossed out as characteristics of the sublime, but the common theme is a resistance to the subject’s apprehensive faculties. Given its associations with “displeasure,” “incapacity,” “astonishment,” and even “terror,”²⁸ one might reasonably conclude the sublime scares Kant precisely because its impenetrable wall grinds his analytic to a halt. Sections twenty-three

²⁵ Immanuel Kant, *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, trans. Paul Guyer and Eric Matthews (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 75; cf. 89. Hayden White is relentless in his critique of what he calls Kant’s extremist “ideology of aestheticism,” which promulgated “the difference, apprehended as an opposition, between literacy and literature” thusly:

literacy is considered as consisting of basic writing skills to be used primarily for the efficient communication of practical information, a certain kind of thought, and commands; . . . literature is considered as the product of a writing practice, the creativity of which is thought to consist of its capacity to permit the expression of intuitions, feelings, and thoughts of a certain impractical nature by virtue of their individuality, subjectivity, or idiosyncrasy [surprise!], on the one side, and their status as products of a rare, inborn talent, even genius, on the other.

In short, “a sensibility wholly imaginative (neither rational nor practical) in nature.” White, “The Suppression of Rhetoric in the Nineteenth Century,” in *The Fiction of Narrative: Essays on History, Literature, and Theory, 1957-2007*, ed. Robert Doran (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2010), 296. The consonances among rhetorics, sensibility, innovation, and the teaching of writing here are fortississimo: *fff*. The notion of a rhetorical literacy as somehow non-aesthetic is not only illusory, but a detriment to the progress of both arts and sciences. Education policy trumpeting the humanities as the university’s “creative” province in contradistinction to “vocational” departments and majors is consistent with this ideology. Ironically, such attitudes coupled with department-specific budget cuts in higher education today actually inhibit innovations beyond those of a narrowly defined variety—read: “monetizeable”—take energy and credit hours away from the pursuit of *invention* so desperately needed in undergraduate curricula. See my fifth chapter below for an elaboration of this point.

²⁶ Sensibility and intelligibility meet. Sensibility by itself, in Kant’s terms, is at best “good” or merely “agreeable.” Thomas Hove, “Communicative Implications of Kant’s Aesthetic Theory,” *Philosophy & Rhetoric* 42, no. 2 (2009): 103-114.

²⁷ Kant, *Judgment*, 128.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 142-143; 152.

through twenty-nine on the sublime in the third *Critique* fall to the floor like darts without tips—and this is exactly the point. It’s a discourse that talks about precisely *not* talking about the sublime. In this way, the notion has a funny correspondence with Hegel’s “symbolic” form of art characterized by an undeveloped and fumbling relation between the subject and its object that is “rather a *mere search* for portrayal than a capacity for true presentation”; consequently, in symbolic art “the relation of the Idea [reason] to the objective world therefore becomes a *negative one*.”²⁹ Although symbolic art’s attempt to shape its concepts are thereby “fantastic and monstrous,”³⁰ this first form is probably the most honest of the three—that is, most reflective of the situation when human animals convert the sensible to the intelligible.

Danger as Life Enhancing.

In the second chapter of *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, Freud gets frightened.

“Anxiety” describes a particular state of expecting the danger or preparing for it, even though it may be an unknown one. “Fear” requires a definite object of which to be afraid. “Fright,” however, is the name we give to the state a person gets into when he has run into danger without being prepared for it; it emphasizes the factor of surprise.³¹

Note this definition’s lack of criteria. Freud is writing about psychoanalysis and trauma, of course, but I am inclined to stretch and repurpose his distinctions for an inquiry into surprise as such. Given the “danger” is aesthetic, “fright” starts to sound like a desirable rhetorical experience for a study of sensibility. This is not an argument, however, for a no holds barred aesthetics. Car crashes, ebola outbreaks, crimes against humanity, and snuff

²⁹ The symbolic is first and least mature relative to what Hegel calls the “classical” (presentation perfected) and “romantic” (pursuit of an unrealizable human spirit) forms. G. W. F. Hegel, *Aesthetics: Lectures on Fine Art*, trans. T. M. Knox, vol. 1 (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 1988), 76-77 (emphasis in the translation; brackets mine); cf. 75-81.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 76n1 (translator’s note).

³¹ Sigmund Freud, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, trans. and ed. James Stachey (New York: Norton, 1990),

film, for example, are surprises this dissertation would not endorse. It *is* an argument, however, that we give the utterly catastrophic its due—*precisely by resisting the impulse to bring surprise as such to intelligibility*. It cannot be done. Such a resolve would require not merely announcing one’s being open to new experiences, but actually seeking out a kind of interpretive vulnerability. Foolish as it seems, willingness to lean into the unknown has utility. The value of liminal states is not unrelated to the rule that “a building is earthquake proof when it has built-in fissures and intentional crevices. Normed solidity, or, rather, *rigidity* is a sure killer,”³² by definition unprepared for the supposed impossibility of *otherwise*, caught off guard—unable to stand tall—when the inconceivable nevertheless arrives.

Deleuze and Guattari speak of a denegative “schizophrenic experience of intensive quantities in their pure state, to a point that is almost unbearable—a celibate misery and glory experienced to the fullest, like a cry suspended between life and death, and intense feeling of transition, states of pure, naked intensity stripped of all shape and form.”³³ This dissertation will make much of such cognitive dissonances, philosophical suspensions, and transitional experiences. Deleuze and Guattari identify the origin of such uncanny encounters as exposure to a simultaneous register of “attraction and repulsion”—not as oppositional or even balancing forces, but coincidental affectations. The poet William Blake was also interested in attraction and repulsion. He not only uses these same two words, he says that “without contraries is no progression.”³⁴ Apparent negatives of each other, he nevertheless maintains that “Attraction and Repulsion, Reason and Energy, Love and Hate,

³² Avital Ronell, “Stormy Weather: Blues in Winter,” *New York Times*, February 2, 2013, <http://opinionator.blogs.nytimes.com/2013/02/02/stormy-weather-blues-in-winter/>.

³³ Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Robert Hurley, Mark Seem, and Helen R. Lane (New York: Penguin, 2009), 18.

³⁴ William Blake, “The Marriage of Heaven and Hell,” in *The Norton Anthology of English Literature*, ed. Stephen Greenblatt, 8th ed. (New York: Norton, 2006), 1432.

are [all!] necessary to Human existence,”³⁵ though we are remarkably efficient at privileging one term in these (only) apparently dialectical pairs under the rubrics of logic and reason.

Artists associated with the Situationists and those involved in Happenings deliberately pursued an aesthetic or affect we might associate with sensibility. Allan Kaprow described Happenings as cultivating “risk and fear” or perhaps a “fine nervousness”—an energy that catalyzes something like a schizophrenic experience, comparable not in content or form, but in spirit: “you giggle because you’re afraid.”³⁶ Guy Debord, best known for his unnerving critique of the spectacle, strikes a different and more productive tone in his other writings on the Situationist International, whose modest goal was “to generate previously non-existent feelings.”³⁷ Additional avant-garde movements and their relations with surprises are considered below in the second chapter on novelty.

Anthropologically, I would understand the experience of such gestures as “liminal,” a term I borrow, stretch, and repurpose from Victor Turner’s work on transitional experiences in rites of passage rituals. Working with Arnold van Gennep’s three stages in rites of passage, “separation, transition, and incorporation,” Turner explores the interpretive ambiguity in these experiences of social evolution. He treats each period of the tripartite sequence in turn, but it is the middle period which primarily interests him in light of inventional opportunities therein. He writes: “[i]n this intervening phase of transition, called by Van Gennep ‘margin’ or ‘limen’ (meaning ‘threshold’ in Latin), the ritual subjects pass through a period of and area of ambiguity, a sort of social limbo” in which subjectivities and therefore confident interpretive capabilities are unavailable.³⁸ I also recall Luce Irigaray’s

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Allan Kaprow, *Essays on the Blurring of Art and Life*, ed. Jeff Kelley, exp. ed. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), 19; 16.

³⁷ Guy Debord, “Towards a Situationist International,” trans. Tom McDonough in *Participation*, ed. Claire Bishop (London: Whitechapel Gallery; Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2006), 99.

³⁸ Victor Turner, *From Ritual to Theatre: The Human Seriousness of Play* (New York: PAJ Publications, 1982), 24.

rereading of Plato’s Allegory of the Cave with attention to the “forgotten path” of *transition* between the shadowy underground and the blinding exteriority:

the “go-between” path that links two “worlds,” two modes, two methods, two measures of replicating, representing, viewing . . . Between truth and shadow, between truth and fantasy, between “truth” and whatever “veils” the truth. Between reality and ream. Between. . . Between. . . Between the intelligible and the sensible.³⁹

Other liminalities are desired in the baroque aesthetics of Jorge Luis Borges and suspensions in the cinema of Alfred Hitchcock, whose rule of thumb was “always make the audience suffer as much as possible.”⁴⁰ The latter’s *Vertigo* in particular is useful here. The film shows James Stewart as the acrophobic Scottie Ferguson dreams he is floating in air over a coastal Californian church which bears significance in the plot. But scenery fades to white, leaving only Stewart’s body, which free falls into white.



Figure 1.1: Scottie, held out in nothing. Still from *Vertigo* (1958)⁴¹

A climatic chase scene later, in waking life, forces him to climb a windy staircase to the church’s bell tower, which he does in haste, inadvertently conquering his fear in the heat of the moment. The character’s aversion to heights, of course, is relevant and available as a means of interpreting the scene. But, if for only a moment, not only the character but the audience is denied orientation and grounding. There is simply blankness—not only an utter

³⁹ Luce Irigaray, *Speculum of the Other Woman*, trans. Gillian C. Gill (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1985), 246-247 (first ellipsis mine; the second and third appear in the translation).

⁴⁰ Quotation from the supplementary material for *Alfred Hitchcock: The Masterpiece Collection*, ltd. ed. (Los Angeles: Universal Studios, 2012), Blu-ray (box set).

⁴¹ *Vertigo*, directed by Alfred Hitchcock (1958; Los Angeles: Universal Studios, 2012), Blu-ray.

lack of bearing in which the poor man's body twitches like an upended cockroach, but precisely a positive representation of that struggle. Stewart is simply held out, dangling. A related aesthetic appears in Borges' "The Garden of Forking Paths," which tells the riddle of one Ts'ui Pên who was supposed to have created "a labyrinth of labyrinths . . . in which all men would become lost."⁴² Decades after the Pên's murder, however, no maze is to be found. With no small amount of detective work, his descendent Yu Tsun realizes the puzzle is not an actual garden, but an apparently incomprehensible manuscript left behind by the dead relative and thought by all who read it to be unfinished, contradictory, and incoherent. As it turns out, the labyrinth is a sort of infinite text—"forking in time, not in space"⁴³—warping and twisting the narrative into plural and incommensurable sequences. "I examined it once," Yu Tsun recalls. "[I]n the third chapter the hero dies, in the fourth he is alive."⁴⁴ Bluntly: a denial of resolution, a sustained shock, an "infinite execution of a rhetorical experiment."⁴⁵ Paradoxically, such a condition is inherent to the enterprises of learning and education, if only temporarily.

Simultaneities.

Schiller made the point simply: "[o]ur psyche passes, then, from sensation to thought *via* a middle disposition in which sense and reason are both active at the same time. Precisely for this reason, however, they cancel each other out as determining forces, and bring about a

⁴² Jorge Luis Borges, "The Garden of Forking Paths," in *Labyrinths: Selected Stories & Other Writings*, trans. Donald A. Yates, eds. James E. Irby and Donald A. Yates (New York: New Directions, 1962), 23; 22.

⁴³ Borges, "Forking Paths," 26. Gilles Deleuze cites the story in his discussion of "impossible" or "many" worlds. *The Fold: Leibniz and the Baroque*, trans. Tom Conley (London: Athlone, 1993), 62-63. Dozens of commentators have located in both Borges and Deleuze anticipations of the internet's architecture, which is precisely a series of effectively endless linkages. Deleuze and Félix Guattari's figure of the "rhizome" has also been deployed for related reasons. "Introduction: Rhizome," in *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minneapolis Press, 2005), 3-25.


⁴⁴ Borges, "Forking Paths," 24.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 27.

negation by means of an opposition.”⁴⁶ Although the notion of an opposition is problematic for reasons I hope are clear by now, Schiller’s conception of sensate and rational faculties of the human as mutually involved reminds us that intelligible is firstly sensible. Indeed, this “middle disposition” between physical sensation and rational apprehension—as well as our ability to make this distinction at all—creates the possibility for a notion of sensibility: “if we are to call the condition of sensuous determination the physical, and the condition of rational determination the logical or moral, then we must call this condition of real and active determinability the *a e s t h e t i c*.”⁴⁷ Recalling that Schiller asserts a productive role for the aesthetic in politics, we might recall Kenneth Burke’s related suggestion that “the service of the aesthetic [is] in keeping the practical from becoming too hopelessly itself.”⁴⁸ Instead, each becomes a kind of strategy for dealing with the inevitability of the other in deliberative, forensic, and epideictic contexts—from the quotidian to the extraordinary. This constant simultaneity of both the sensible and the intelligible highlights the co-productive relationship between thinker and thought, spectator and art, scholar and discourse. Specifically, routinized habits of communal interpretive practice (such as those of an academic discipline) are probably better understood as contingent, accidental—discursive modalities susceptible to Rancière’s “redistribution of the sensible,” an appearance or disappearance of that which is possible or available for sense experience, perception,

⁴⁶ Friedrich Schiller, *On the Aesthetic Education of Man: In a Series of Letters*, trans. Elizabeth M. Wilkinson and L. A. Willoughby (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1967), 141.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 141-143 (widened kerning in the translation).

⁴⁸ Kenneth Burke, *Counter-Statement* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1968), 112. Recall that the *Letters* open with scorn for “Utility[,] . . . the great idol of our age.” Schiller, *Aesthetic*, 7. As a reminder, and for good measure: “[i]t is not true that the aesthetic and the practical are necessarily opposed. . . . [T]o ask that the aesthetic set itself in opposition to the practical is to ask that the aesthetic be one specific brand of the aesthetic.” Burke, *Counter-Statement*, 111. This strategy can only result in a betrayal of the aesthetic’s dynamism. I think of the anarchy circle-a, , pressed on t-shirts in the mall as an example of such failed strategies. As Thomas Frank has demonstrated, counterculture itself has been thoroughly co-opted as one flavor among many and nobody seems to care. Aestheticized politics indeed. See Frank, “Why Johnny Can’t Dissent,” in *Commodify Your Dissent: Salvos from The Baffler*, eds. Thomas Frank and Matt Weiland (New York: Norton, 1997), 31-45.

hearing, viewing, utterance, or performance.⁴⁹ Socioeconomic and material circumstances along cultural and technological innovation condition the possibility of things like novels, theatre stages, performance art, internet video, microphones, and typography. Rancière is particularly interested in “redistribution” or appearances of *new* sensible possibilities. In a word, *surprises*. His work on such innovations is engaged in the second chapter below. The key for both Schiller and Rancière is an approach to sensibility that understands the political as aesthetic and the aesthetic as political—and not by any act of will. The point is that it is impossible to talk about one from a context cleansed of its partner term because intelligibilities shade off into one another.

Body’s Languages.

Although I will not engage the issue directly, my project is in many ways indebted to the body’s sensory apparatus and work on essentially embodied nature of interpretation. As Brian Massumi reminds us, “the skin is faster than the word.”⁵⁰ His daring endowment of affect with a certain “autonomy” ventures into a “virtual” zone of conceptual indeterminacy between the body’s register of phenomena and the subsequent event of re-cognition. A fleeting moment, to be sure, but one where cognitive apprehension is temporarily unavailable prior to the application of intelligible conceptuality. Add unconsciousness to the mix, and you’ve got yourself a mind-body-hand-eye-mouth-ear-nose machine that is a stranger to both itself and its world while having convinced itself it knows better.⁵¹ Others

⁴⁹ Jacques Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics*, ed. and trans. Gabriel Rockhill (London: Bloomsbury, 2014), 7-8. The translator describes the sensible as simply “what is visible and audible as well as what can be said, thought, made, or done.” Ibid., 89.

⁵⁰ Brian Massumi, *Parables for the Virtual: Movement, Affect, Sensation* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2002), 27.

⁵¹ “What are recognized object attributes and owned emotions if not old surprises to which we have been more or less accustomed? . . . Is recognition anything more than the habit of no longer see what’s new?” Ibid., 221.

have established a depth to the apparent superficiality of the lived and the affective. The sensorimotor capacities of infants, for whom everything is new, has interested the arts and sciences alike. For prelinguistic babies, perceiving and manipulating objects is not a metaphysical activity because they “learn about our world not with conceptual and propositional knowledge, but more fundamentally, via bodily interactions and feelings” they cannot even identify. The connection is not excessive. This is a situation from which we never fully depart, a lifetime of conceptual schemata notwithstanding, because even returns to things remembered—physical and metaphysical—are mediated by the body’s apparatus. Human animals making legible the sensible world are “big babies.”⁵² As Anna Munster has demonstrated, the rule applies even to the apparent cleanliness and order of binary code. Far from a “reduction or erasure of the organic body’s relation to the cybernetic,” digitality is better conceived not as a control mechanism, but rather a genesis of a new “universe constituted primarily out of information”⁵³ that is inherently aesthetic. No glitzy visualization required.

For the sake of acknowledging and performing such a relation, this dissertation considers scholarly approaches to “the new” and

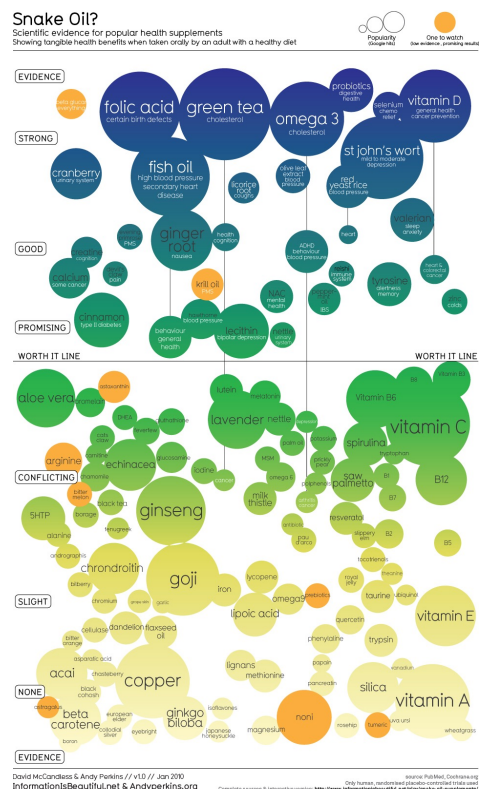


Figure 1.2: “Snake Oil? Scientific Evidence for Popular Health Supplements,” by from the *Information is Beautiful* series by David McCandless and Andy Perkins. Image by david [McCandless]. Licensed under CC BY-NC 2.0.

⁵² Mark Johnson, *The Meaning of the Body: Aesthetics of Human Understanding* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2008), 51. Upon revisitations, “[t]he same ‘object’ can . . . present different affordances to different organisms, or even to the same organism at different times.” Ibid., 47.

⁵³ Anna Munster, *Materializing New Media: Embodiment in Information Aesthetics*, Hanover: Dartmouth College Press, 2006), 65; 64.

sound with particular attention to electronic music in the second and third chapters, respectively. As we will see, these two discourses are uniquely positioned to help us think and live both surprise and sensibility for academic writing. The goal will be to actually enact and perform such a relation temporally across the duration of the text. “What shall we call such discourse?” asks Barthes. “[E]rotic, no doubt, for it has to do with pleasure; or even perhaps: *aesthetic*, if we foresee subjecting this old category to a gradual torsion which will alienate it from its regressive, idealist background and bring it closer to the body.”⁵⁴

Existential Registers

Martin Heidegger asserts that a mood receptive to sensibility is necessary to undertake and more so experience his attempt in *Being and Time*. His “analysis” required a posture not typically associated with academic thinking: “as a state-of-mind which will satisfy the methodological requirements, the phenomenon of *anxiety* will be made basic for our analysis.”⁵⁵ This analysis would be no mere narrative, no mere explication of Being that could only betray its dynamism. Instead, Heidegger dared to imagine an engagement with Being that was somehow outside of negation. A fascinating passage on this point appears in the lecture “What is Metaphysics?,” delivered two years after the treatise:

Anxiety is there. It is only sleeping. Its breath quivers perpetually through Dasein, only slightly in those who are jittery, imperceptible in the “Oh, yes” and the “Oh, no” of men of affairs; but most readily in the reserved, and most assuredly in those who are basically daring. But those daring ones are sustained by that on which they expend themselves—in order thus to preserve the ultimate grandeur of existence.⁵⁶

⁵⁴ Roland Barthes, *Roland Barthes*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Hill and Wang, 2010), 84 (emphasis and lowercasing in the translation).

⁵⁵ Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson (New York: Harper, 2008) 227 (original emphasis).

⁵⁶ Martin Heidegger, “What is Metaphysics?,” in *Basic Writings from Being and Time (1927) to The Task of Thinking (1964)*, ed. and trans. David Farrell Krell (London: Harper, 2008), 106.

This anxiety as latent in even the most familiar situations suggests an uncanny inability to comprehend the full extent of its implications for our Being-there in the world. For me, what is most remarkable about the essay is that it actually performs its anxiety. Consider the opening tease: “‘What is metaphysics?’ The question awakens expectations of a discussion of metaphysics. This we will forgo.”⁵⁷ There are no easy ways out in Heidegger’s critique of Western metaphysics and its reliance on empiricism, rationality, and faith in its own observations. World and Being can be much more surprising than the prevalence of intelligible accounting would indicate. And yet, for all this, he proceeds in the essay with his characteristic, early Heideggerian analytical rigor and a necessarily sequential plan: first x, then y, then we will be prepared to z. Intelligible and sensible registers blur.

In any case, the combination of “reserved” and “daring” attributes in those inclined toward anxiety suggests a kind contradictory synthesis of active and passive states. Hence Cynthia Haynes, taking a cue from Heidegger, points out that “things do not depend on human reason, they emerge before us on their own.”⁵⁸ What does this mean? We can come up with an infinite array of methods in a kind of imperial conquest to know the world and our relation to it, stacking the latest iterations of this incessant chattering of discourse upon one another, and still be so far removed from any understanding of our ontological condition. Heidegger is key on the issue, not only because of his propositional ideas, but because of the manner in which he presented or performed them in his writing.

Sociologist Marvin Zuckerman’s research with his “Sensation Seeking Scale” is still further work on this issue as I am construing it across disciplines. The instrument is a series of tests he and some colleagues developed in the late 1960s to gauge one’s propensity for “a trait defined by the need for varied, novel, and complex sensations and experiences and the

⁵⁷ Ibid., 93.

⁵⁸ Cynthia Haynes, “Writing Offshore: The Disappearing Coastline of Composition Theory,” *Journal of Advanced Composition* 23, no. 4 (2003): 679.

willingness to take physical and social risks for the sake of such experience.”⁵⁹ This work when fused with rhetoric reveals interesting relationships between risk taking and other, less so called “behavioral” and more epistemic and/or aesthetic tendencies. One such disposition of import for my project involves a tolerance on the part of sensation seekers for ambiguity, where “intolerance for ambiguity represents a tendency to react to ambiguous ideas or situations as a threat rather than a challenge.”⁶⁰ Aporia and paradox pose a relatively low “threat” to the sensation seeker, who delights in murky questions such as those posed by a discourse of “sensibility” as construed by this dissertation.

Rhetorics of Possibilities, Possible Rhetorics.

A sensibility for aesthetic and epistemological variation is a readily identifiable Sophistic emphasis on novelty. John Poulakos, for example, associates the Sophists with “the novel, the unusual, that prior to which we have no awareness, the unprecedented.”⁶¹ His favorite example is Hippias, who is reported to have boasted in conversation with Socrates his standard of discourse: “I always try and say something new.”⁶² But, for the present writing, this isn’t a new for its own sake. As already indicated, aesthetics are political and vice versa. Victor Vitanza’s perpetual reinclusion of “some more” in *The canonized History of Rhetoric* as well as the affective experience of “denegation” he attempts in his writing are hysterical efforts to recoup the sensible downplayed in the accountancy of the archive. Instead: improbabilities, possibilities, potentialities, and “incompossibilities”—that is, plural conditions of possibility that cannot be reconciled but nevertheless occur alongside each

⁵⁹ Marvin Zuckerman, *Sensation Seeking: Beyond the Optimal Level of Arousal* (Hillsdale: Lawrence Erlbaum, 1979), 10.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 264.

⁶¹ John Poulakos, “Toward a Sophistic Definition of Rhetoric,” *Philosophy & Rhetoric* 16, no. 1 (1983): 41.

⁶² Recollected by Xenophon, *Memorabilia*, trans. David Gallop in *The Older Sophists*, ed. Rosamond Kent Sprague (Indianapolis: Hackett, 2001), DK86A14 (6) (quoted in Poulakos, “Toward,” 41).

other simultaneously. Entertaining such ideas helps safeguard against our tendency to eliminate surprise, outlier, and error with instruments of regularity and salience such as bell curves.⁶³ Such tendencies are what Burke calls a “trained incapacities,” a term he borrowed from Thorstein Veblen and refigured for criticism as a “state of affairs whereby one’s very abilities can function as blindnesses,” where one’s “training would work against them.”⁶⁴

Poulakos’ formulation of the Sophists as being interested in “the possible” or “the world as it is not” since such a rhetoric of possibility “opens new horizons and advocates their pursuit, thus giving man the chance to venture finding what he lacks.”⁶⁵ Vitanza goes even further, beyond lack, in a trajectory from “*One* (homogeneity) to *Two* [possible/actual] (heterogeneity homogenized) to *Some More* (i.e., to Radical Heterogeneity)”⁶⁶ to allow for the perpetual inclusion for alternative, marginalized, and oppressed notions of rhetorical possibility in the first place. The result is an ongoing, baroque aestheticization of information, archive, and canon having no necessary characteristic of beauty or taste, but rather texture.

Scission.

“Surprise” for this project, then, is not something new under the sun.⁶⁷ Instead, these pages will investigate a necessarily transient *experience* of unassimilable phenomena or information and accountancy for such experiences in scholarly venues. It is my belief that

⁶³ Nassim Nicholas Taleb, “The Bell Curve, that Great Intellectual Fraud,” in *The Black Swan: The Impact of the Highly Improbable*, (New York: Random House, 2007), 229-252.

⁶⁴ Burke, *Permanence and Change*, 7.

⁶⁵ John Poulakos, “Rhetoric, the Sophists, and the Possible,” *Communication Monographs* 51 (1984): 218; 224.

⁶⁶ Victor J. Vitanza, “‘Some More’ Notes Toward a ‘Third’ Sophistic,” *Argumentation* 5 (1991): 131 (brackets mine, original parentheses).

⁶⁷ “What is it that hath been? The same thing that shall be. What is it that hath been done? The same that shall be done. Nothing under the sun is new, neither is any man able to say: Behold this is new; for it hath already gone before in the ages that were before us.” Ecclesiastes 1:9-10, *New Catholic Edition of the Holy Bible* (New York: Catholic Book Publishing Company, 1952), 712.

such an experience is only ever identified retrospectively, after trauma subsides and the comfort of composure returns. In drawing these writers, thinkers, and artists together, I hardly intend to conflate their obvious differences. But I would like to highlight a commonality of a *desire* to engage in creative processes of exploration “without criteria,” to borrow a term and a phrase from Lyotard.⁶⁸ Insofar as such is possible.

The problem, of course, is that as soon as one attempts to articulate sensibility, one mediates the experience not merely in the envelope of representative language, but, more importantly, in *proposition*, in grammar, thereby engaging in a kind of betrayal by forcing a “stammering translation into a completely foreign tongue.”⁶⁹ While I deal with subjects and objects, I am more so interested in postures, attitudes, and moods we might assume during *necessarily transient* experience of objects and events that confuse, disrupt, and unsettle. I am less interested in a critique of the binary (although that is certainly an important issue) than I am in augmentations, alterations, and enhancements of the subject so that the object might be experienced anew. And I will need an object, after all, if I am to advance past the stasis of conjecture. In light of Heidegger’s argument that basically all methodologies are avoidance mechanisms against alternative understandings—the most powerful assumptions being those about which we are totally unaware—I am most interested in novel conditions of possibilities for academic work. Specifically, I would acknowledge and embrace our aesthetic relation with our discourse. Intelligibility as intervention underscores a relegation of mental and experiential activity prior to the arrival of communicable knowledge.

The dissertation is “about” precisely this tension between a would-be inventive writer and their discourse conventions that rely on intelligibility and code—yet are also capable of “registering” on the level of the sensible. The separate works of Julia Kristeva

⁶⁸ Jean-François Lyotard, *Libidinal Economy*, trans. Ian Hamilton Grant (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993), 31.

⁶⁹ Nietzsche, “Truth and Lies,” 1176.

and Roland Barthes are immensely helpful on this point. Kristeva's distinction between symbolic and semiotic analysis reclaims aesthetic or affective dimensions of what could very well otherwise be mere decryption. Similarly, Barthes speaks "a discomfort [he] had always suffered from: the uneasiness of being a subject torn between two languages, one expressive, the other critical."⁷⁰ What comes out in reading Kristeva and Barthes is a realization that we are always already *both* within and without structural analysis. This duality and the anxiety it creates is my "object." In addition to Kristeva and Barthes, I also plan to revisit the outsider-on-the-inside performances in Spivak's "negotiating with structures of violence," Lynn Worsham's implosion of hermeneutics, and Haynes' attempt to "draw us away from the shoreline of philosophical reason and its alluring beacon of argumentation," pointing our sterns, instead, toward "abstraction"; she continues: "In casting off from *ground* metaphysics (a difficult and dissuasive move), we occupy a paradoxical position; we must stand with one foot on land and one foot on our vessel."⁷¹ I see these writers as brushing against the limits of a discursive apparatus by means of stretching from the inside out. This trio of "impostors" to their discourses, along with Kristeva and Barthes, are the focus of the fourth chapter below.

But there is a potential for misdirection here, as the famous dualism arises. As I've stressed, the difference between sensibility and intelligibility is not negative, but positive. In light of the literature, I propose "sensibility" as an open-ended capacity to undergo a necessarily ephemeral experience of discovery, surprise, novelty, shock, wonder, awe, eureka!, epiphany, and the transitional experience of ex-stasis itself *during* the activities of thinking, reading, writing, and, especially for this dissertation, listening. Surprise is a strange and

⁷⁰ Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Hill and Wang, 1981), 8.

⁷¹ Haynes, "Offshore," 671.

visceral rendition on the Socratic paradox in which one claims to know that they do not know.

The Finest Quality.

Surprises can be catastrophic and/or invaluable. Scholarship as explanation—a search for causalities amounting to a challenging-forth of the so called “content”—seems to stand in direct contrast with surprise. Here, then: “the paradox of wonder: it is the beginning of inquiry, . . . but the end of inquiry also puts an end to wonder.”⁷² Rather than seek to iron out interpretive wrinkles, I have presented a discourse of texts, thinkers, art works, and more that embrace and hope for surprising, “sensible” events to serve as reminders that our world and our rhetoric could be otherwise—for better or worse. Rickert puts it particularly well in saying that “when we tether intent to self-consciousness, we cut off large swaths of human activity from rhetorical practice in our rhetorical theory.”⁷³ Let’s face it: cogent ideas simply do not comprise the full breadth and scope of the rhetorical subject’s experiential and interpretive capacities. Scholarship should reflect this situation and benefit from this productive ambiguity besides.

Ought: Aesthetics of Rhetorics.

Such interpretive stretching, of course, will only ever take place from inside the very constraints we identify as limiting—which is to say that such stretching will take place casuistically, whereby “one introduces new principles while theoretically remaining faithful to

⁷² Lorraine Daston, “Wonder and the Ends of Inquiry,” *The Point*, 2014, <http://thepointmag.com/2014/examined-life/wonder-ends-inquiry>.

⁷³ Thomas Rickert, *Ambient Rhetoric: The Attunements of Rhetorical Being* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2013), 36.

old principles.⁷⁴ Deterritorializations have territorialized origins. The trick and the challenge, then, will be to enact or perform a sensible writing that incites dissonant affects while nevertheless operating within the protocols of academic writing.

My argument is that what is needed is not novel objects of study or new vocabularies with which to undertake rhetorical study of sensibility, not another reading that will settle, once and for all, the matter of reading the bibliographies below—but entirely new moods and modes of discoursing that are not merely content to be self-conscious of and apologetic for the fixation inherent to the scholarly apparatus, but attempt to wobble that paradigm through the introduction of not only novel propositional content but novel ways of talking about sensibility that minimize the undesirable calcifications promoted by the typical goals of critical discourse: fixation, operationalization, control, capitalization. All of which seems especially important if your “object” of study is the affective experience of surprise brought on by the limits of a paradigm or a discursive apparatus.

Steve Whitson and John Poulakos certainly surprised rhetorical studies with their 1993 essay “Nietzsche and the Aesthetics of Rhetoric.” Aligning themselves with the philosopher, they claimed that rhetoric is essentially artistic and not, as virtually all composition textbooks and pedagogies would have it, an activity of constructing knowledge.⁷⁵ As foils to Robert Scott and his memorable claim that “rhetoric is a way of knowing” and is thus “epistemic,”⁷⁶ Whitson and Poulakos provoked an aesthetic disruption

⁷⁴ Kenneth Burke, *Attitudes toward History*, 3rd ed. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), 229.

⁷⁵ Steve Whitson and John Poulakos, “Nietzsche and the Aesthetics of Rhetoric,” *The Quarterly Journal of Speech* 79, no. 2 (1993): 132.

⁷⁶ Robert L. Scott, “On Viewing Rhetoric as Epistemic,” *Central States Speech Journal* 18 (1967): 17. To be fair, Scott’s position was not that rhetoric yields or uncovers eternal truth, but rather that cooperative argumentation carries the potential for *creating* contingent truth “fixed only in a relative sense” (Ibid.). But such a concession was not enough for Whitson and Poulakos, who follow Nietzsche in their doubt of useful knowledge itself. In any case, Scott’s essay prompted a series of hairsplitting debates on the relationship between rhetoric and knowledge, perspectivism, intersubjectivity, objectivism, and other related concepts. As Barry Brummett remarked, interlocutors in such debates had eventually “grown hoarse in this futile effort.” Brummett, “A Eulogy for the Death of Epistemic Rhetoric,” *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 9 (1990): 70.

in the tireless accumulation of knowledge through propositional logic. Picking up Nietzsche's declaration that the subject's intellectual and reflective capacities are not capable of reproducing objects because we stand in a basically aesthetic relation to the world, Whitson and Poulakos import Nietzsche for rhetoric to stress that knowledge is itself aesthetic because our relationship with the world is sensuous; encounters with objects, arts, others, and especially important for me, discourses are firstly sensate or sensible. Notably, aesthetic rhetoric is associated with the body and the senses: "because we have nothing to go on except nerve stimuli from our senses, linguistic signs intervene to expand the stimuli and forge them into concepts"⁷⁷ during a process neuroscience reminds us is entirely physical. Probing these issues drops us right on the meta/physical threshold between intelligibility and sensibility.

While I am empathetic with Nietzsche and largely in agreement with Whitson and Poulakos, the line drawn between aesthetic and so called epistemic rhetorics replays the ancient divide even as it proclaims the primacy of the aesthetic. It's not hard to see why the essay drew a blistering critique from James Hikins, who, like an epistemic playground bully, makes a series of layup arguments against the duo of aestheticians. The critique is that aesthetic rhetoric is actually "eristic," a playful technique Hikins describes as gaming systems and lacking actual, propositional argument.⁷⁸ Like a modern day Isocrates, who charged the sophists with eristic and bashed their flashy discursive tricks because they could not found or facilitate political affairs, Hikins makes a similar dismissal. In line with the practicality his teachings prioritized, Isocrates equated the practices of the sophist's. "Jugglers' tricks," he

⁷⁷ Whitson and Poulakos, "Aesthetics of Rhetoric," 137.

⁷⁸ "[N]otably absent is the requirement that Eristic engage in conventional philosophical argument." James W. Hikins, "Nietzsche, Eristic, and The Rhetoric of the Possible: A Commentary of the Whitson and Poulakos 'Aesthetic View' of Rhetoric," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 81, no. 3 (1995): 360.

called them, which “do not profit anyone yet attract great crowds of the empty-minded.”⁷⁹ While Whitson and Poulakos claim to be attacking the epistemic tradition from “within,” Hikins maintains they are in fact “without” because they lack an argument beyond the claim that aesthetics is prior to rhetorics. And yet, there it is: Whitson and Poulakos’ article in the pages of *The Quarterly Journal of Speech*.⁸⁰ The lesson we might learn from these exchanges is that there exist alternative intelligences in addition to intelligibilities, and that these are worthy of acknowledgement and inclusion in everyday academic practices.

Both parties maintain some essential divide between aesthetics and epistemology that results in an interesting but ultimately circular conversation. And to varying degrees, the responses continued this circularity. Douglas Thomas tries to broker a deal between the two “competing” approaches, but winds up reaffirming the binary in a “risk/reward” cost-benefit analysis where neither side has anything to offer the other.⁸¹ Chief among the Nietzschean platform’s risks is “allowing aesthetics to overwhelm our sense of critical purpose,”⁸² a sentiment that replays an earlier concern that “the contemporary age does not demand merely ‘charm and impact,’ but sober consideration of the complex problems confronting it and effectual solutions.”⁸³ The notion that aesthetics has nothing to offer so

⁷⁹ Isocrates, *Antidosis*, trans. George Norlin, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1928), §269. The classist motives driving his dismissal of eristic are well documented. As M. I. Finley observes, the pedagogy of Isocrates was “designed for members of the ruling elite, a socially and culturally homogeneous group, whose common values were formed and repeatedly reinforced by their continuous association and shared experience.” *The Use and Abuse of History* (New York: Penguin, 1975), 208.

⁸⁰ This in distinction from Richard A. Chervitz and Robert J. Darwin, who argue the performance of discourse is paradoxical in that it cannot avoid the propositional form: “the epistemic is an inevitable part of discursive activity.” Chervitz and Darwin view this acknowledgement as a necessary corrective to the relegation of the epistemic in favor of a totalizing aesthetic. Chervitz and Darwin, “Why The ‘Epistemic’ In Epistemic Rhetoric? The Paradox Of Rhetoric As Performance,” *Text and Performance Quarterly* 15 (1995): 203. Again, the problem is the idea that one can be delineated from the other. It’s not true.

⁸¹ Douglas Thomas, “Reflections on a Nietzschean Turn in Rhetorical Theory: Rhetoric without Epistemology?,” *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 80 (1994): 71-76.

⁸² *Ibid.*, 73.

⁸³ Hikins, “Nietzsche, Eristic, and The Rhetoric of the Possible,” 374 (quoting Whitson and Poulakos).

called real world policy making—higher educational, geopolitical, economic, etc.—is an exceptionally unfortunate and deep misunderstanding.⁸⁴ Whitson and Poulakos’ fantastical approach notwithstanding, the aesthetic as superfluous or inhibiting incorrectly presupposes we can bypass form for content as if each did not bleed into each other. Furthermore, the ability of the arts to anticipate, reflect, or catalyze social and economic developments is well known.⁸⁵

With the benefit of hindsight, we can easily sense it is *not* a question of whether rhetoric is or is not aesthetic *or* epistemic, but that the question makes it possible to engage our relationship with knowledge beget by rhetorical work. For me, the question is not an ontology of rhetoric, but a sensible relationship with rhetorical action and potential surprise with regard to the discursive capacities we thought we knew as primarily or exclusively epistemic. Because Whitson and Poulakos continue the commonplace of pitting epistemic rhetoric against aesthetics, they all too quickly concede their essay is of the former tradition:

Is this essay written in the aesthetic tradition of rhetoric? No—the conventions of academic writing militate against the kinds of prose Nietzsche would have endorsed. As written, this essay acknowledges that academic writing generally privileges the epistemic tradition; at the same time, it suggests that the epistemic tradition is not altogether impervious to a critique from within.⁸⁶

While the tongue is in the cheek, the authors conspicuously stop short of a full embrace of an aestheticism they themselves frame as somehow antithetical to an epistemic tradition.

Two decades later, with multimodal scholarship and alt presentations up to and including art

⁸⁴ Greene begins to displace the impasse by arguing that ethics does not simply go out the window when aesthetics or the sensible is recognized as anterior. Ronald Walter Green, “The Aesthetic Turn and the Rhetorical Perspective on Argumentation,” *Argumentation and Advocacy* 35, no. 1 (1998): 19-29. Instead, ethics is highlighted in a way Richard Vatz might have liked because emphasis is placed on the constitutive nature of rhetorical. Rhetoric determines situations, not the other way around. Richard E. Vatz, “The Myth of the Rhetorical Situation,” *Philosophy & Rhetoric* 6, no. 3 (1973): 154-161.

⁸⁵ See Benjamin Winterhalter, “The Morbid Fascination With the Death of the Humanities: Why Professors, Librarians, and Politicians are Shunning Liberal Arts in the Name of STEM,” *The Atlantic*, June 6, 2014, <http://www.theatlantic.com/education/archive/2014/06/the-morbid-fascination-with-the-death-of-the-humanities/372216/>. See also Scott Jaschik, “Marco Rubio vs. Aristotle,” *Inside Higher Ed*, August 20, 2015, <https://www.insidehighered.com/quicktakes/2015/08/20/marco-rubio-vs-aristotle>.

⁸⁶ Whitson and Poulakos, “Aesthetics of Rhetoric,” 143.

installations seen at conferences in rhetoric and composition, we might begin to think the aesthetic tradition has been assimilated. Yet a more viable way of reading Whitson and Poulakos—one more consistent with Nietzsche, really—would be to suggest they were always already aesthetic.

Might it be possible to integrate meaningfully such faculties or capacities into academic writing? Which is mythical, that we have something like a “sensitivity,” or the idea that we can transcend it?

CHAPTER TWO

BUILD: NOVELTY

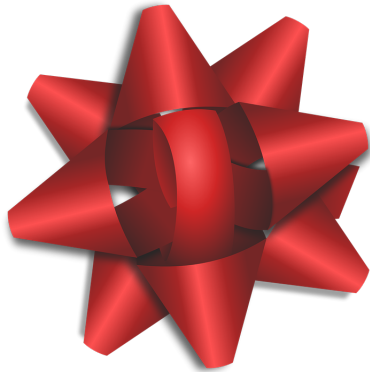


Figure 2.1: Bow

Bow on my package tied up with string: these are a few of my choice idiosyncrasies. Concept commodity fetishes. I'm drooling. Oh: now this, *this* is something different, something new. Say it and it's no longer true.¹

What is originality? *To see* something that has no name as yet and hence cannot be mentioned although it stares us all in the face. The way men usually are, it takes a name to make something visible for them.

—Nietzsche²

I could not see my way to dispute the transience of all things, nor could I insist upon an exception in favour of what is beautiful and perfect. But I did dispute the pessimistic poet's view that the transience of what is beautiful involves any loss in its worth. On the contrary, an increase! Transience value is scarcity value in time. Limitation in the possibility of an enjoyment raises the value of the enjoyment. —Freud³

Introduction

To begin: *novelty*. Itself associated with beginnings, the novel as a semantic entity in this sentence cheats itself out its own meaning. Most can relate to a new acquisition, travel to a foreign place, the experience of unfamiliar art works. But “the new” as referent seems to require and (or?) result in a something *recognizable*, referential, and termed. When signified, the new saws off the branch on which it sits. In this way, the new is like surprise in that

¹ Excepting the allusion to the film *The Sound of Music*, these words are my own.

² Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science: with a Prelude and an Appendix of Songs*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Vintage, 1974), 218 (original emphasis). Both the author's subtitle and my third chapter below indicate this matter is not limited to visuality.

³ Sigmund Freud, “On Transience,” in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, trans. James Strachey with Anna Freud, vol. 14, 1914-1916 (London: The Hogarth Press, 1957), 305. According to Strachey, the “poet” interlocutor is unknown. See *Ibid.*, n. 1.

Lastly: Figure 2.1: The bow vector on this page is by OpenClipartVectors and is in the Public Domain under CC0 1.0.

everyone can relate to having a new experience, but nobody knows what it is. If “it” had qualities or attributes, it wouldn’t be new. The new is thus a floating signification. Its value and punch abounds in business, marketing, engineering, the sciences—and even humanities scholarship in pursuit of “fresh” and “distinctive” approaches to textual analysis. But the new is a literal nothing and must be. Round and round the mulberry bush.

For this reason and others, the new is a favorite dead horse. As I will demonstrate, scholarly treatments of novelty frequently take form as bureaucratic accounts of self-proclaimed progressives, and read their rhetorics as empty, cheap, or commercial—egotism at best. After all, innumerable critics wail, if something were *really* new, it would bear the mark of no antecedent whatsoever. Hence the new cannot be re-cognized or even identified. If such were possible, the referent would not be new.⁴

While these are important lessons with real consequences that ought to inform a study of the new, my sense is these gripes emerge from a false conundrum attributable to a relationship with information and intelligibility characterized by control, regulation, and order that masquerade as somehow non-relational. Moreover, such dismissals obscure the bigger issue: what is our relationship with the novel, to surprise? To simplify and reduce the claim, the reliance of scholarly discourse on a “critical” relation with its content seems to secure the fate of the new to the laughing stock. Interpretive in/security, if you like. Critiques of disembodied Cartesianism and its subject-object relationship are a dime for two baker’s dozens, yet mainstream forms and attitudes of scholarship buck at the vulnerability the collapse of this divide entails. It’s worth remembering Descartes himself ranked “wonder as the first of all passions” with a use value, reasoning that the novel instigates and inspires

⁴ As the epigraph from Freud alludes, an aesthetics of transience permeates the chapter. It is a minor sensibility generally inadequate for producing the hallmarks of compelling arguments: stoppage, exhaustiveness, completion, and so on.

the work of thought, learning, and knowledge.⁵ Careful not to overdo it, however, because “surprise” in excess can result in paralysis of “astonishment” and freeze the inquiry.⁶ Tracing the genealogy of *wonder* through episodes in the history of science starring phenomena unassimilable and irreducible to contemporary intelligibilities, Lorraine Daston remarks that a general distaste for such affects has crossed disciplinary borders: “humanists are even more chary [than scientists] of expressing wonder in their scholarly publications or even their popular ones. To do so flirts with vulgarity, even kitsch.”⁷ Indeed, it is easy (and perhaps lazy) to write the new off as fad—that which cannot and does not aim to sustain interest, engagement, or thought. Even aesthete Edmund Burke admits it: “[c]uriosity, from its nature, is a very active principle; it quickly runs over the greatest part of its objects, and soon exhausts the variety which is commonly to be met with in nature,”⁸ a view that situates novelty squarely in the realm of the superficial and unsophisticated.⁹ *Kenneth* Burke remarks that “surprise is the least complex form of fulfillment.”¹⁰ Read literally, he’s right. One can hardly experience fulfillment of an expectation one does not hold, and it makes no sense to anticipate surprise. Yet surprise hath wrought a proliferation of scholarship in which I intervene with attention to the presumed relationship between relevant writers and the

⁵ René Descartes, *The Passions of the Soul*, trans. Stephen H. Voss (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1989), 52.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 58.

⁷ Lorraine Daston, “Wonder and the Ends of Inquiry,” *The Point*, 2014, <http://thepointmag.com/2014/examined-life/wonder-ends-inquiry>.

⁸ Edmund Burke, *Philosophical Enquiry Into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* (Basil: J. J. Tourneisen, 1792), 34.

⁹ Importantly, however, Burke goes on to reclaim a strange utility for curiosity with a switch-up two lines below: “[b]ut whatever these powers are, or upon what principle soever [sic] they affect the mind, it is absolutely necessary that they should not be exerted in those things which a daily and vulgar use have brought into a stale unaffected familiarity. Some degree of novelty must be one of the materials in every instrument which works upon the mind; and curiosity blends itself more or less with all our passions.” Burke, *Sublime and Beautiful*, 34-35.

¹⁰ Kenneth Burke, *Counter-Statement* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1968), 36, n. 4.

information they engage and produce. So long as the relationship is basically “critical,” engagements with “the new” (as if it were singular) set themselves up for disappointment precisely because criticism’s job is to know, secure, and establish foothold—period. *However*, my sense is that this relationship is more formal than essential, actual, or based on the epistemological capacity of the manuscript-tool.

To be sure, one encounters great difficulty in trying to address a sensible new without subsuming it under an intelligible category. Rather than “talk about not talking about,” however, this chapter drives at top speed into the discursive wall dictating the untouchability of the new. Rather than stake an ontological flag in the new and charter its generic criteria, however, my approach will differ in its exploration of the *aesthetics of rhetoric* of the new.¹¹ Stacking prepositional phrases such as these (“about”; “of . . . of . . .”) may appear to be critical distancing.¹² While grammatically manifest, such distance cannot achieve deaestheticized intelligibility. A good example of this impossibility is the common Introduction, Methods, Results, and Discussion format seen in scientific articles (IMRAD), which I have used to organize the present chapter. The purpose is two-fold. *First*, it demonstrates the extent to which appetites for humanities scholarship are not so unlike those for sciences, which expect controlled analytic sequences and the dissection of

¹¹ “Aesthetic(s)” is used in the sense established during the Introduction, having to do with a “sensitivity” in an ongoing *relation* among experiencing interpreting subjects and their so called objects.

¹² In a certain sense, this is true and could probably be extended to other grammatical features and the proposition itself. After all, “[s]ubject-object was in grammar before it structured metaphysics.” Gregory L. Ulmer, *Avatar Emergency* (Anderson: Parlor Press, 2012), 140. In this text and elsewhere, Ulmer suggests the subject-object relation is an inherent and endemic feature of a strict conception of the “apparatus” of literacy. Alternative apparatuses include orality and “electracy,” a primarily image-based and yet multimedia communications Ulmer characterizes as that which “is to digital media what literacy is to alphabetic writing.” *Internet Invention: From Literacy to Electracy* (New York: Longman, 2003), xvii. The idea follows not only the technologies of orality and literacy, but also their assumptions, epistemologies, metaphors, institutions, and so on. The term thus refers not simply to computers or digital compositions, but a paradigmatic shift in moods and modes of thinking that are in fact performable in alphabetic writing, which comprises the vast majority of Ulmer’s vitae. Electracy is discussed further during the final chapter below.

phenomena.¹³ Additionally and vice versa (sciences as humanities) it shows how the IMRAD instrument is product of creative choices, decisions, operationalizations, best guesses, and results more in precisely defined ambiguities than certainties. *Second*, use of the structure is presented here as performance—a glitch of contexts inspired by dada and conceptual artists who put the readymade, the unadorned painting, the basic geometric shape, and the body in the museum.

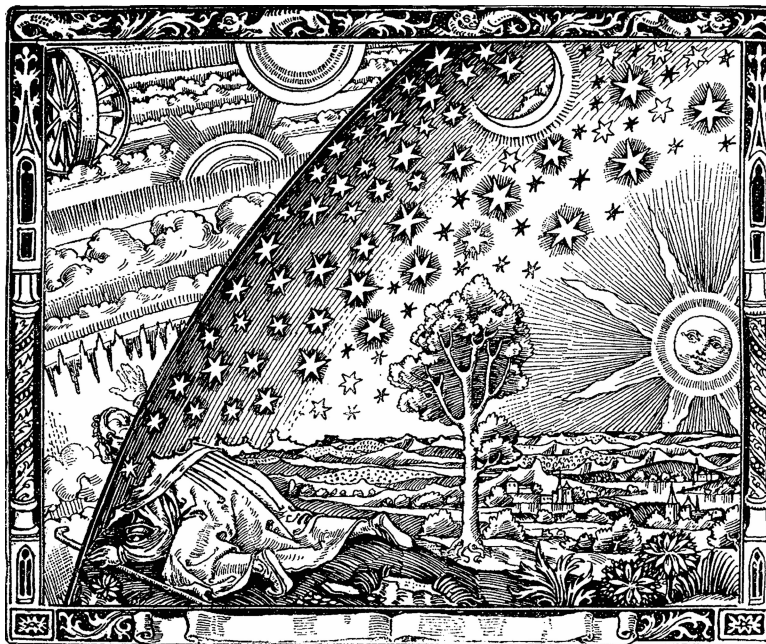


Figure 2.2: The romantic beyond. “Flammarion Engraving” first appeared in Camille Flammarion’s *L’atmosphère: météorologie populaire* (1888). Image is in the Public Domain under PD-1923.

To be clear, it is not necessary to go beyond some firmament of “conceptuality” or reflective knowledge to make the point that intelligibility is itself aesthetic in the sense of being relational unto its object. Again: let us recall Nietzsche’s “stammering translation.” Or we might amend Wilde’s maxim that “[t]he mystery of the world is the visible, not the

¹³ The etymology of “analysis” includes the ancient Greek ἀνάλυσις, meaning to unravel, loosen, or reduce to parts.

invisible”¹⁴ and fit it for our present purposes, where the mystery turns out to be precisely what is known as intelligible. As we saw in the opening chapter, the distinction between intelligible and sensible is untenable; each runs far too easily into the other. Here, I propose not only acknowledgment but performance of an aestheticized relationship with intelligibility. I assume that nothing comes from nothing, that all perceptible phenomena are casually produced, and that works have histories—acknowledged or not. Prior knowledges may very well intervene during a reflective process—and at varying degrees of consciousness—but category and identification are themselves lived and temporal; there is no white room of conceptuality divorced from the sensibility of time, place, body, or existential condition.¹⁵

Methods

Trajectory. First, I review generalized doubt, disgust, and dismissal of claims to the new and original the work of Peter Bürger, Rosalind Krauss, Michael North, and Boris Groys with particular attention to critiques of various and sundry avant-garde movements. Such aversion is compared for resemblance in particular and peculiar ways those familiar dismissals of spectacle, kitsch, and commodity in general. While accurate, such critiques have

¹⁴ Oscar Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (Leipzig: Bernhard Tauchnitz, 1908), 34.

¹⁵ A necessary acknowledgement here involves relations and decisions embedded in algorithmic actants, particularly those of cloud computing proliferating in our cultural moment. We not only have driverless cars and pedometers, but also cloud-tethered refrigerators, thermostats, and deadbolts. Adding automation and stirring such an “internet of things” delegates “decision” processes to nonhuman objects that act independently of wetware. One particularly astute theorist has called this practice “algorithmic perception,” an arrangement that presents major societal promises and cultural pitfalls. Two such dangers, the scholar maintains, are “pedestrian optimization” for commercial and governance purposes on the one hand, and inflationary pushback amounting to “the fetishization of the human experience of human experience” on the other. See Benjamin H. Bratton, “On A.I. and Cities: Platform Design, Algorithmic Perception, and Urban Geopolitics,” Het Nieuwe Instituut, 2015, <http://bennopremselalezing2015.hetnieuweinstituut.nl/en>.

limited our understanding of novelty to gimmick and reduced our relationship with innovation and rhetorical invention itself. As discussed in the previous chapter, this is perhaps a consequence of information systems and infrastructures regulating critical discourse.¹⁶

Three current texts on novelty in art, literature, theory, and science are then explored. Evaluated are Michael North's *Novelty: A History of the New*, Boris Groys' recently translated *On the New*, and Jacques Rancière's *Aisthesis: Scenes from The Aesthetic Regime of Art* for their relative viability as means of engaging the new. Texts are assessed for the ability of their respective formal approaches to actually exceed form by engaging the new temporally and performatively.

Between the second and third analysis, an interruption of “anxiety” (*angst*) according to Martin Heidegger appears. While he reserved these privileged modes of engagement for an ultimate and supreme analytic for Being, there is great promise in the adaptation of these moods for rhetoric I will sketch over the course of the chapter. In temporalizing essence and endowing the work with an existential capacity to “set up a world,” Heidegger introduces an anxiety during which familiar relations, givens, and for-granted relations with objects, world, self, and art works are no longer tenable. In a particular and peculiar way, everything can be new or *anew*. This chapter asks: Is novelty impossible or inevitable?

Results

Cheap thrill abounds, of course. From *American Idol* commercial break cliffhangers, to clickbait, to the “reboot” film—that nostalgic replay of some bygone blockbuster with

¹⁶ *Not* surprisingly, consequences spillover into pedagogy too. See my fifth chapter, below.

updated casting—there is no shortage of the empty old masquerading as sparkly new. Recycling cardboard cutout forms as they do, it's easy and necessary to acknowledge these media cheat audiences out of originality in the strict sense of something new under the sun. Perhaps the pinnacle of the form is the novelty item or the *gag*—the hand buzzer, the whoopee cushion, the projectile snake from the can of “peanuts.” Such accouterments seem to equip the prankster with the means to dupe the unsuspecting, but it turns out that the joke's on the jokester. Such items fetishize a short-lived and superficial escapism, choreographed faux pas, and a feigned, safety-netted rupture of the everyday and routine. Worse for surprise, the affective force of the novelty item is about as twist-ended as a Jack-in-the-box appearing right on time, every time. Nothing new here.



Figure 2.3: Cheap laughs, or none at all: Eddy Goldfarb signature “Yakity Yak Talking Teeth.” Photograph mine.

Surprise Stock

It was Clement Greenberg who famously described the phenomenon of “kitsch” or lowbrow art as “simulacra of genuine culture Kitsch is mechanical and operates by

formulas. Kitsch is vicarious experience and faked sensations,”¹⁷ driven primarily or even exclusively by profit motive. Although he would later attenuate his hardline dichotomy, kitsch as such could not rise to the self-criticism Greenberg considered essential to modernist art¹⁸ given its chief audience of birds and bottom feeders. These “surprises” come in Cracker Jack boxes, but also Netflix recommendation lists, emoji updates, or the latest and greatest chemical remix at Starbucks. Do they also come on the pages of academic journals, or in syllabi? Are they sold three credit hours at a time? Yes and no.

One affirmative response comes from Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno’s blistering critique of “the culture industry” and its subsumption or coerced submission of art to business ideologies. While the relationship between art and labor is fraught with contradictions and paradoxes, one thing that is clear is that it’s nearly impossible to separate the two. If only as a conditioning possibility, political-economic circumstance makes art conceivable in the first place and complicates the cult of art as pure labor for its own sake. The notion of a contemporary artistic enterprise somehow un beholden to time, place, or material situation is probably a myth of bourgeois origin. All this is well known. For Horkheimer and Adorno, however, the culture industries of film, television, music, and so on monetize art’s supposed *fall* from its own self-direction and does so specifically with regard to eccentricity and idiosyncrasy: “[T]hat art renounces its own autonomy and proudly takes its place among consumption goods constitutes the charm of novelty.”¹⁹ Singularity

¹⁷ Clement Greenberg, “Avant-Garde and Kitsch,” *Partisan Review* 5, no. 9 (1939): 39-40.

¹⁸ Clement Greenberg, “Modernist Painting,” in *The Collected Essays and Criticism*, ed. John O’Brien, vol. 4, *Modernism with a Vengeance, 1957-1969* (Chicago: University Of Chicago Press, 1995), 85-87. Further, even high modernist art for Greenberg did not constitute any rupture in the historical trajectory of art: “[m]odernist art continues the past without gap or break, and wherever it may end up it will never cease being intelligible in terms of the past.” *Ibid.*, 92.

¹⁹ Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, trans. John Cumming (New York: Continuum, 1991), 157.

becomes just another flavor among several choices, all of which are meticulously catalogued, tabulated, and prescribed for particular demographics by the culture industry. Elimination of surprise is the name of the game. Such control is epitomized by “predictive” mechanisms like the “focus group,” which reduce aesthetic experience to quantity by means of the yay or nay, the Likert scale, or the seemingly innocuous query. *“How likely are you to recommend X to a friend?”* Products, political candidates, and pop media pilots are trialled on sample populations, whose feedback is then used to determine whether newbies fly, die, or perhaps how they might be modified to increase palatability and chances of commercial success. Give the people what they want, but beware confirmation bias and the comfortable.

One particularly distressing example is the case of Shazam, a free application for mobile smartphones capable of identifying music within reach of the device’s microphone. In what amounts to a streamlined and crowdsourced focus group, users with internet access or cell service all over the world can “discover” music they hear at the coffeeshop, the bar, or a party by putting a name to the beat. Labels and radio stations purchase the resultant data from Shazam to learn not only which songs are most popular, but also which vocal patterns, tonic progressions, keys, and other stylistic features generate the most interest a given moment or particular geographic region. Financial allocations for promotion *and creation* of new artists follow. Knowingly or not, users give away their behavioral data in exchange for the service of the app, which provides convenient links to purchase the song electronically on Apple iTunes once the music is matched (resulting in yet another sales data set). One might think this puts content control in the hands of the “consumer” and for the better, giving the public a say in what comes next. But numerous metrics such as Billboard report a negative feedback loop wherein today’s most popular songs tend to get played more frequently and stick around on the charts longer than they did in the past, when interest and

sales data came from honor system reporting by radio stations and record shops.²⁰ The arrangement boasts all the progress and efficiency of Taylorism, and preference for the comfort of familiarity puts us right back in the closed and regulated system where pleasure has no pioneering mission, but only “moves rigorously in the worn grooves of association. No independent thinking must be expected from the audience.”²¹ Hence what we might call *placebo surprises*: the trusty twist ending wherein the guilty party is the one whom everyone least suspects, the sudden foley shriek in horror, and the incessant updates for planned obsolescence in fashion or the cellular telephone industry, each made to manufacture lack and false consciousness. “What’s new for fall by spring means nothing.”²²

The repetition in these basically farcical novelties is why Roland Barthes’ well known study of the image mocks “the whole gamut of ‘surprises’” that falls flat precisely because it can be accounted for as an effects stockpile: the appeal to a photographed subject’s rarity for its own sake, the superimposition and other exploitations of technique, “the *trouvaille* or lucky find,” and so on.²³

²⁰ Conflicts of interest in such reports, the thinking goes, skewed data and fabricated a false-positive preference for new music. See Derek Thompson, “The Shazam Effect,” *The Atlantic*, December 2014, <http://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2014/12/the-shazam-effect/382237>. A video supplement embedded in the piece includes an interview with Shazam CEO Rich Riley, who appeals to the sensible when he claims the company “can really help show when an artist is connecting with an audience.” Related company Next Big Sound, also profiled in the video, tracks the self-promotional activity of up and coming artists to glean how, for example, Instagram “likes” correlate with download sales in specified timeframes. A banner hanging over a whiteboard in Next Big Sound’s office space reads, “Making Data Useful” in big, black letters.

²¹ Horkheimer and Adorno, *Dialectic*, 137.

²² Desaparecidos, “What’s New for Fall,” from *The Happiest Place On Earth* (Omaha: Saddle Creek Records, 2001).

²³ Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Hill and Wang, 1982), 32-34.



Figure 2.4: Double rainbow over Clemson, South Carolina.
Photograph mine.

For Barthes, a surprise is inexplicable and must be, puzzling for an utter and radical lack of why.²⁴ Contrast this ideal figuration against an early scene in *Willy Wonka & the Chocolate Factory*. Shortly after the lucky Golden Ticket holders arrive and enter the topsy-turvy candy works, the children and their parents are checking their coats when gilded “hooks” in the shape of human hands spring to life, seizing the outerwear from unsuspecting guests who cry out in shock. Wonka zips onscreen: “[l]ittle surprises around every corner—but nothing dangerous!”²⁵ But surprise and the new for the present writing *are* dangerous in the specific sense of instigating vulnerability, exposure, and anxiety. As Avital Ronell in an interview suggests, information and intelligibility can function as kind of naive fortification or an all too thin security blanket for the psychoanalytic condition instigated by a world that includes, for examples, the trauma of tsunamis and political turmoil: “we try to defend against

²⁴ “The photograph becomes ‘surprising’ when we do not know why it has been taken.” Ibid., 34.

²⁵ *Willy Wonka & the Chocolate Factory*, directed by Mel Stuart (1971; Burbank: Warner Brothers, 2010), Blu-ray. The original poster for the film at once generalizes, sanitizes, satiates, and consoles the would-be surprised—all while feigning subversion: “It’s everybody’s non-pollutionary, anti-institutionary, pro-confectionery factory of fun!” By the way, Wonka lied. Children in the film nearly drown and burst from the inside-out, and though such hardships are brought on by their own conceits, viewers eventually learn Wonka planned from the beginning to eliminate all but one visitor in perverse survival quest of sorts.

[helplessness] by building up all sorts of machinery, apparatuses, [and] cognitive systems that pretend and claim to understand what's happening. And then when disaster strikes—if it's truly a disaster—all our systems have to be destroyed, because that's what disaster means."²⁶ Such a relationship with intelligibility and the violence of shock is a far cry from the “[b]anal though elaborate surprise”²⁷ of the culture industry, mere and momentary simulations of anxiety for disaffected audiences. Bumper car hiccups immediately after which homeostasis is reestablished.

Freak Control

The cliché of “new” as simulacra is readily admitted, but just to what extent are such dismissals the result of one's *relationship* with the new defined provisionally as that which is merely yet unknown—perceptible but not identifiable? As a way of responding, let us position the *wunderkammer* or “cabinet of curiosities” as a conflict avoidance mechanism. Chests of hodgepodge specimens from the natural world, distant travels, and foreign cultures, these encyclopedic display cases most popular from the sixteenth to eighteenth centuries were typically populated with exotic items for the pleasure and entertainment of what were almost exclusively European owners.

²⁶ Avital Ronell, interviewed by Elza Gonçalves, *Euronews*, video, April 5, 2011, <https://youtu.be/yMXPRCdGRqk>.

²⁷ Horkheimer and Adorno, *Dialectic*, 137.



Figure 2.5: Novelty found and/or lost? Domenico Remps' "Cabinet of Curiosities" (1690s). Image is in the Public Domain under PD-1923.

Notable for me is not what the cabinet features or makes visible, but what is obfuscated by the attitudinal frame of collection. While *wunderkammern* as microcosms were vehicles for education, marvel, and awe, they were also social indicators of power and mastery²⁸ that enabled a sort of dime-store tourism. We might say the cabinet betrays a telling relationship with novelty indeed, one characterized by spectacle, safety found through distance, voyeurism, and domestication. The original curiosity cabinets were a highly varied and flexible phenomenon, and some functioned as honest inquiry into anthropology, medicine, and botany. Today, however, a similar relationship with novelty takes the form of Ripley's Believe it or Not!, that great institution of counterfeit orientalist plunder. *Please exit through the gift shop.* Different and yet similar controls and regulations in and of rhetorics have been

²⁸ Barbara Maria Safford and Frances Terpak, *Devices of Wonder: From the World in a Box to Images on a Screen* (Los Angeles: Getty, 2001), 6-7; 153-156.

acknowledged and roasted by Victor J. Vitanza. Questioning the desirability of a disciplined or disciplinary rhetoric sought, for example, in the Aristotelian dream for an exhaustive account of persuasion in this and that situation, Vitanza exposes the relational drive behind such an effort: “[l]et us not be fooled: What they—these crypto-philosophers clothed in sheepish rhetorical garb—are really talking about is *control*, these efficiency experts, these Young Bureaucrats of Language and of Creativity and of the Imagination.”²⁹ Systemic management of the means of persuasion *may* come at the cost of closure and rhetorical stagnation, depending upon the tonality of our relationship with intelligibility. The too likely result is an algorithmic and, as Vitanza shows in performance, an exclusionary rhetoric typically maintained to serve elite, privileged, or already dominant interests. It has all the friends it needs, and newcomers are perceived as unruly threats to stability and authority of knowledge.



Figure 2.6: Catalog. A stamp collection.³⁰



Figure 2.7: Fixation. Entomology case.³¹

²⁹ Victor J. Vitanza, “Critical Sub/Versions of the History of Philosophical Rhetoric,” *Rhetoric Review* 6, no. 1 (1987): 50 (original emphasis).

³⁰ “My Stamp Collection” by J’ram DJ is licensed under [CC BY 2.0](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/2.0/).

³¹ “*Lepidoptera Americana*” is in the Public Domain under [CC0 1.0](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/2.0/). From the collection of nineteenth century naturalist Ludolph Heiligbrodt housed at the University of Texas at Austin. Photograph by Alex Wild.

I am reminded of the not so different (and yet) scientific accounting for natural phenomena described by Bruno Latour. As an ethnographer tagalong with a team of scientists studying Amazon forestry in Boa Vista, Brazil, Latour notes with near-condescending delight how the team's confidence in relation to the studied trees multiplies when the group returns to the lab with specimens in hand. There, prior knowledges, instruments, and most notably language can be applied to phenomena more precisely and systematically. Distance is key: "[i]n losing the forest, we win knowledge of it."³² While the *wunderkammer* brings unfamiliar objects near, it also sets up a not so dissimilar distancing, given that its contents are, like the Brazilian trees, "detached, separated, preserved, classified, and tagged."³³

In light of the earlier discussion, it might seem that novelty is about as useful as a kaleidoscope. Yet there once was a time when that device could "create, in a single hour, what a thousand artists could not invent in the course of a year; and while it works with such unexampled rapidity, it works also with corresponding beauty and precision."³⁴ Lest the argument be misunderstood, this is no apology for trinket. What I am against and alongside, however, are irresponsible broad brush paintings and critical-opportunistic relations with "novelty" as a conceptual entity,³⁵ and, to repeat, intelligibility in general.

³² Bruno Latour, *Pandora's Hope: Essays on the Reality of Science Studies* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999), 38; 39; cf. 36-39.

³³ *Ibid.*, 39.

³⁴ Sir David Brewster, *The Kaleidoscope: its History, Theory, and Construction, with its Application to the Fine and Useful Arts*, 2nd ed., "Greatly Enlarged" (London: John Murray, 1858), 151.

³⁵ Let's remember, it is precisely the "questionable quality, taste, originality, and necessity" of knickknacks that makes them easier to compare than contrast alongside some of the most significant art works of the twentieth century. Mark Newgarden and Picturebox, Inc., *Cheap Laifs: The Art of the Novelty Item* (New York: Abrams, 2004), 7.

No Wonder

“Avant-Garde” and its relations to novelty are always contested issues. Given the multitude of names, movements, and localities associated with the concept at different times and places, the term itself is imprecise and probably used in excess.³⁶ Whereas some deployments of the term refer simply to experimental, ambitious, or progressivist arts practices, in other cases the term ought to be associated with specific political-ideological agendas, as in the case of the Situationist International. These artist-thinker-performers certainly expanded the possibilities of art in hopes of a limitlessness, but did so in response to issues like alienated labor, architectural grammaticization of the city life, and the the society of the spectacle, image, and detachment propagated by media industries. The term’s genealogy is further complicated by various *neo-avant-gardes*, which, again hazarding a generalization, refers to relatively institutionalized or (in some cases, unabashedly) commodified arts practices that are to be distinguished, at least in certain ways, from the earlier nostalgias for autonomous art that could transcend historical circumstance or instigate the injection of something alien.

Yet for all this messiness, scholarly engagements with whatever novelty something like “the avant-garde” might offer turns out to be rotten with the perfection³⁷ of the categorical approach. Peter Bürger’s seminal *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, for instance, recognizes the inadequacy of this impulse and sets out to recoup “the relationship between

³⁶ I am indebted to Beth Lauritis, whose conversation and thinking influences the discussion of “avant-garde” in this paragraph and throughout.

³⁷ I invoke the final clause of Kenneth Burke’s in/famous definition of man: “the symbol using (symbol-making, symbol-misusing) animal, inventor of the negative . . . separated from his natural condition by instruments of his own making . . . goaded by the spirit of hierarchy (or moved by the sense of order)[.] and rotten with perfection.” *Language and Symbolic Action: Essays on Life, Literature, and Method* (Berkeley: The University of California Press, 1996), 16.

interpreter and literary work,” i.e., the historical or embedded quality of the aesthetic category itself.³⁸ While the intention is admirable, given the ultimately critical relation the author assumes with its object, “the avant-garde,” eventually the study cannot help but insist on the very stasis of category for “the avant-gardiste work” it set out to surpass. In fact, Bürger presents a five-point plan of generic criteria: 1) attempted dissolution of the “work” as unitary and singular entity, 2) newness understood as a (naive) claim of complete break with tradition (total unprecedance), 3) chance operations, 4) emphasis on the fragmentary and allegorical (according to Walter Benjamin), and 5) montage and collage techniques.³⁹ When such recognizable themes began to take salience and replay themselves in institutional contexts like the museum and consumer culture, stable motifs emerged, generic criteria were formed, and it became difficult to see *-ist* and *-ism* arts practices as genuinely innovative. Hence, “the neo-avant-garde institutionalizes the *avant-garde as art* and thus negates genuinely avant-gardiste intentions.”⁴⁰ This critique is corollary to the assessment that the mission of integrating art and the praxis of life was unsuccessful.⁴¹ While there certainly is a sense of the artist as arcane, obscure, and remote, the critique lacks the same subtlety missing in “ivory tower” caricatures of the academy (what profession isn’t specialized, what worth of any given knowledge set is self-evident to those not materially invested in its applications?).

³⁸ Peter Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, trans. Michael Shaw (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), 4; 15.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 55-82.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 58.

⁴¹ “[A]rt as an institution continues to survive as something separate from the praxis of life.” *Ibid.*, 57; cf. 58.

Needless to say, the response rests on a distinction between art and life in the first place, and assumes such activities can be neatly sectioned off without overlap.⁴²

Still, the impossibility of originality in the strict sense is a tough argument to counter. The allures of creative genius, authenticity, origination, birth, and avant-garde mystique itself, as Rosalind Krauss has argued, are probably better construed as “function[s] of the discourse on originality” than actual qualities or accomplishments of associated artists.⁴³ Rhetorical strategies. The figures are so cliché they hardly require example: the distant prodigy, the tortured soul, the struggled labor of the all nighter that alone grants a proximity to something never before seen, undone—new. From the postmodern vantage, these modernist overtones seem preposterous and without basis since the results so frequently turn out to resemble unacknowledged forebears; for Krauss, then, honesty is the best policy, taking form here an open embrace of “endless replication.”⁴⁴ Is it so bad? There is even the (good) argument that copyright law stands in the way of new creative works.⁴⁵ But the real strength of her assessment is, again, predicated on accounting and tracing, against which modernist tropes parading themselves as new stand no chance.

⁴² Remember: “[O]nly by forgetting that he himself is an *artistically creating* subject . . . does man live with any repose, security and consistency.” Friedrich Nietzsche, “On Truth and Lies in a Nonmoral Sense,” trans. Daniel Breazeale in *The Rhetorical Tradition: Readings from Classical Times to the Present*, ed. Patricia Bizzell and Bruce Herzberg (Boston: Bedford, 2001), 1176 (emphasis in the translation).

⁴³ Rosalind E. Krauss, *The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths* (Cambridge, MA: The Massachusetts Institute of Technology Press, 1999), 158-160.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 170.

⁴⁵ Lawrence Lessig, *Free Culture: The Nature and Future of Creativity*, (New York: Penguin, 2004), 294-295.

Just the Same: and/or, the Same, but Different

Far easier to posit is another, perhaps scare quoted “novelty” associated less with an immaculate conception than with something *anew*, familiar but different, or somehow revived. Michael North’s remarkably interdisciplinary *Novelty: A History of the New* (2013) traces such patterns across an impressive range of discourses including that of the pre-Socratics, atomism, cybernetics, evolutionary biology, aesthetics, and more. Allowing for the notable exception in creationisms like Christianity, this history operates under two models of *recurrence* and *recombination*, whose “basic shapes” the writer claims “were established before Plato and have not varied much since.”⁴⁶ Recurrence takes the form of the much romanticized revolution, whose very term North is fond of reminding the reader carries cyclical and circular connotations from the get go. His second frame, recombination, is to be found in the play of letter and language, Darwin, the collage, and so on. In each case, what is new is (merely?) the already given in different form, configuration, or guise. As he demonstrates, however, this situation hardly affects the persistent cultural interest in the new, nor does it turn down the volume on discourses fetishizing an ontologically new already discussed above. To begin, North has to demonstrate just why these relatively conservative models of novelty are the only tenable ones. Working primarily with Parmenidian “invariance” of that which *is*, the reader is shown how this ancient cosmology crossed over into science and philosophy: “Parmenides’ foundational premises, that what is, is and what is not cannot come to be, were apparently so impressive that they established the essential conditions for Plato’s ontology,”⁴⁷ which is concomitant with love of wisdom as a situation of lack in need of cure by means of pursuit and acquisition. North goes on to demonstrate

⁴⁶ North, *Novelty: A History of the New* (Chicago, The University of Chicago Press, 2013), 7.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 22; 23.

how this basic unchanging ceaselessness of *the natural and material world* is also to be found in Zeno, atomists like Lucretius and Epicurus, and Aristotle.

I argue that North's attention to these two models of repetition and recurrence, originating in the Presocratics and coming to influence "most" models of novelty,⁴⁸ overlooks a veritable interest in rhetoric of the Sophistic tradition. As is well known, the Sophists were generally associated with "the novel," but also the merely "unusual" and discursive maneuvers "prior to which we have no awareness" in the historical record.⁴⁹ Specifically, it should be acknowledged that the "irrationality" of Gorgias punctures a loophole in the closed systems of the recurrent and the recombinatory. Crucially, however, this model does not posit the appearance of something new without material origin, but rests on a basically "irrational" relationship with *logos* understood here both as language (speech, word) and our necessarily murky relationship with the material order of the world and universe. The Gorgian alternative to the generally humanist and anthropocentric subject has been the topic of much commentary in rhetorical studies, whose first major secondary touchstone is the work of Italian classicist Mario Untersteiner. Again, Gorgias' in/famous fragment "On the Nonexistent" or "On Nature" quite clearly states the issue is not the world of substance as it *is*, but rather our ability to know it in the first place. It is not an exaltation or valorization of the sensible, but rather a qualitative analysis of the intelligible. As already established in the previous chapter, Gorgias' triple trouble-making—nothing exists; even if so, can't be known; even if known, can't be communicated—is based on the raw disjuncture among signifying practices and the material (or immaterial) substances to

⁴⁸ Ibid., 35.

⁴⁹ John Poulakos, "Toward a Definition of Sophistic Rhetoric," *Philosophy & Rhetoric* 16, no. 1 (1983): 44.

which logos refer. According to the Sophist, what *does* exist is “heterogeneity . . . between the spoken logos, which is bound to be the vehicle of knowledge, and the possible experiences [*both*] sensible and intellectual.”⁵⁰ Even the sensible (in this context, the bodily register of stimuli in worldly experience) cannot help because of this utter gulf between substances and logos. Yet we are forced to act on such mismatches at every turn. In the simplest act of mere recognition turns out to be an *imposition*, an inessential pairing which therefore amounts to “creating something new, irrational.”⁵¹ This is a frequently cited phrase in rhetoric by those like myself who wish to establish an alternative relationship with intelligibility. I sense a codependence with such instruments we use “[n]ot to know, but to schematize—to impose upon chaos as much regularity and form as our practical needs require. In the formation of reason, logic, the categories, it was *need* that was authoritative: the need, not to ‘know,’ but to subsume, to schematize, for the purpose of intelligibility and calculation.”⁵² The intelligible is thus irrational in the sense of being a rather blunt creation.

Sophistic Stress Test

As is well known, the Sophists offered expensive lessons in oratory which only the elite could afford. These practices no doubt contributed to an association of the Sophists with *nomos*, or human/cultural law, alongside *physis*, or the natural laws of the physical world

⁵⁰ Mario Untersteiner, *The Sophists*, trans. Kathleen Freeman (New York: Philosophical Library, 1954), 141.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 161.

⁵² Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, trans. Walter Kaufmann and R. J. Hollingdale, ed. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Vintage, 1968), §515 (original emphasis). Cf. Untersteiner, *The Sophists*, 158. I think also of Lucy R. Lippard, whose coauthored essay with John Chandler, “The Dematerialization of Art,” aestheticizes intelligibility and perhaps metaphysics itself: even “scientist’s attempt to discover, and perhaps even *impose* order and structure on the universe, rests on assumptions that are essentially aesthetic. Order itself, and its implied simplicity and unity, are aesthetic criteria” in the sense of being a creative relational rubric. Lippard, *Changing: Essays in Art Criticism* (New York: E. P. Dutton & Co., Inc., 1971), 259 (emphasis added).

or universe. Such categorization invokes the stale nature/culture distinction whose moment has passed long ago. However, along with Untersteiner, Bernard Miller's discussion of *kairos* as it appears differently in Plato and Gorgias further complicates this issue for the better. Typical conceptions of *kairos* are often understood "quite simply [as] a recognition on the part of the rhetor of a situation that he appropriately responds to or masters through . . . propriety or expediency."⁵³ This is the notion of saying the right thing at just the right time in a sort of rhetorical slam dunk commonly portrayed in composition textbooks. In Gorgias, however, things appear differently: "*kairos* . . . here is not the application of language rhetorically selected and suited to fit the occasion or proper time, but through the aegis of the irrational *logos* it deals most significantly in the creative generation of language itself."⁵⁴ Importantly, then, "*kairos* is not a concept only. It is an experience or encounter as well."⁵⁵ As Vitanza phrases it, the Gorgian *kairos* proffers "a view of the 'subject' as a function of *Logos/Kairos*," rather than the other way around.⁵⁶ So much for *nomos*. What is your relationship with information?

In this sense "[a] world of dissonance is depicted here, tragic in the sense that the faith in the order and rationality of the world is dashed. On this level Gorgias' idea of the tragic is akin to the more basic claims of the Sophists concerning reality and appearance," the irresolution of the two,⁵⁷ the worth of arguing both sides of a case,⁵⁸ and exercise of

⁵³ Bernard A. Miller, "Heidegger and the Gorgian *Kairos*," in *Visions of Rhetoric: History, Theory, and Criticism*, ed. Charles W. Kneupper (Arlington: Rhetoric Society of America, 1987), 156.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 177.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 169.

⁵⁶ Victor J. Vitanza, "'Some More' Notes Toward a 'Third' Sophistic," *Argumentation* 5 (1991): 124.

⁵⁷ Miller, "Gorgian *Kairos*," 176.

⁵⁸ I refer to the anonymous "Dissoi Logoi" fragment, which advocates the study of contrasting or contradictory arguments on the same issue. See Rosamond Kent Sprague's translation in *The Older Sophists*, ed. Rosamond Kent Sprague (Indianapolis: Hackett, 2001), DK90.

“mak[ing] the weaker seem the better cause”⁵⁹ Far from the silly caricature sometimes *projected* onto the Sophists and their supposed preference for play, pun, and satire, these so called games turn out to function as a sort of de-anthropomorphizing “reality” checking before, one hopes, wrecking.⁶⁰ Again, the trauma of surprise is correlate to the arrogance or naivety of security and the avoidance mechanism represented here by a classical intelligibility and the critical manuscript. Stay humble. (This is also one of innumerable reasons why what I would call the aesthetic dimensions of rhetoric Gorgias describes in the *Encomium of Helen* as “seduction” are not simply fun formal experiments, but deeply serious demonstrations of how high fives among all too human, enlightened subjects can go wrong). With regard to the new, Thomas Rickert’s reading of this discourse is that the “novelty, unpredictability, and situated rationality in which their [Gorgias’, Untersteiner’s, Miller’s, Vitanza’s, et al.’s] versions of kairos are better conceived less as categorical pronouncements than as descriptions working *against* modernist understandings of creativity”⁶¹ someone like North demonstrates are, after all, indebted to the recurrence and recombination models. His *History of the New* is thus incomplete not so much because it fails to account for this or that Sophist per se, but because of its identificatory frame Gorgias’ relationship with logos would surprise.

⁵⁹ Associated with Protagoras in Aristotle, *On Rhetoric: A Theory of Civic Discourse*, trans. George A. Kennedy, 2nd ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 1402a.

⁶⁰ “We conceal . . . that we, human beings, are not masters of this situation. *Anthropos* is not in charge here or elsewhere.” Victor J. Vitanza, *Negation, Subjectivity, and the History of Rhetoric* (Albany: The State University of New York Press, 1997), 292.

⁶¹ Thomas Rickert, *Ambient Rhetoric: The Attunements of Rhetorical Being* (Pittsburgh: Pittsburgh University Press, 2013), 87 (emphasis added).

Invaluables

Boris Groys' *On the New* is an exceptionally knotty text whose coy insight is as intricate as its pivots and reversals. His basic thesis, predicated on a selective Nietzschean perspective, states the new springs from revaluation of values, and specifically crossovers between sacred and profane realms.⁶² Duchamp's *Fountain* is a strategic glitch of context, inserting as it does the utterly mundane, industrial, and readymade into the museum; elsewhere, the profanity of joke and pun deface the sanctity of *Mona Lisa*—if only a cheap reproduction thereof. Two points are necessary here for the present analysis. First, the new thusly figured depends upon its apparent opposite for its conceptual identity,⁶³ resulting in a new at least partially predicated on a “negative” knowledge functioning by means of contrast. $A \neq \text{non-}A$; $\text{new} \neq \text{old}$. Yet in the case of the readymade, old *does* become (a)new in a sense about which Groys is well aware. What has changed is not the object, but our *relationship* with the object and the information it generates. Still, there persists for him a necessary link between conceptual relations with art and the cultural condition in which all material chips are already on the table, merely changing hands between sacred and profane, appearing now and then in this or that configuration, accompanied by corresponding rhetorical charges to produce relational innovation.

The exchange of the card table is an apt metaphor given that innovation for Groys is an activity whose possibility and, inevitably, ends are conditioned by a “cultural-economic logic,” which is the second point that interests me here. Unlike Nietzsche, Groys does not find the transvaluation of all values possible or desirable. His analysis replays the familiar

⁶² Boris Groys, *On the New*, trans. G. M. Goshgarian (1992; London: Verso, 2014), 64.

⁶³ “The new is new in its relation to the old, to tradition.” *Ibid.*, 6.

dismissal of “extra-cultural” or “hidden” realities often featured in modernist mythologies.⁶⁴ On a related point, it is often thought that avant-garde movements revere meaninglessness and the nonsensical in its effort to subvert ideology and defer the inevitable installation of a new order. Yet according to the author, the “avant-garde does not ‘empty’ lower practices ‘of their meaning’” in celebration of pure materiality, “but, rather, endows them with meaning by bringing them into meaningful relation with the cultural tradition.”⁶⁵ Hence it is cultural-economic logics all the way down for Groys. In a clever move, however, he acknowledges the economy is far from an “intelligible” phenomenon, primarily because analyses of the cultural-economy are themselves embedded within it, which makes critical distance unavailable.⁶⁶ Like weather, even the most learned cannot pick it apart or make accurate forecasts with consistency. Still, this study *On the New* operates on a literal currency, especially in prioritizing the issues of archival perseverance and impact: “[i]t is not the meaning of innovation which is relevant to culture, but, rather, its value” in a cultural-economic system.⁶⁷

Can valuation of the new thusly surprise? No. It is in fact a retrospective abacus analysis whose purpose is to “close the writing,” as Barthes would say.⁶⁸ Economic tremors are by no means cozy for those who weather the storm, but the framework of valorization/devalorization alone is a comfortable intelligibility whose relational potential is limited to the materiality of capital. Obviously, capital creates relations and conditions the possibility of art in the first place; however, the claim that aesthetic and existential effects-and-affects *may*

⁶⁴ Ibid., 13-14.

⁶⁵ Ibid., 167, n. 4.

⁶⁶ Ibid., 10-11.

⁶⁷ Ibid., 75; 44.

⁶⁸ Roland Barthes, “The Death of the Author,” in *Image, Music, Text*, trans. Stephen Heath (New York: Hill and Wang, 1978), 147.

exceed and surprise the most exacting economic tabulations is not incommensurable with this first, conditioning principle.

Anxiety Inaction

Please pardon the interruption of the analysis for a reminder that Martin Heidegger's *Being and Time* resurrects a foreclosed anxiety. The Question of Being—What does it mean to be?—has been conveniently forgotten after having been relegated to universality, indefinability, or self-evidence. That which “the ancient philosophers found continually disturbing as something obscure and hidden has taken on a clarity and self-evidence such that if anyone continues to ask about it he is charged with an error of method.”⁶⁹ The treatise thus opens with insistence and provocation in the renewal of a troublesome inquiry. Later, Heidegger introduces the mood of “anxiety,” from the German *angst*,⁷⁰ with which he designates a peculiar shade of contemplation prompted by radical openness; it is the terror and/or freedom of having no orientation, no direction, no guide. In fact, “contemplation” is probably too involved a term, since what is meant is precisely an elementary perplexity and a lack of conceptual grounding. The trauma of such a “state of mind” or “mood”⁷¹ in Heidegger is prompted by nothing more than blank absurdity of one's existential situation, i.e., *Dasein* or the condition of Being-there (in-the-world), asking the question, How does it mean *to be*? How and why does the human contemplate the possibility of its own existence? Of course, we never get a certifiable answer because the inquiry is itself radically open in

⁶⁹ Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson (New York: Harper, 1962), 21.

⁷⁰ Translators Macquarrie and Robinson follow precedent with “anxiety,” but indicate “‘uneasiness’ or ‘malaise’ might be more appropriate.” *Ibid.*, 227, n. 1.

⁷¹ These two terms are the typical translations of *Befindlichkeit* and *Stimmung*, respectively. *Ibid.*, 172, n. 2; n. 3.

just this way—without reliable guidance. As we saw in Nietzsche, empirical evidence cannot help because evidence merely reflects our desires.⁷² The invention of specialized knowledges along with the comforts of everyday social experience, small talk, and entertainment—all these are distractions, suppressions, or even deliberate avoidances of anxiety brought on by the stupefaction of human calculation in the face of its indifferent natural environment, and even morality. But don't forget: “[a]nxiety is there. It is only sleeping.”⁷³ The important point is that “[a]nxiety can arise in the most innocuous situations. Nor does it have any need for darkness, in which it is commonly easier for one to feel uncanny,”⁷⁴ because it is precisely inauthentic tumult which inspires such terror in its very vacuity and inessentiality. Surprise: “[e]veryday familiarity collapses.”⁷⁵ According to Mary-Jane Rubenstein, “[a]nxiety thus ruptures all of Dasein's usual relations to itself and other beings (namely, subjectivity and objectivity) and confronts Dasein with bare thatness in the face of ‘the nothing’” left after everything breaks and there's nowhere to hide.⁷⁶ All frameworks dissolve, become untenable, and appear for what they are: desperate attempts to control and account for the default estrangement of being-there.

Sweet Nothings

In the “What is Metaphysics?” lecture delivered two years after the disruption that was *Being and Time*, anxiety is introduced with a conspicuously poetic tone relative to its role

⁷² Boris Groys, “History after the End of Historicism” (lecture, European Graduate School, Saas-Fee, Switzerland, June 2014).

⁷³ Martin Heidegger, “What is Metaphysics?,” in *Basic Writings from Being and Time (1927) to The Task of Thinking (1964)*, ed. and trans. David Farrell Krell (London: Harper, 2008), 106.

⁷⁴ Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 234.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 233.

⁷⁶ Mary-Jane Rubenstein, *Strange Wonder: The Closure of Metaphysics and the Opening of Awe* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008), 37.

in the earlier treatise as a methodological necessity. Yet ironically, the mystique is logical.

After all, “what about this nothing?”⁷⁷ How can nothing *be*?

In our asking we posit the nothing as something that “is” such and such; we posit it as a being. But that is exactly what it is distinguished from. Interrogating the nothing—asking what and how it, the nothing, is—turns what is interrogated into its opposite. The question deprives itself of its own object.⁷⁸

The problem is analogous to the situation articulated at the beginning of this chapter: how can novelty or surprise, as that without properties, be known or objectified? Answer: they cannot; they become so only formally-and-irrationally, as we saw with Gorgias and Nietzsche. In different ways, both the nothing in Dasein’s anxiety and surprise only “become” objects when situated in something like a proposition or a critical manuscript. For Heidegger, it is only during the experiential, existential, and temporal suspension of anxiety that his so called “object” is engaged. Hence the devastating collapse of a cleansed metaphysics alone “discloses . . . beings in their full but heretofore concealed strangeness as what is radically other. . . . Da-sein means: being held out in to the nothing.”⁷⁹ Everyday appearances, commonplaces, and routines are unmasked and revealed as merely provisional. The simplest recognition of an object “ready-to-hand” is thus a blockage, and “the structure of the thing as thus envisaged is a *projection* of the framework of the sentence”; even prior to grammar, the blithe, authoritative presumption in the “assault” of recognition does not make objects any more accessible.⁸⁰ The gigantic leap here from Heidegger to surprise, can

⁷⁷ Heidegger, “What is Metaphysics?,” 95.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 96.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 103.

⁸⁰ Martin Heidegger, “The Origin of the Work of Art,” in *Basic Writings from Being and Time (1927) to The Task of Thinking (1964)*, ed. David Farrell Krell, trans. Albert Hofstadter (London: Harper, 2008), 150 (emphasis added).

in fact be made by working through the related distinction from “thing” to “work.” Let us see what a work can do.

Work to World

Though there’s no question on the philosopher’s vitriol for aesthetics of neophilia and the distraction of the curio,⁸¹ Heidegger maintains a relationship with art that he himself argues is capable of preserving surprise and instigating existential epiphany. Although it is common to interact with art works as mere objects, commodities, and so on,⁸² such practices downplay the transformative potential in both creation and engagement. Works for Heidegger are quite different, a position encapsulated in the phrase, “[t]o be a work means to set up a world.”⁸³ The work is thus posited as something exceeding both *physis* and *nomos*, as something endowed with the capacity to actually *create* or *intervene* in a world instead of merely reflecting, representing, or responding to the world. What appears to be nostalgic if not baldly anthropocentric turns out to have implications even more radical than Gorgias.

The essay’s famous interpretation of the Van Gogh painting argues the “depiction” is greater than shoes, but more importantly the owner’s relation with the world. Heidegger waxes poetic in these sections, some lines of which are basically pastoral: “[i]n the shoes

⁸¹ Though he uses different language, he laments, for example, the superficiality of kitsch aesthetics described earlier in this chapter while at the same he recognizes art’s power: “[f]or us today, the beautiful is the relaxing, what is restful and thus intended for enjoyment. Art then belongs in the domain of the pastry chef. . . . *And yet* art is the opening up of the Being of beings.” Heidegger, *Introduction to Metaphysics*, trans. Gregory Fried and Richard Holt (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000), 140 (emphasis added). See also Heidegger, *Being in Time*, 214-217 on “curiosity.”

⁸² “Works of art are shipped like coal from the Ruhr and logs from the Black Forest.” Heidegger, “The Origin of the Work of Art,” 145.

⁸³ Heidegger, “The Origin of the Work of Art,” 170.

vibrates the silent call of the earth, its quiet gift of the ripening grain and its unexplained self-refusal in the fallow desolation of the wintry field.”⁸⁴ What appears in such passages is another work of art inspired by the first which instigates an encounter anew.⁸⁵ The scene might be pretty, but it has nothing to do with visual or even aesthetic pleasure in the wide sense. The issue, rather, is existential: “[t]he world is the self-opening openness of the broad pathos of the simple and essential decisions in the destiny of a historical people.”⁸⁶ The quotation oozes Nazism, though Heidegger’s vision was ultimately more radical—and dangerous—than any political program could actuate. This is why his official engagement with the party was short-lived, blatant anti-Semitism and persistent failure to repudiate the party notwithstanding.⁸⁷ The connection between the “open” relation to the work and the irrationality of interpretation can hardly be missed: “[e]very decision . . . bases itself on something not mastered, something concealed, confusion; else it would never be a decision”⁸⁸ but obvious, machinic, procedural. Hence we have a work whose consequence is limited neither to its material base nor its cultural-economic operationalization. Both these dimensions are in play, of course, but the Heideggerian work is relatively speculative and daring in terms of what might be possible for its *work*.

⁸⁴ Ibid., 159.

⁸⁵ I am indebted to Jeff Love for years of guidance with Heidegger. His interpretation appears in this sentence, and the discussion of the philosopher throughout this section is influenced by conversations with Love and colleagues at Clemson including Data Canlas in particular.

⁸⁶ Heidegger, “The Origin of the Work of Art,” 174.

⁸⁷ Jeff Love and Michael Meng, “The Political Myths of Martin Heidegger,” *New German Critique* 42, no. 1 (2015): 45-66.

⁸⁸ Heidegger, “The Origin of the Work of Art,” 180.

Showtime

In contrast to North and Groys, Jacques Rancière's *Aisthesis* performs an alternative response to shifts in aesthetic thought. The trick, as always, is one of *relation* with innovation, of which he presents in fourteen “scenes” deliberately selected for their relatively minor roles as tangential asides. The chapter-episodes comprise a string of vignettes not on art proper, but on criticism and theories of arts introducing in different ways alternative relations with a particular work or aesthetics writ large. He opens, for example, with Johann Joachim Winckelmann's commentary on the damaged *Belvedere Torso*, the limbless, turn-of-the-millennium nude in whose image we cannot be sure, though one common presumption is Hercules: “[i]nstead of compensating for the lack, he transformed it into a virtue: [t]he mutilated statue that represents the greatest active hero miscast in the total inactivity of thought.”⁸⁹ Though the attrition of extremities took place centuries after the work was sculpted, as a relic from its context of Platonic *mimesis* and Vitruvian ideal, *Torso* is for today's spectator disfigured, asymmetrical, and belatedly anachronistic.



Figure 2.8: Triumph of imperfection. Photograph of the *Belvedere Torso*. Photo by Stefano Costantini is licensed under CC BY 2.0.

⁸⁹ Jacques Rancière, *Aisthesis: Scenes from the Aesthetic Regime of Art*, trans. Zakir Paul (London: Verso, 2013), 2-3. It ought to be mentioned that Rancière cites Heidegger nowhere in this text.

Yet it is precisely in its decapitation and amputation that the figure takes on a new posture: *through* with labor and motion, “purified from the dross of humanity . . . absorbed in lofty reflections,” as Winckelmann put it.⁹⁰ Is this something from nothing? From lack, from absence as presence? The broken statue receives something grander than its status as anecdote or exhibit during this shift from deficit to merit.

Another chapter recalls an attempted shift in conception of so called “decorative” arts in the work of Parisian critic Roger Marx and the architectural thought of John Ruskin. The scene begins with citation to a 1910 lecture by Marx, during which the speaker exalts a work he claims is endowed with a “sensibility and intelligence directed towards nature’s spectacle and passing time” so subtle it “partakes in modern anxiety and curiosity.”⁹¹ The piece? A glass vase by Émile Gallé, son of a furniture manufacturer. This scene works to undermine the demarcation between functional crafts and works of pure aesthetic pleasure by reorienting the discussion to terms of building and making—decoration included. The implied hierarchy here constitutes a topdown “subordination of the builder’s hands” and a “division between the work of the artist and the artisan” Ruskin “would brutally overthrow.”⁹² According to Rancière, the Englishman believed the built environment was not only functional, but existential too; “the conjunction of these two functions is essential because it allows one to reject the simplistic opposition between the useful object and the object of disinterested contemplation.”⁹³ It’s not as if these categories are mutually exclusive, and, like the kaleidoscope those works highly involved with both of these allegedly separate

⁹⁰ Johann Joachim Winckelmann, *The History of Ancient Art*, trans. G. Henry Lodge, vol. 2 (1764; Boston: James R. Osgood and Company, 1880), 264-265, quoted in Rancière, *Aisthesis*, 1.

⁹¹ Roger Marx, *L’Art social* (Paris: E. Fasquelle, 1913), 112-113, quoted in Rancière, *Aisthesis*, 133.

⁹² Rancière, *Aisthesis*, 138.

⁹³ *Ibid.*, 139.

domains may not amount to compromised kitsch at all, but rather a clear expression of the human's attempt to arrange and configure the materials of the world in some intervention.



Gallé vase (1896). Photograph released to the Public Domain by the copyright holder.

And so on. While these scenes are not incidental, the larger issue for the present writing is the construal of novelty and surprise relationally. The material supplies (North) and capital bases (Groys) are inadequate means by which to analyze novelties—however genuine or inauthentic they might be. As these examples show, the making of the new can be an existential and temporal enterprise that need not import something never before under the sun. The point is rather to open and refract what is already before us, staring us in the face and apparently usual, everyday. Holistically, *Aisthesis* is a collection of what Barthes might call “neutrals,” a term which does not refer to an object with generic properties, but functions as an open-ended designation for that which “baffles the paradigm,” past, present,

and futures.⁹⁴ Its gestures are predicated on what Rancière elsewhere names the “redistribution of the sensible,” a contentious notion that refers to the *making possible or available* sensible experience in a given context. This “distribution” is a sort of allocation governing “who can have a share” in that which is perceptible and thereby “defin[ing] what is visible or not in a common space” populated by spectators.⁹⁵ Unlike North and Groy, Rancière maintains for art the capacity to “intervene in a general distribution of ways of doing and making as well as in the relationships they maintain to modes of being and forms of visibility,”⁹⁶ or, more broadly, perceptibility. His “aesthetic regime of arts,” a sort of pioneering desire driven by “thought which has become foreign to itself,” enables what the writer boldly calls a “transformation of the forms of sensible experience, of ways of perceiving and being affected.”⁹⁷ The passive voice in this last bit is a clue that such pursuits are not wholly rational efforts, and that such pursuits necessitate an open, interpretive anxiety. Works that set up worlds—whether or not they set out to do so.

Discussion

These findings suggest Rancière’s performative approach is a relatively viable means of engaging innovation in art and theory—not because he maintains the allure of the new as somehow alien or extra-cultural, but because he demonstrates the existential quality of knowing innovation across time, as well as the simultaneous ease and difficulty such an

⁹⁴ Roland Barthes, *The Neutral: Lecture Course at the Collège de France (1977-1978)*, trans. Rosalind E. Krauss and Denis Hollier (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005), 6. The relation here is a basic paradox: “the Neutral means suspension of violence; as a desire, it means violence.” *Ibid.*, 13.

⁹⁵ Jacques Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics*, ed. and trans. Gabriel Rockhill (London: Bloomsbury, 2014), 8.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, 18; Rancière, *Aisthesis*, ix.

activity entails. Rather than categorical (Bürger), ontological (North), or cultural-economic (Groys) approaches, Rancière begins to perform some of the anxiety which presents itself when we admit we do not know where art is going or the full extent of its capacities, accidental and otherwise. The results also indicate that hardline intelligible scholarship embodied by the critical manuscript cannot admit its aesthetic dimensions, though it nevertheless bears a striking resemblance to cultural industry kitsch in its search for easy explanation, cliché, and stasis. In response to this situation, future inquiry into the new might seek alternative modalities of engagement, perhaps those that stretch and make temporal their engagements with such phenomena.

CHAPTER THREE

DROP: AESTHETICS OF RHETORICS DURING TIMBRE

Sound only exists as it is going out of existence.
—Reverend Walter J. Ong¹

You walk into the room with your pencil in your hand.
You see somebody naked and you say, “Who is that
man?” You try so hard, but you don’t understand
just what you will say you when you get home. . . .
You walk into the room like a camel and then you
frown. You put your eyes in your pocket and your nose
on the ground. There oughta be a law against you
coming around. You should be made to wear
earphones. —Bob Dylan²

Note: This chapter makes fair use of audio embedded into the PDF. The recommend viewer is Adobe Acrobat Reader DC (free). Please visit get.adobe.com/reader to ensure media playback. Readers using Preview for Macintosh or other PDF viewers will not see or hear audio files.³

Being situated in time, sound is transient: it departs as it arrives. Even when recorded, archived, and preserved for delivery on demand, it is perceptible only as a fleeting vibration. An aural encounter is thus qualitatively different from prevailing literate modes of discourse in the academy not only in terms of medium, but also in an aesthetic sense of being uncontrollably temporal for the experiencing subject. While all experience is temporal and embodied, the sonic dimension is uniquely so because it concerns dissipating waves of energy. Even organized and meticulously arranged compositions of sounds such as music function in this aesthetic sense, which accents the interpretive problematics of sound brought about by its very ephemerality. In this sense, sonic energy—including but not limited to music—flees from epistemological tenets of stasis and verification, revealing, for

¹ Walter J. Ong, *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word* (London: Routledge, 2002), 31;

² Bob Dylan, “Ballad of a Thin Man,” from *Highway 61 Revisited* (New York: Columbia Records, 1965).

³ See the appendix for notes on the fair use of copyrighted materials in this chapter.

me, the inadequacy of traditional modes of analysis to engage its aesthetic dimensions. Reflecting and writing about sound poses unique challenges for the critic that make it a good metaphor for an inquiry into sensibility. While we can certainly know sound empirically through measures of pitch, intensity, duration, and so on, it is interesting to note the absence of familiarity with these modes of analysis by no means precludes the potential to hear. Or create.⁴ We can record and call up a sound at any given moment, we can modulate and edit sound, but “there is no way to stop sound and have sound.”⁵ Like surprise, sound is fugitive.

Transience is only one source of the curious silence surrounding our relationship with sound. The terms “timbre” and “tone color” in music theory refer to the idiosyncratic character of different instruments playing the same note, which at once associates the concepts with both the singular and relative. A trombone’s texture differs from a ukulele’s, of course, and a sitar sounds different than a gong. Yet these deceptively simple differentiations pose virtually limitless opportunities and challenges for the very possibility of knowing what and how a sound actually is. But for all this, timbre plays a relatively quiet and ambiguous role in music theory, which concentrates on relatively mathematized topics

⁴ The same could be said, of course, for images and visuals in general. I also do not deny the obvious: that structural systems of information can be brought to bear on both sound and image to variously d/evolve understandings of these phenomena. I simply note that, unlike literacy, specialized knowledges are not *requisite* for an aural or visual experience.

⁵ Ong, *Orality and Literacy*, 32.

like tonality, harmony, pitch, meter, rhythm, and notation.⁶ It is for these reasons that rhetorical scholarship has something to learn about itself from electronic music.

Although much valuable work is available on authorship, sampling, and remixing in digital music, the aesthetic texture and affective experience of experimental and dance genres in particular is also worth exploring in rhetorical terms. Specifically, attending to impulses in recent electronic dance music (EDM) known as “dubstep” alongside related sensibilities in rhetoric gives the field fresh ways to engage sonic experiences as objects of study. Aesthetics and rhetorics of recent EDM—music which for some critics is assaulting noise—can contribute to conversations in rhetoric increasingly concerned with the sonic dimension as a fruitful horizon for rhetorical effects and affects, the possibility of writing as something beyond or other than representation, complications of the split between subject and object, and performative argumentation. To establish such offerings, this chapter will provide and yet surpass a “rhetoric of electronic dance music.” The primary contribution, however, is a performative exploration of the music and the aesthetic interactions among fans and the

⁶ The only means of quantitatively accounting for timbre is the presence of “overtones” in the “harmonic series” of a sound. When a note sounds, what actually is emitted is not only the “fundamental” or specified note, but a relatively faint blend of overtones at higher frequencies known as a harmonic series; patterns in harmonic series correlate to subjective differentiations in timbre—e.g., bright; muddy; raspy. Arthur Jacobs, *A New Dictionary of Music* (Baltimore: Penguin, 1958), 160; 379. It’s somewhat awkward to suggest, however, that overtones causally produce timbre since the instrument produces the overtones. Even in the case of early synthesizers, when the precise distribution of overtones to be emitted were known (i.e., programmed) before anyone struck a key, the experience of timbre by the body is only ever continuous and analog. Today, virtual instruments are typically sampled because, you guessed it, the singularity and quality of overtone distribution is richer. The investigation here is of textural aesthetics of sound, which are to be Gorgianically distinguished from representations of sounds achieved through signal processing and quantization. Logos ≠ substances or existing things *represented*. (I hasten to add, however, that *encounters* [relations] with logos are only ever material, lived, temporal, and so on)! In appealing to the phenomenological experience of sound, I hardly intend to invoke a transhistorical subject as critiqued, for example, by Jonathan Sterne. *The Audible Past: Cultural Origins of Sound Reproduction* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003), 13-15. I simply note that the numeric and sampled representation of sonic energy differs markedly from the bodily register of such phenomena, historically situated though those bodies may be. This point seems overlooked or overtly dismissed in much of the literature on sound. One important exception, however, is Steph Ceraso’s recent step forward in arguing that listening is “multisensory act” and hence its rhetorical weight should not be limited to translating the sonic into the semiotic. She critiques and moves beyond what she calls the “ear-centric” model of listening, which privileges the decryption of sounds as vehicles for semiotic meanings—and an overdose of which she argues can diminish the bodily experience of the sound. Ceraso, “(Re)Educating the Senses: Multimodal Listening, Bodily Learning, and the Composition of Sonic Experiences,” *College English* 77, no. 2 (2014): 102-123.

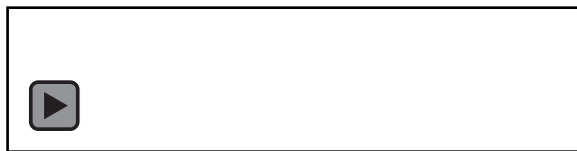
appeals of the art. My title proposes neither a hierarchy nor an essential divide between aesthetics and rhetorics. Instead, it suggests a tentative distinction for the purpose of highlighting the differences between experiencing and identifying rhetorical action. The larger point involves the conception of so called “objects” of study in scholarly discourse and our relationship(s) with these objects. I surmise that rhetoric may not only acknowledge this disjuncture, but perform it as well.

The following pages perform a “glitching” of the scholarly manuscript by enacting the aesthetics of recent electronic dance music (commonly referred to as “EDM”) as well as other contemporary strains of experimental electronic music. The initial emphasis is on idiosyncratic textures and timbres in electronic music known as “dubstep,” which is presented as a modality through and during which to perform academic thinking about the music. The discussion begins with a sampling of dubstep and an introduction of recent EDM cultures (along with their detractors), transitions to an outline of the chapter’s paralogical and post-critical methods, and begins to sketch a rhetoric of electronic dance music. We then rebegin by glitching into the sequence a pair of excursions into musical rhetoric and strains of experimental music that have been recognized as “noise,” “glitch,” and “failure.” The piece concludes by coming “full squiggle” in acknowledging the common critique of dance music as mere product for popular audiences devoid of artistic experimentation. The suggestion throughout is that EDM invites and promotes an engagement with the art that is both “sensible” and “intelligible,” and thus deserves an inquiry that is performative as well as critical.

While I begin to trace a rhetoric of EDM in a grammatical or generic sense below, the chapter also establishes the rewards (necessity, perhaps) of engagements with rhetorics that go beyond identification and explore the *relationship* that rhetors and audiences have with the music. In other words, more than simply discoursing “about” EDM will be required in

order to engage the aesthetic and affective experience of such auralities to do fitting service for this music and culture that, as we will hear, prioritizes innovative timbres and singularities of textures over traditional generic attributes. EDM has no monopoly on artistic experimentation, of course, and I hope the discussion of timbre here may be extended or applied to other genres. But, as we will hear, EDM's emphasis on idiosyncratic and novel textures make it a good case study for the aesthetic and affective experience of music as sound in general.

Electronic dance music has long, diverse, and international histories (not to mention futures). "Dubstep," one particular strain in the expansive and cross-pollinated ecology of EDM writ large, has recently garnered near mainstream attention. Although this cross-section of EDM varies tremendously from artist to artist, dubstep might be loosely characterized by its relatively slow tempo of approximately 140 beats per minute, generic structural patterns (e.g., "builds," "drops," "interludes"), digitally synthesized sounds, and recurring themes of its occasional lyrical content. It can be *un*characterized by its disarray of baroque, modulated, and sometimes atonal combinations of sounds.



Clip 3.1: Datsik, "Hydraulic," from *Hydraulic / Overdose* (Kelowna BC, Canada: Rottun Recordings, 2011).

Reductive accounts of dubstep music sometimes make reference to robots or aliens to describe the disjunctive and unusual aesthetics, timbres, and moods of the genre. One reviewer for *The New York Times* describes a dubstep concert as "almost all tremor": "That there's no dance music less sensuous than this was not an obstacle. Dubstep can often sound

like the gears of an industrial thrasher groaning from overuse, or the soundtrack to the construction of a Richard Serra steel sculpture.”⁷ Notable for me is the very notion that such textuality (texturality?) is desirable in the first place, especially given that such arts are currently experiencing a windfall of attention. While EDM and rave cultures are not new, their recent inclusion in mainstream media is. Artists like Skrillex, Dillon Francis, and Datsik have enjoyed a recent boom of international listenership and achieved unprecedented commercial success in polymorphous genres like dubstep, drum and bass, and electro-house.⁸ I will be most interested in American, Canadian, Northern European, and Australian varieties of dubstep music produced from approximately 2010 to the present. The focus will be relatively new and noisy varieties of dubstep whose roots are in artists like UK producers like Skream, Burial, and Rusko, who, in turn, are indebted to actual “dub” music, or “reggae dub.” Tracing this history in the detail it deserves is beyond the scope of the present writing, but suffice it to say the focus here is a more recent wave of artists like, sure, Skrillex, but also others such as SKisM, Kill the Noise, KOAN Sound, Adventure Club, Butch Clancy, and many more whose era is to be carefully distinguished as its own, polymorphous and evolving movement within the broader context and phenomenon of EDM. The idea is to consider such genres as means or modalities *through* and *during* which to perform academic thinking on the music.

Evidence that EDM has staked a claim in public consciousness includes the use of dubstep to score popular films and television commercials, the fact that Skrillex has won six

⁷ Jon Caramanica, “Waves of Sound, Wobbles of Bass,” *New York Times*, April 22, 2013, <http://nyti.ms/1VOOVRM>.

⁸ My use of the term “genre” and generic categories are in line with Carolyn Miller’s understanding of the concept. Following Miller, my interest will *not* be in recurring substances (semantics) or forms (syntactics) of music. Instead, the chapter will be oriented by a “an understanding of how discourse works—that is, [how] it reflects the rhetorical experience of the people who create and interpret the discourse” with certain *actions* or *purposes* in mind. Miller, “Genre as Social Action,” *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 70 (1984): 152. While I will begin with recurring textual and textural attributes of the music, my ultimate concern will be the affective experience of the music and how audiences not only taxonomize, but relate with the art.

Grammy Awards, and the massive commercialization for live performances of associated artists. The buzz has been sufficient to send dozens of producers on international tours and sustain colossal festivals like Electric Daisy Carnival and Ultra Festival, which are each attended by hundreds of thousands of people annually.⁹ Once the pleasure of underground niches and clandestine warehouse raves, EDM has arrived in international mainstream cultures. Yet scholars have only begun to learn from the aesthetics of the most successful producers of the last decade. Rhetoric should tune in.

Intentions, Intent, Performance

In *The Postmodern Condition*, Jean-François Lyotard uses a metaphor of soapy water to illustrate an epistemological architecture that was stochastic in its inter- and trans-disciplinary and fusions, relations, and influences.¹⁰ He describes the state of knowledge as a kaleidoscopic series of generations and reorganizations, mapped as an incredible complexity of geometry in flux at all times. Rather than the “performativity” Lyotard associates with mastery of already established procedures, he suggests the new means by which knowledge is to be invented is “paralogy,” or the invention of new knowledge making procedures.¹¹ The *Report on Knowledge* he sketched was spastic, proffering a “postmodern science as a search for instabilities” that would yield “singularities and ‘incommensurabilities’” necessarily out of sync with the methods and procedures of the day.¹² I notice strikingly dis/similar energies, impulses, and aesthetics in recent electronic music and dubstep in particular.

⁹ Jesse Lawrence, “With Ultra Music Festival Two Weeks Away, EDM Poised For Biggest Summer Yet,” *Forbes*, March 10, 2014, <http://www.forbes.com/sites/jesselawrence/2014/03/10/with-ultra-music-festival-two-weeks-away-edm-poised-for-biggest-summer-yet/>.

¹⁰ Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, trans. Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), 58.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 44 ff.

¹² *Ibid.*, 53; 60.



Clip 3.2: Skrillex, “Rock ‘n Roll (Will Take You to the Mountain),” from *Scary Monsters and Nice Sprites* (Tampa: Big Beat Records / Atlantic Records, 2012).

The music suggests aesthetic liminality in its apparent sensibility for texture and timbre itself—not instead but in addition to the intelligibility of meter, rhythm, melody, progression, and lyrical content typical of popular Western music. We hear baroque arrangements of flotsam and jetsam alongside cracks and pops fractions of a second in duration. We hear flirtations with atonality and a primarily percussive experience. I submit an aesthetic pleasure in electronic dance music cultures comes partly from a forfeiture of control as listeners are awash in sounds for which they need not account as part of a melody or progression. While some hear noise, others sense perceptual dilations and a renewed sense of relation to music itself. Counting myself among the latter group, I am in agreement with Jeff Rice’s remix of Lyotard for a theory of digital aurality: “to listen is not to seek out a truth; it is to engage with the *process* of knowing as opposed to just the known.”¹³ To suggest listening as an activity of knowing is to underscore the processual, temporal, and even existential dimensions of inquiry typically downplayed or unacknowledged when the scholarly text is limited to propositional content.

I will therefore engage in both critical and “post-critical” discussions to discuss, perform, and engage electronic dance music. My attempt will be to take up what Gregory L.

¹³ Rice juxtaposes this theory of “digital aurality” he dubs “ka-knowledge” with the historically “topos based” model of knowing in literate paradigms characterized by localized information and “a fixed place of meaning” Jeff Rice, “The Making of Ka-Knowledge: Digital Aurality,” *Computers and Composition* 23 (2006): 267 (original emphasis); 276.

Ulmer describes as a “relation of the critical text to its object of study to be conceived in terms no longer of subject-object[,] but of subject-predicate.”¹⁴ It could be argued that EDM cultivates an aesthetic of *surprise* related in spirit to Ulmer’s discussions of collage and montage, a *stammering* comparable to historiographical shifts in the discourse of human arts and sciences as recollected by Michel Foucault, and a *wobbling* we might associate with recursive and self-reflexive discourse. Indeed, for starters, I will first make and support these very claims before demonstrating the ease with which these interpretations can and should be surpassed by an enactment of the music—beyond an account of their salient features. Hence, I move from subject-object to subject-predicate.

The question of how to approach music with alphabetic writing has been of interest for rhetoricians in the past, most notably in the 1999 *enculturation* special issue, “Writing/Music/Culture.” As editors Thomas Rickert and Byron Hawk noted, the disjuncture in medium makes writing about music is something like “Avowing the Unavowable.” There is a sense, they suggested, that “music composes us when we listen to it and when we write about it,”¹⁵ and not the other way way around. Gregory Erickson’s piece in that issue deals with some of ways music criticism interacts sonic arts. In his terms, my intentions are not only to “describe” or identify elements in electronic dance music, “point” to its salient features, and thus “augment” my readers’ engagement with the art; my primary or holistic efforts will be to “emulat[e] . . . the effect of the music”¹⁶ temporally across the duration of the writing. Hence, I partially accept Erickson’s challenge to “write about music without definition or description, to see it not as an artifact, but as a mysterious and powerful

¹⁴ Gregory L. Ulmer, “The Object of Post-Criticism,” in *The Anti-Aesthetic: Essays on Postmodern Culture*, ed. Hal Foster (New York: The New Press, 1983), 86.

¹⁵ Thomas Rickert and Byron Hawk, “Avowing the Unavowable”: On the Music of Composition,” *enculturation* 2, no. 2 (1999): http://enculturation.net/2_2/intro.html.

¹⁶ Gregory Erickson, “Speaking of Music: Explorations in the Language of Music Criticism,” *enculturation* 2, no. 2 (1999): http://enculturation.net/2_2/erickson.html.

cognitive *process*.”¹⁷ For me, the issue is not whether we define and describe, but rather how scholars *relate* to such definitions and descriptions. I am also in sync with Adam Koehler, who picks up the beat in this journal some years later to stress that when we imagine rhetoric as musical (i.e., flip the notion of music as rhetorical), “we are asking rhetoric to grapple with the aesthetic” itself—“asking rhetoric, as a mode of production (rather than a mode of interpretation), to seek aesthetic ways of knowing.”¹⁸ And so, as Matthew A. Levy might suggest, I invite readers to take out their “earplugs,”¹⁹ and (why not?) hear and feel the texts—both the aural works cited and my own—in addition to grounding the art with figures, meanings, and referents. I begin with such an activity, but I won’t stop there.

In addition to dubstep, I will examine the moods, sensibilities, and aesthetics of aural arts traditions that have gone under the scholarly headings of “noise,” “glitch,” and “failure.” While not directly antecedent to the strains of dubstep and other EDM approached here, they are related in spirit.²⁰ Because noise, glitch, and failure have firm groundings in academic discourse that recent electronic music does not, this trio is a good place from which to begin the way toward dubstep and rhetoric. My attempts will be to establish important similarities and differences between these movements, and spell out what we can learn from more contemporary music about how to engages its practices.

In linking (only) apparently discontinuous traditions, this chapter is itself a glitch and may be related to Casey Boyle’s understanding of the phenomenon as an error that makes a

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Adam Koehler, “Frozen Music, Unthawed?: Ka-Knowledge, Creative Writing, and the Electromagnetic Imaginary,” *enculturation* 7 (2010): <http://enculturation.net/frozen-music-unthawed>.

¹⁹ Matthew A. Levy, “Shhhh! Or, the Methodological Earplugs of Cultural Studies in Popular Music,” review of *Mapping the Beat* by Thomas Swiss, John Sloop, and Andrew Herman, *enculturation* 2, vol. 2 (1999): http://enculturation.net/2_2/levy.html.

²⁰ Such a claim might irritate some readers because it conflates so called “popular” music with “experimental” music. While there is certainly a sense in which arts and rhetorics might aim for mere “gratification and pleasure”—“flattery,” perhaps—this popular/experimental divide is rather coarse. I join many others in rejecting this false dichotomy. See Plato, *Gorgias*, trans. W. R. M. Lamb (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1925), 462d-462e.

forgotten because “transparent” system of mediation opaque.²¹ In my case, the mediator is the explanatory academic manuscript. Productively, Boyle’s glitches provoke what he calls a “metastable” relationship between and among experiencing subjects and objects. Rather than looking “at” and “through” objects, texts, or mediators themselves (a “bi-stable” arrangement endorsed by Richard Lanham),²² Boyle pursues an ongoing and mutually involved engagement with objects. Emphasis here is on the preposition “*with*” and the relational action of “*being with*” glitches by undergoing their manifest metastability; when an instrument of mediation reveals itself *as mediator* in error, it is not only the subject but also the instrument and the object that wield affective force.²³ Hence, explanation is simply not enough, especially when the so called “object” in question is an evolving phenomenon such as a genre of music. Then and always, *relation* is necessary to accompany identification. My attempt here is the performance such a metastable relationship with both music and the academic essay. Put differently, the argument I perform “with” glitching is that timbre can be engaged with writing that aims not so much to represent sound as predicate itself upon it.

Switch: Glitch; Listeners, Listening, and Meter

Another way of thinking about glitch is a jamming or crossing of lines to instigate strange or unexpected hybridizations. And indeed, some varieties of glitch music integrate sound samples that might be described as incomplete, interrupted, clipped, or “cut short.” Unlike a note played on a traditional instrument, glitchy sound samples burst onto the track with the sound apparently already in progress and conclude by abruptly slicing the sample in a way that seems a bit too early. In production terms, the “attack” and “decay” of glitched

²¹ Casey Boyle, “The Rhetorical Question Concerning Glitch,” *Computers and Composition* 35 (2015): 12.

²² See Richard Lanham, *The Electronic Word: Democracy, Technology, and the Arts* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1993), 5-6; 80-82.

²³ Boyle, “Glitch,” 19-22.

samples, or how quickly the sound appears and disappears, is often instantaneous to the human ear. The arrival and departure time of the glitched samples are so quick and disjointed that they resemble a skipping compact disc, and indeed, this is how some of the early glitch music was created. Readers interested in experimental electronic music may recall the producer Oval, whose discography is commonly cited as pioneer work in glitch music (Clip 3.3).



Clip 3.3: Oval's glitches: "Shop in Store" from *94 Diskont* (New York: Thrill Jockey Records, 1995).

Recent producers such as KOAN Sound have adapted the aesthetic for dubstep and other EDM genres, weaving meticulously arranged and yet glitchy sonic tapestries (Clip 3.4).



Clip 3.4: KOAN Sound, "Blue Stripes," from *Dubstep Onslaught* (London: Z Audio, 2011) (various artists).

The point here is that the integration of glitch into meter is a simultaneous appeal to both experimental and popular sensibilities. Considered alongside the work of producers associated with experimental music "proper," these tracks sound relatively well behaved. Take, for instance, the arrhythmic auralities of Ryoji Ikeda (Clip 3.5), whose stunning audio/visual installations are internationally renowned.



Clip 3.5: Ryoji Ikeda, from *Formula* (London: Forma, 2005).
Book + DVD release.

All the above suggests a muddled “who’s who” with regard to insiders, outsiders, and mobile producers traversing both popular and experimental worlds. I posit dubstep as this third sort of outsider art on the inside of the mainstream. My intent is therefore to collapse the distinction altogether by suggesting the rhetorical strength of the art is precisely in a collision of these two supposedly distinct appeals: intelligibility of metered rhythms and sensibility of novel timbres.²⁴

Electronic Dance Music, Error, Liminality

In a word, I take electronic dance music and dubstep in particular to be *liminal*. I borrow, stretch, and repurpose the term from Victor Turner’s anthropological work on rites of passage to signify a rhetorical encounter with a strange and transient moment necessitating improvisation. Any honest discussion of a genre that relies on salient features immediately encounters outliers and exceptions. I am therefore less interested defining a genre or any subgenre of electronic music than I am in exploring what does appear to be an effort in a diverse body of dubstep to push toward (and exceed?) interpretive thresholds, aesthetic limits, intelligible margins, and affective boundaries. I claim this striving is manifest in the contents, forms, and purposes of the art.²⁵

²⁴ My gesture here is inspired by Victor J. Vitanza’s attempt to be “an outsider while inside” when accounting for histories of rhetorics. His topographic model for such histories is the Klein jar, a non-orientable surface “which is all outside and no inside, or which is neither.” *Negation, Subjectivity, and The History of Rhetoric* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1997), 19; 7.

²⁵ See n. 8, above.

Actually, a common criticism of EDM is that it is not music at all because it does not continue longstanding traditions of composition in the Western mainstream. While such reactionary criticisms echoing those historically lodged against experimental music are by no means unique, they are just as bitter and uncompromising. Negative reviews of dubstep as somehow outside or other than music itself abound in popular culture. Henry Rollins, former frontman of the legendary punk band Black Flag, contributes to this discourse in a standup comedy routine by wondering “which came first, shitty rave music or the drugs?”

So you make music this shitty, and everyone says, “God, this sucks!”

[Rollins impersonating a particular discussant:] “No, no, take these drugs.”

[Rollins as a second individual brings pantomimic narcotics to his tongue and convulses, imitating loss of motor control. The music review is revised:] “*Fuck*, that’s so good!”

[Laughter in the audience].

[Rollins as himself:] *Or*, were there just a bunch of people sitting in warehouse with a bunch of ketamine and ecstasy, and they took a bunch of it, and they said, “Alright, now make some music!”²⁶

Self-satisfied punchline being that results in both cases would be comparable. He goes on to identify disc jockeys as “nonmusic fuckheads” and “record player players,”²⁷ trivializing producers of original content who are also necessarily DJs for the sake of live performance. The artists, meanwhile, are aware of this counter-discourse, and even use the criticism as source material for new productions. The audio from the Rollins gig, of course, was itself remixed and sampled in EDM productions including SKisM’s “Rave Review” (Clip 3.6).



Clip 3.6: Rollins remixed. SKisM, “Rave Review,” from *Down with the Kids* (London: Never Say Die Records, 2010).

²⁶ Henry Rollins, *Henry Rollins: Up for It* (Tokyo: Geneon, 2001), DVD (my transcription, emphasis reflects vocal accent).

²⁷ Ibid.

Rollins represents an extreme responses, but the framing of his complaints as exclusionary is telling and relevant for my argument because of the emphasis on aesthetic discontinuity and radical invention in EDM. Some strains of digital music have perceived themselves as liminal since their inception. Kim Cascone's landmark article, "The Aesthetics of Failure," ushered in the work of electronic artists who embraced, pursued, and exploited hiccups and errors in digital audio production. These artists reveled in the mutated audio emitted during the crashes and stalls of editing software, understanding such errors as creations instead of scraps. While it is a banality that digital technologies afford a wide range of tools and opportunities for producers to stretch and pioneer the sonic arts, what might be less commonplace is that some artists actually appreciate and celebrate the failure of the same hard and soft wares. As Cascone observes, the tools of electronic music composition not only streamline production, but "digital technology [also] enables artists to explore new territories for content by capturing and examining the area *beyond the boundary* of 'normal' functions and uses of software."²⁸ His essay calls attention to a deliberate cultivation of breakdown and deterioration as an intentional mood: "It is from the 'failure' of digital technologies that this new work has emerged: glitches, bugs, application errors, system crashes, clipping, aliasing, distortion, quantization noise, and even the noise floor of computer sound cards are the raw materials composers seek to incorporate into their music."²⁹ Importantly, the impetus for all this noise is a kind of willed liminality on the part of the producers: "while technological failure is often controlled and suppressed—its effects buried *beneath the threshold of perception*—most audio tools can zoom in on the errors, allowing

²⁸ Kim Cascone, "The Aesthetics of Failure: 'Post-Digital Tendencies in Contemporary Computer Music,'" *Computer Music Journal* 24, no. 4 (2000): 14 (emphasis added).

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 13.

composers to make them the focus of their work.”³⁰ For Cascone, failure promised forking pathways to new sonic aesthetics.

Turner’s anthropology is also concerned with interpretive thresholds. I have in mind his work on “liminality,” a transitional period of growth in which cultural subjects undergo what is often a jarring experience of maturation and enculturation. Typical examples include fraternity pledging or, in so called “primitive” cultures, a youth’s passage into adulthood sometimes consummated with a test of survival on one’s own for a period of time while isolated from the tribe. Working with Arnold van Gennep’s three stages in rites of passage, “separation, transition, and incorporation,” it is the middle period which primarily interests him; Turner writes that “[i]n this intervening phase of transition, called by Van Gennep ‘margin’ or ‘limen’ (meaning ‘threshold’ in Latin), the ritual subjects pass through a period and area of ambiguity, a sort of social limbo” in which subjectivities and therefore reliable interpretive capabilities are unavailable.³¹ Those undergoing liminality may find themselves endowed with more than they thought possible—capable of previously unimaginable rhetorical, aesthetic, interpretive, and experiential capacities.

Following Lyotard and Ulmer in search of interpretive free play, I take note of EDM as cultural texts that flirt with such bending, modulating, and repurposing symbols in atypical and improvisational ways. Texts that encourage and instigate feelings of breakage, mutation, and experimentation as part of their reading-listening-feeling experience seek out and promote innovative modes of experiencing arts and rhetorics. As liminal, EDM seems deserving of an engagement that resists the temptation to reduce the art to a list of recurring attributes, although this is perhaps the only place we can start.

³⁰ Ibid., (emphasis added).

³¹ Victor Turner, *From Ritual to Theatre: The Human Seriousness of Play* (New York: PAJ Publications, 1982), 24.

Before we begin, however, acknowledgment of a triple anxiety is necessary. First of all, “overwhelmingly, the intellectual tradition has considered music suspicious if not dangerous” because of its indeterminate affective force, especially when considered relative to the cognitive prowess language supposedly affords.³² Second: according to Plato, the music most threatening to the order of the ideal state is im/precisely the novel and unfamiliar.

When Plato said that “the overseers of our state . . . must throughout be watchful against innovations in music . . . fearing when anyone says that the song is most regarded among men ‘which hovers newest on the singer’s lips,’” one may wonder whether he had in mind the boast of . . . Timotheus [of Miletus] who said: “I do not sing what men have sung in time past. In novelty is power. . . . Far from us be the Muse of the old days.”³³

The inconsistency of the new necessarily implies deviance, abandonment, and renewal—all of which Plato situates firmly in the realm distracting appearances: dancing shadows on the wall. Third, all the above is in and/or out of line with Jacques Attali’s landmark study on noise and experimental music. His position is that disruptive musical arts can rock established paradigms and instigate social change in a way that necessarily entails overhauling

³² Thomas Rickert, “Language’s Duality and the Rhetorical Problem of Music,” in *Rhetorical Agendas: Political, Ethical, Spiritual*, ed. Patricia Bizzell (New York: Routledge, 2010), 157.

³³ Qtd. in Katharine Everett Gilbert and Helmut Kuhn, *A History of Esthetics* (New York: Dover, 1972), 30. The quoted passages, respectively, are Plato, *Republic*, 424b and Alfred Croiset and Maurice Croiset, *Histoire de la Littérature Grecque*, vol. III (Paris: Librairie des Écoles Françaises, 1887), 34. No full text in English of the latter exists to my knowledge, though spot translations are common in scholarship. Timotheus of Miletus is an amusing figure, dating liminal sonic aestheticism back as far as the third and fourth centuries, BCE.

For Carlo Valgulio, Girolamo Mei, and other Renaissance humanists, the name Timotheus of Miletus brought to mind the image of a musician who flouted custom by enlarging the number of strings of the traditional kithara to accommodate his innovative style, and was humiliated by the authorities of the city of Sparta for doing so. . . . “Timotheus expanded his lyre to eleven strings, whereas up to Terpander and others like him it did not go beyond seven. For this alteration he was exiled by the Spartans as a spoiler and destroyer of the ancient music,” Mei wrote to [Vincenzo] Galilei.

Martha Maas, “Timotheus at Sparta: The Nature of the Crime,” in *Musical Humanism and Its Legacy: Essays in Honor of Claude V. Palisca*, eds. Nancy Kovaleff Baker and Barbara Russian (Stuyvesant: Pendragon Press, 1992), 38. The cited correspondence, dated May 8, 1572, appears in Claude V. Palisca, *The Florentine Camerata: Documentary Studies and Translations* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989), 71.

the prevailing aesthetic infrastructures: “[f]or the code to undergo a mutation . . . and for the dominant network to change, a certain catastrophe must occur.”³⁴

A Rhetoric of Electronic Dance Music?

Surprise?

If “surprise is the least complex kind of fulfillment,”³⁵ one can’t help but wonder how an agenda for experimentation is handled by this model. What if one’s hope is to enter the liminal, to tinker with the unfamiliar for the purposes of invention? I neither wish to fight a straw man nor argue with Burke’s hierarchy of complexity. My purpose in citing Burke is rather to propose that listeners of dubstep, despite Rollins et al., are in fact less concerned “the creation of an appetite . . . and the adequate satisfying of that appetite,”³⁶ than with the discovery of appetites they were not aware they held—or even knew existed. Producers of dubstep and some other EDM genres seem to have an aesthetic preference “closer to invention than verification,” to repurpose Gregory Ulmer’s words from different but related context.³⁷

A liminal aesthetic, insofar as there is any such thing available for analysis, is one that calls to mind Ulmer’s discussion of collage and montage as “post-critical.” Using heterogeneous elements “cut out and pasted into new, surprising, provoking juxtapositions,”³⁸ collage is recombinant composition in which the traditional function of signification is altered to one not primarily concerned with referentiality. Ulmer’s linkage of

³⁴ Jacques Attali, *Noise: The Political Economy of Music*, trans. Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011), 34.

³⁵ Kenneth Burke, *Counter-Statement* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1968), 36, n. 4.

³⁶ Gregory L. Ulmer, *Heuretics: The Logic of Invention* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1994), 31.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, xii.

³⁸ Ulmer, “Post-Criticism,” 85.

the form to Derridian “grammatology” suggests that collage “does not abandon or deny reference, but re-thinks reference in another way: ‘it complicates the boundary line that ought to run between the text and what seems to lie beyond its fringes, what is classed as the *real*.’”³⁹ Given that collage can rely on reference for the sake of juxtaposition, referentiality is not irrelevant; regardless, what we have here is an elevation of texture and materiality to an equal if not higher status than the conceptual realm “beyond” the work itself. For Ulmer, collage shifts away from “representation by the metaphysics of ‘logocentrism,’ the era extending from Plato to Freud (and beyond) in which writing (all manner of inscription) is reduced to a secondary status as ‘vehicle,’ [and] in which the signified or referent is always prior to the material sign, the purely intelligible prior to the merely sensible.”⁴⁰ The connection to EDM here is that a grammatology transposed for music might dispense with tonality as a guiding parameter of progressions melodies. Indeed, in dubstep sounds themselves are featured not as differential operators, but simply as textures in their own right.



Clip 3.7: Dino Safari, “A Ghost Named Charlie” (I.Y.F.F.E., Au5, and Auratic Remix). Self-released.

The aggressive remix of the track “A Ghost Named Charlie” (originally produced by Dino Safari) and Downlink’s “Factory” are good examples of such compositions (Clips 3.7 and 3.8). These works seem to rely on something other than latent, relational significations in a tonal network (e.g, those of a key signature) and signify the timbres themselves.

³⁹ Ibid., 87. The cited passage is Derrida’s, from *Dissemination*, trans. Barbara Johnson (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1981), 41-42 (original emphasis). Cf. Ulmer, “Post-Criticism,” 83.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 87.



Clip 3.8: Downlink, “Factory,” from *Factory / Yeah* (Kelowna BC, Canada: Rottun Recordings, 2011).

More specifically, these samples dispense with popular music’s tonal gold standard, which is loosely analogous to language as a static system of differences prior to deconstruction. In music theory, the distance between notes on the staff measured in “intervals” or “steps” determines consonance and dissonance among notes (and is also the basis of scales and key signatures). Instead of and/or alongside melodic phrases governed by tonality, these clips offer an aesthetic of surprise by combining an eclectic array of sound samples. And the compatibility of Ulmer’s grammatology with Cascone’s aesthetics is striking, particularly when the latter describes the composing process of early glitch music: in a sense, “[t]he ‘atomic’ parts, or samples, used in composing electronica from small modular pieces had become the whole.”⁴¹ For Cascone, glitch music is “composed of stratified layers [of samples] that intermingle and defer meaning until the listener takes an active role in the production of meaning.”⁴² Such a listening experience is a key change in the relationship between knower and known characterized by a forfeiture of expectation and an embrace of texture of mere sound itself.

Stammer?

In *The Archeology of Knowledge*, Michel Foucault describes a historiographical shift. “Attention has been turned,” he writes, “away from vast unities like ‘periods’ or ‘centuries’ to

⁴¹ Cascone, “Failure,” 17.

⁴² Ibid.

the phenomena of rupture” and “discontinuity (threshold, rupture, break, mutation, transformation).”⁴³ For him, the task is no longer tracing stable lines in thought, politics, philosophy, arts, and so on, but rather charting genealogical understandings of how such discourses are paradoxically substantiated by disjunctives tossed out in favor of these very stabilities. In so doing, he insists that scholars take up a different relationship with archive, which itself must be reinvented in order to adequately engage rupture. The result is a strange imperative: “suspend the continuous accumulation of knowledge, interrupt its slow development, and force it to enter a new time.”⁴⁴ In so doing, Foucault was perfectly aware, researchers may stammer in attempt to register something heretofore inarticulable or disallowed precisely because it renders a field’s trajectory discontinuous.



Clip 3.9: SKisM, “Elixir,” from *Down with the Kids* (London: Never Say Die Records, 2010).

I hear dubstep stammering in songs like SKisM’s “Elixir” and Kill the Noise’s “Talk to Me” (Clips 3.9 and 3.10). As we hear in the latter sample, this effect is often accomplished by dicing vocal tracks and rearranging the bits in fragmented syncopation.

⁴³ Michel Foucault, *The Archeology of Knowledge and the Discourse on Language*, trans. A. M. Sheridan Smith (New York: Vintage, 2010), 4; 5.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 4.



Clip 3.10: Kill the Noise, “Talk to Me,” from *Kill Kill Kill*
(Los Angeles: OWSLA, 2011).

The result sounds like someone interrupting themselves—these two clips can hardly contain themselves! Notice the exact rhythm of the stammer in both samples is rarely if ever repeated; each bar of the cited passages (un)usually offers a unique rhythmic phrase. Recalling the sequence from memory is, I think, deliberately made difficult, and as such a stammering aesthetic could be read attempt to brush up against limits of articulability.

Wobble?

Hayden White conceives of ideal argument as a “diatactic” movement. He prefers this term to dialectic, which “too often suggests a transcendental subject or narrative ego [that] stands above the contending interpretations of reality and arbitrates between them.”⁴⁵

A diatactical orientation, on the other hand,

does not suggest that discourses about reality can be classified as hypotactical (conceptually overdetermined), on the one side, and paratactical (conceptually underdetermined), on the other, with the discourse itself occupying the middle ground that everyone is seeking [as in dialectics]. On the contrary, discourse, if it is genuine discourse—that is to say, as self-critical as it is critical of others—will radically challenge the notion of the syntactical middle ground itself.⁴⁶

Such a middle ground, after all, cannot exist except as a reterritorialization. How might

White’s “metadiscursive reflexivity” *sound*?

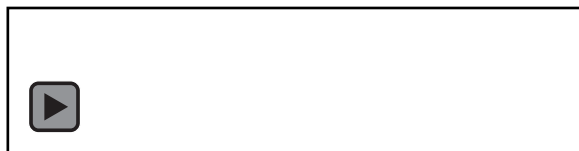
⁴⁵ Hayden White, *Tropics of Discourse: Essays in Cultural Criticism* (Baltimore: The University of Johns Hopkins Press, 1978), 4.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*



Clip 3.11: Butch Clancy, “Boogie Knights.” Self-released.

Dubstep is known for its cultivation of an aesthetic known as “wobble,” a tremololike modulation effect usually achieved by means of oscillating the parameters of an effect filter applied to a sound-sample in real time and rhythmically looping the output. “Boogie Knights” by Butch Clancy and a remix of Diana Vickers’ “Sunlight” by Adventure Club may serve as examples of especially wobbly tracks (Clips 3.11 and 3.12). Such wobbling is generated with technique called “low frequency oscillation,” which temporarily amplifies a select window of low-end frequencies of a sound *as it is sampled*. The procedure is roughly analogous to sweeping the “low” dial of a stereo’s equalizer during playback for realtime modulation. The result is not a modulated sound, but a sound being recurrently modulated in the present. Although machinically rhythmic, the result feels precarious because the timbre is wavering in time.



Clip 3.12: Diana Vickers, “Sunlight” (Adventure Club Remix). Self-released.

These effects and consequent affects riding on these crests of frequency recall Turner’s liminal “interval[s], however brief, of margin or limen, when the past is momentarily negated, suspended, or abrogated, and the future has not yet begun, an instant of pure potentiality when everything . . . trembles in the balance.”⁴⁷ If we need and desire

⁴⁷ Turner, *Ritual*, 44.

rhetoric and rhetorical studies to transform our modes of thinking, listening, reading, and writing, then suspension and trembling must be admitted to the discourse.

Rebeginning: Glitch

Experimental music is by no means a new phenomenon, and predates all three writers and EDM by a long shot. Here, then, I will switch and trip the flow of the chapter by claiming that the cursory discussion of attributes I outlined above does *not* in fact amount to a viable “rhetoric of electronic dance music.” I surmise that what sustains audience interest in EDM is that each surprise, stammer, and wobble is something different—by which I hope to indicate something grander and yet subtle relative to the banal (though important) idea that individual texts from any one genre are each themselves different. Instead, the claims are that if anything is “signified” or “represented” in electronic dance music, it is liminality itself in which all interpretive bets are off. The purpose, perhaps, is to “intervene in the world, not to reflect but to change reality.”⁴⁸ Hence, the questions: how, in light of its surprising “tendencies,” should we treat experimental music in scholarly discourse—and why would it matter for rhetoric?

Prior to, beyond, or perhaps in excess of our intelligible relationship with rhetorics as identifiable means of persuasion, there also exists a relatively unwieldy dimension of engagement with rhetorics, less intelligible than merely sensible.⁴⁹ This qualitative distinction becomes especially important if the issue is liminal experiences in arts and rhetorics. Next, then, I pull the ground out from under my own argument thus far—I glitch it—for the purpose of demonstrating that what is needed and wanted for experimental discourses on

⁴⁸ Ulmer, “Object,” 86.

⁴⁹ By invoking a distinction between sensibility and intelligibility, I make reference to one of the longest dialectics in the history of Western thought. Related pairings include aesthetic/cognitive, feeling/meaning, experiencing/knowing, and so on. As I established in the first chapter, it is unwise to posit these terms as antitheses or opposites.

experimental rhetorics is to actually enact and perform these sorts experiences—in addition to simply discoursing *about* such experiences. The subject is now *how to think and write* notions, moods, attitudes, and affects associated with aural experimentalities.

Sonic Aesthetics of Rhetorics

A number of scholars have explored the rhetorical implications of listening, sound, and music as modalities of engagement. I am in tune with Steven B. Katz, for example, who highlights the fact that reading, like music, is temporal. His is “a temporal philosophy based on harmonic association and holistic synthesis of thought and feeling rather than sequential extraction and hierarchical differentiation of meaning”⁵⁰ we might get through referentiality. Katz’s suggestion is not simply that music can be rhetorical, but that rhetoric could be musical. My attempt is to underscore the temporality of the present argument by means of enacting a *glitch*. It is not that the typology of dubstep attributes I outlined above is wrong or unhelpful. Indeed, such taxonomy is probably a necessary basis from which to begin discoursing. But such information as mere data diminishes, potentially or to a certain extent, the affective capacity of electronic dance music by taking it out of its lived, temporal dimension.

Byron Hawk and, separately, Thomas Rickert and Michael Salvo have argued that music can have a “worlding” capacity to reflect, actuate, and propel not merely technological innovations, but also existential moods. From Wagner to Yes to Brian Eno, Rickert and Salvo suggest that evolutions in music not only reflect or parallel but also *inspire* transformations of our relation to the art and the world. Specifically, they notice that accelerations in new media composition technologies can prompt both artists and audiences to ponder their

⁵⁰ Steven B. Katz, *The Epistemic Music of Rhetoric: Toward the Temporal Dimension of Affect in Reader Response and Writing* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1996), xii.

relationships with music, which is especially pronounced in “a culture that is less resonate with interpretation than with engagement.”⁵¹ Relatedly, Hawk’s listening sessions with the experimental punk band Refused leads him to suggest that pioneerings in music “se[t] the emergent ground for the rhetorical affects and future paths they make possible through their work of art.”⁵² What I take from these writers is a cumulative feeling that experimental ventures in music may afford an opportunity not merely for persuasion in the usual sense of making appeals to existing paradigms and satisfying established formal appetites, but can also occasion a dramatic alteration of aesthetic preferences or even reveal new “preferences” or desires not yet formulated or recognized by audiences.

Rickert argues that ambient music is conducive less to intelligible analyses than to “attunements” or mood based engagements that I would associate with sensibility as an alternative to intelligibility. He notes, for example, that ambient music “eschews melody,” a major dimension of grounding for popular Western music, “in favor of slowly unfolding harmonic textures . . . designed to withdraw from direct attention and permeate one’s overall environment.”⁵³ Transposed for rhetorics, ambient music’s departure from the catchy, the recognizable, the operationalizable, and melodic qualities of popular music helps us think of an engagement with arts and rhetorics not limited to the intelligible relationship with information (textual, sonic, and otherwise) we tend to take for granted. On a grander and existential scale, this ambient dimension within which we always already dwell highlights the ever present sensible *in* the intelligible, the former functioning as the basis of the latter, thereby dissolving the distinction between the poles:

⁵¹ Thomas Rickert and Michael Salvo, “The Distributed *Gesamtkunstwerk*: Sound, Worlding, and New Media Culture,” *Computers and Composition* 23 (2006): 296.

⁵² Byron Hawk, “The Shape of Rhetoric to Come: Musical *Worlding* as Public Rhetoric,” *Pre/Text* 20, no. 1-4 (2010): 17 (issues 1-4 reprinted, 2010).

⁵³ Thomas Rickert, *Ambient Rhetoric: The Attunements of Rhetorical Being* (Pittsburgh: Pittsburgh University Press, 2013), 133.

[Ambient rhetoric] deprivileges directly conscious experience and boosts the importance of indirect, unconscious, auratic, osmotic, and ambient phenomena. Put differently, such rhetorical design organizes an experience, not so much to persuade in any direct sense, but to attune and inflect our sense of bodily inhabitation and the cradle of intelligibility within which we comport ourselves.⁵⁴

While the varieties of EDM sampled here are scarcely comparable to ambient music in terms of generic properties, stylized tropes, production techniques, or textural aesthetics, the relations among the experiencing subject, the art, and cultural attitudes toward electronic dance music are nevertheless compatible with Rickert's rhetoric. It is argued throughout his book that an overreliance on deliberation and intentionality in rhetorical studies has necessarily resulted in a selective rendering of the field and its affective capacities that privileges intelligible salience over less manipulable engagements with rhetorics and/or, here, the aesthetics of rhetorics. I sense a related exigency available in, through, and during electronic music given its emphasis on idiosyncrasy in timbre that seems to invite engagement without a requisite of "interpretation" in the sense of recognizing familiar melodic patterns. For me, textural aesthetics of progressivist electronic music cited in this chapter extend the frontier of timbre less to comport listeners toward a worldly or bodily relation than to intervene and pioneer *new* sonic possibilities of information exchange within that world.

Experimentalities, Popularities; Surprises.

Before closing, I would like to make a metadiscursive comment on the aesthetics of experimental electronic musics that have gone under the scholarly headings of "noise," "glitch," and "failure." Readers familiar with such aural arts will be quick to note that the samples of popular EDM cited earlier differ enormously with this trio of experimental strains. My claim is not for a similarity of textural aesthetics, but a compatibility of desires in

⁵⁴ Ibid., 154-155.

the efforts of recent EDM and dubstep in particular. It would be a mistake to class dubstep and other EDM alongside the latest flavor of bubblegum pop for young masses—although it may (d)evolve into that someday not too distant. For now, I simply maintain that relatively popular electronic dance music and dubstep in particular, especially during its emergent phase in the early 2010s, performs a rhetorical tightrope act in mixing appeals to both *stasis* (in terms of meter and rhythm) and *fluctuation* (in timbres and textures). I begin (again), however, with academic usages of the terms “noise,” “glitch,” and “failure” that come from the separate works of Douglas Kahn and Cascone.

My particular interest is the special handling required in light of the semantic ironies that arise when the objects of scholarly discourse are artworks that would hope to be experimental or scramble existing aesthetic classifications. One of the first issues that arises in defining any member in this trio of noise, glitch, and failure as an aesthetic entity is whether any of these can or should be considered “music.” Kahn approaches the issue with the subtlety and care it requires in his 1999 book *Noise Water Meat*. The title is a nod to the unlikely materials and mediums with and in which the Italian Futurists, John Cage, William Burroughs, and others disrupted conventional music of their days by integrating novel and, if you like, raucous production techniques. These artists and thinkers brought noisy sounds like industrial machinery, teapots, and the body’s capacity to register and emanate nonvocal sound to bear on our understandings of musical, aesthetic, and affective experience. Kahn therefore begins instead with “sound” as *any* “auditive phenomena”—real or imagined, audible or dreamed. Apropos of experimental or avant-garde arts movements, then, the first step in conceiving noise as art is to consider this general sense of *sound* as art, if only because made “significant” or “musicalized” by the artists.⁵⁵

⁵⁵ Douglas Kahn, *Noise Water Meat* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1999), 3-4.

In terms of noise, the historical texts most significant for Kahn are the separate compositions of Italian Futurist musicians Francesco Balilla Pratella and Luigi Russolo. Each penning essays in the genre “Manifesto,” both Russolo and Pratella are polemic in bemoaning what they saw as complacency in the textural aesthetics of Italian music in the early part of the twentieth century. In *The Art of Noises*, first published in 1913, Russolo proclaims “musical sound is too limited in its variety of timbres” and urges his contemporaries to diversify the very notion of music: “*we must break out of this limited circle of sounds and conquer the infinite variety of noise-sounds.*”⁵⁶ Russolo is remembered specifically for the construction of his “intonarumori” devices, which he used to create his sounds that generally resemble gas powered lawn equipment (Clip 3.13).

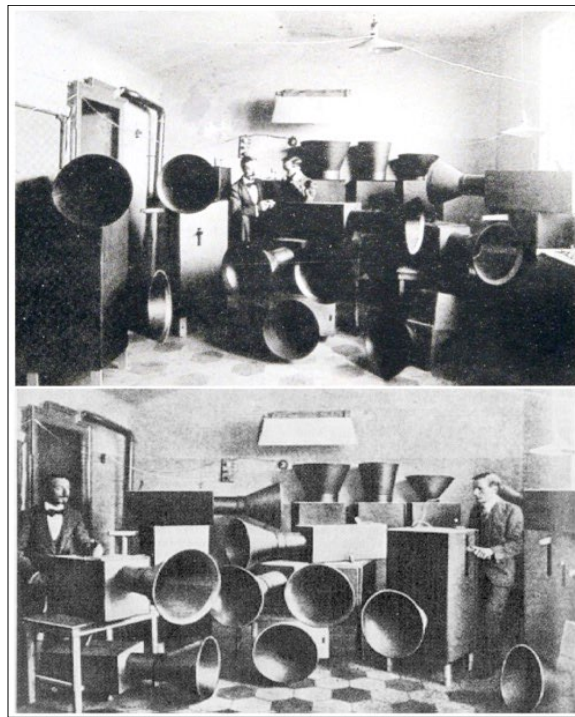


Figure 3.1: Russolo (left), Ugo Piatti, and the Intonarumori (1913). Image is in the Public Domain. First published by Russolo in *The Art of Noises*, 1913. See n. 56.

⁵⁶ Luigi Russolo, *The Art of Noises*, trans. Barclay Brown (1913; New York: Pendragon, 1986), 28 (original emphasis).



Clip 3.13: Rusollo, “Risveglio Di Una Città,” (1913) is in the Public Domain. “UbuWeb Sound - Luigi Russolo,” UbuWeb, accessed January 25, 2015, http://www.ubu.com/sound/russolo_1.html.

Pratella’s “Manifesto for Futurist Musicians” is specifically addressed to “the young, who are necessarily athirst for things that are new, alive, and contemporary.”⁵⁷ The text encourages readers to abandon schools of music and create noise independently because such institutions promote tradition and conservatism in art.⁵⁸ While Pratella and Russolo position themselves as loud and proud—virtuous because disruptive—Kahn points out a (not so?) subtle irony in their posturing: “with so much attendant on noise it quickly becomes evident that noises are too significant to be noises” in the common sense of being unwanted—or, at least, too significant to be thought unwanted by all.⁵⁹ What seems like a straight forward split between the noise and music is, for both the Futurists and Kahn, superfluous—but for different reasons. The conception of noise in an antagonistic or contrarian relationship with music seems to position the former as somehow outside the latter. But one of Kahn’s insights is that the phenomenon of musical noise, especially as it developed from the early part of the century to the experimental movements in America during the 1950s and 1960s, was and is always addressed in terms of attention, salience, and reintegration.

This line between sound and musical sound stood at the center of the existence of avant-garde music, supplying a heraldic moment of transgression and its artistic raw material, a border that had to be

⁵⁷ Francesco Balilla Pratella, “Manifesto for Futurist Musicians,” in *Futurism: An Anthology*, eds. Lawrence Rainey, Christine Poggi, and Laura Wittman (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009), 75.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 79.

⁵⁹ Kahn, *Noise*, 21.

crossed to bring back unexploited resources, restock the coffers of musical materiality, and rejuvenate Western art music.⁶⁰

While zeitgeist among the Futurists and other progressives like John Cage, Fluxus, and Happenings in the mid-twentieth century called for an ambiguous and open ended venture into that which disoriented and unsettled audiences and creators themselves, Kahn suggests they always did so with the intent of returning from the journey to exhibit and thus make salient newfound textures. Such a claim downplays, at least to some extent, the qualitative difference in experimentation of recently popular EDM artists and those who do so for explicitly counter-cultural reasons. The idea of Russolo and Pratella as subversive minoritarians is thus somewhat complicated here since, while cultures are not monoliths, subcultures are cultural.

Yet avoiding the temptation to simply reintegrate the different, new, or experimental into the market, some inevitability, or the merely causal is crucial. All the above may very well apply in various ways and to varying degrees. But the categoricism at the heart of the critical manuscript sells the work short, and this is not so naive and nostalgic an objection as it may seem. The argument is simply that such explanations (categorical and causal) do not account for the impact and affect of the work—subjectively or historically. Liminal aesthetics can and do indeed trigger epiphanic thresholds, paradigmatic shifts, and other transformations in personal but also political and economic precincts as well.

Experimental electronic music (EDM included), for example, seems especially well positioned to investigate relationships users have with technology, aesthetic possibility in the digital, and relations among others, community, and world. While this chapter's choice to focus on electronic dance music is not incidental, those textures and timbres are metaphors for the project's larger effort to rethink ways of treating and dealing with the probable

⁶⁰ Ibid., 69.

inevitability of shock and overhaul of aesthetic and rhetorical practices. For a recent example with an electronic but entirely different sound, consider the exceptional work of Holly Herndon. Her 2015 album *Platform* explicitly invites listeners to relate with the art by oscillating between popular and experimental tendencies before dissolving one into the other.



Clip 3.14: Holly Herndon, “Home,” from *Platform* (London: 4AD / Rvng Intl., 2015).

Note the use of timbre—not narrative, not tonal semiotics, not rhythm—but timbre to explore and relate to a contemporary situation characterized by ubiquitous computing, surveillance, and cloud feudalism. Tracks on this record are occasionally without meter at all, simply embarking on one excursus after another—yet somehow in a way that feels continuous, if not unified. Samples are practically tactile: rich, wet, and prickly.



Clip 3.15: Holly Herndon, “New Ways to Love,” from *Platform* (London: 4AD / Rvng Intl., 2015).

Rhetorical criticism should lend an ear timbre itself. Such an approach allows us to be *with* the information “about” which we supposedly discourse from critical distance implied by the manuscript genre. Surprise: it’s not enough.

Perhaps an irony permeating the present text—positioning glitch and noise as “an aesthetic” to be recognized, held up, critiqued, and/or celebrated—has undermined their disruptive edges. Cascone himself makes an interesting pivot a decade after the publication of his perennial essay in a talk he titles “The Failure of Aesthetics.” He laments what in retrospect seems like the inevitable appropriation of glitch aesthetics by mainstream media:

Today, glitch has become a permanent part of the arsenal of au courant stylistic sound and visual effects invoking edginess for many opening credits of formulaic cyber sci-fi films. The tired “technology run amok,” “gone awry” trope was given a new varnish and retooled for the internet age. . . . As a result, glitch has become a fashion statement detoothed for our safety, commodified for our entertainment consumption.⁶¹

What came about as a direct challenge to grammatical and overly familiar modes of sonic production has itself been grammaticized. Yet by the end of the talk, he rebounds hope, challenging artists to once again move beyond trope and typification to engage in yet more stretching. The appetite for innovation cannot be satisfied by reliance on techniques or streamlined aesthetic tendencies already dominant in electronic music. After all, it’s not as if glitch *as such* is susceptible to cooptation. My attempt here has been to glitch the academic essay for the sake of leaving open not only the aesthetic potentialities of electronic music, but for the purposes of imagining alternative approaches-to and relationships-with scholarly objects in academic writing.

Full Squiggle

I have oscillated between experimental music on the one hand and “popular” dance music on the other in an attempt to demonstrate this apparent dichotomy is false. Still, in light of all the fanfare surrounding EDM cultures, the question remains: just how

⁶¹ Kim Cascone, “The Failure of Aesthetics” (presentation, Share Festival at the Regional Museum of Natural Science, Turin, Italy, November 3, 2010).

experimental are these electronic dance music artists? To what extent are these artists simply catering to popular or general audiences with predefined, albeit freshly minted, expectations?

With its emphasis on textural experience of the art through exploration of idiosyncratic timbre, EDM attempts to satisfy appetites some listeners music might not know they possess. And yet, undeniably, these same fans crave and take comfort in the security of certain tropes, most notably the common 4/4 time sustained in a highly structural fashion. Often the same rhythm is used throughout the entirety of a song or even across whole albums. Hardly experimental(?). I would see this apparent juxtaposition of experimentation and regularity as an attempt to point outside from inside, an attempt to cater to an oscillation of appetites for both stasis and divergence. Not one or the other, but each alternatively as a unified rhetorical gesture.

The larger issue for rhetoricians is a possible shift in mood or approach to objects of study that would be novel or experimental. If we simply reintegrate experimental arts, discourses, rhetorics, or modes of existence into a categorical, intelligible frameworks of analysis we risk downplaying the very lived, affective, and sensible experiences of those howls, yawps, and glitches.

CHAPTER FOUR

INTERLUDE: VIOLENCES WITHIN, WITHOUT, AND WITH LOVE

Imagine such a play. It has gone on for about forty minutes. You know the characters, you have become accustomed to their idiosyncrasies, and you are already tired of their peculiar habits. Now they stand before you with their familiar gestures and it seems nothing interesting is ever going to happen—when suddenly, because of a trick used by the writer, the ‘reality’ you perceived turns out to be a chimaera . . . Looking back you can now say that things were not what they seemed to be, and looking forward with the experience in mind you will regard any clear and definite arrangement with suspicion, on the stage, and elsewhere. Also, your suspicion will be the greater the more solid the initial story seemed to be. This is why I have chosen a scholarly essay as my starting point. —Feyerabend¹

The track of writing is straight and crooked.
—Heraclitus²

Anecdote on Anecdotes. A common technique used in opening academic essays is telling a story that serves as an emblem for some larger issue, argument, or theme. In this chapter, I have written a story about reading Roland Barthes’ work on the ethics and aesthetics of writing. What follows is *not* a full and true account, but, I must warn the reader, it can still be pretty bloody if construed as the kind of scholarly narrative that is, in the end, a series of notes on readings or an account of accountings. I confess: what appears below is the *Greatest Hits* of what was in actuality a series of circlings, abandonments, temperings, erasures, and ugly distillations. I revised it obsessively, cutting what did not “make sense,” adding what seemed to be missing, and refining what some might find unclear. No surprises. Nothing unusual here. In this case, however, the so called “content” made revisions more like ethical stammerings and necessitated a sort of *stretching*. For Barthes, there exists a disjuncture

¹ Paul Feyerabend, *Against Method* (London: Verso, 2010), xvi.

² Attributed to Heraclitus by Hippolytus in *Refutation of All Heresies*, cited in *A Presocratic Reader: Selected Fragments and Testimonia*, 2nd ed., ed. Patricia Curd, trans. Richard D. McKirahan and Patricia Curd (Indianapolis: Hackett, 2011), 48 (22B59).

between the gradience in the aesthetic experience of reading and what seemed to him the “violence” of critical discourse. Although his understanding of the situation is not limited to a simple dualism (aesthetics v. criticism; no blur), a struggle with the apparent double bind is everywhere in his writing, and appears as an ethical imperative. Barthes sought to stretch both our relationship with the critical apparatus and writing itself for the sake of bringing forth an aesthetics of “critical” engagement.

For this reason, the present chapter hopes to do more than deliver an intelligible reading of Barthes’ work. Not “instead,” but in addition to such a reading, I invite the reader to relate to the impossible proposition that propositional content—claims, coherent ideas, explanations—are only part of a grander interpretive event. Prior to or beyond the intelligible content of a piece of scholarly literature, I gesture toward a *relationship* experienced among author, content, and audience. Hence “interpretation” itself is at stake.

The relations among writers, writings, and readers might be romantic, constricting, maddening, effacing, and so on—and in each of these different senses profoundly and even violently affective. While perhaps commonplace, Barthes’ endurance through the implications of such violences are expansive and help us write and teach writing in uniquely ethical and aesthetic ways. His attempt was to reimagine a relationship with language itself as not merely conflictual or paradoxical—enabling while also disabling—but multiple in the sense of possessing capacities in excess of representation and delivery of information. Barthes’ idea of language does not displace so much as surpass its everyday function as a communicative vehicle or transmissive medium for an exchange of ideas by means of symbolic representation. In addition to these sorts of transactional dimensions that help language users meet and explore each other’s ideas, language and writing for Barthes are also radically subjective in a way that makes grammatical arbitration a sort of violent imposition. But it is critical to note that his position runs much deeper than the clichés that individual

subjects interpret objects differently and that our supposedly reliable means for attaining intersubjectivity through cultural codes and grammars are ultimately experienced subjectively (although that is certainly part of it). The gesture is instead related to a practically indefensible hunch that the insecure posture or attitude with which critics sometimes approach proposition, code, and grammar betrays the inadequacy of these means to “capture” to breadth and scope of interpretive events so much as *release* their potentiality.³

One thread running throughout his work was a reconceptualization of the function of writing by stretching the relation between object and interpreting subject.

We often hear it said that it is the task of art to *express the inexpressible*; it is the contrary which must be said (with no intention of paradox): the whole task of art is to *unexpress the expressible*, to kidnap from the world’s language, which is the poor and powerful language of the passions, another speech, an exact speech.⁴

This is one of Barthes’ many dizzying conjectures that is confusing because (only) apparently ironic (unexpress for exactitude?). Importantly, this writing that operates within the apparatus of alphabetic literacy but does not take referentiality as its primary goal is more than simply paradoxical. Although often remembered for his aesthetic jubilations of irrationality associated with “*punctums*” and “third meanings,”⁵ another side of Barthes involves a veritable floundering *within* what he understood as the violence of structural, codified, and disciplinary ways of writing. He surmised the existence of unaccountable, even

³ I am reminded of Kenneth Burke’s contention that “the aesthetic is defensible because it could never triumph” over what he called “the practical,” epitomized by industrialization and, in later writings, the development of nuclear weapons he witnessed in the mid-twentieth century. *Counter-Statement* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1968), 113. This hunch as an “indefensible” underdog in my essay is so because it is inadmissible to logic, codification, and perhaps even recognition.

⁴ Roland Barthes, *Critical Essays*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Hill and Wang, 1982), xvii-xviii.

⁵ In Barthes’ *Camera Lucida*, “punctum” is famously juxtaposed with “studium,” an application or mere “consequence of knowledge” and “training.” Trans. Richard Howard (New York: Hill and Wang, 1982), 25; 26. The comparatively strange experience of a “punctum” involves not interpretive mastery but an encounter that “shoots out . . . like an arrow, and pierces” the beholder of an image (ibid., 26). “The Third Meaning” is introduced in an essay of the same name and distinguished from “informational” and “symbolic” levels of literal and figural meanings. Barthes, “The Third Meaning,” in *Image Music Text*, trans. Stephen Heath (New York: Hill and Wang, 1997), 52-68. At issue here is “the signifier” itself, “not the signified”; the event of “reading[,] . . . not intellection” (ibid., 53).

unintelligible experiences brought on by reading and writing, and a conflictual anxiety on this point is manifest in nearly all his books, lurking here and there in even his most unbridled texts. It is specifically this struggling with violence apparently inherent in critical discourse that is *the* issue on which we should focus if we want to find a writing, a rhetoric, an aesthetics, an inquiry that would temper itself against its own calcification of the movement that is reading, writing, and learning. And, self-conscious though he is—stammering in “a discomfort [he] had always suffered from: the uneasiness of being a subject torn between two languages, one expressive, the other critical.”⁶ And Barthes does struggle, “none the less.”⁷

At issue is a subtle inkling, a barely identifiable sense that something huge about the experience of the text is lost precisely in the instance we think we’re getting close. “In this article” and beyond it, I tell a story about Barthes as consciously *within* and yet anxiously desirous of being *without* structure, code, and system. He lived this struggle everywhere in his writing, institutional life, and in his own mind against what he names this “violence.” As we will see, his response neither resignation nor retaliation, but instead a strange *love* for an inexhaustible potentiality of readings. The primary means by which he pursues this kind of dwelling within structure involves an emphasis of *sensibility* in addition to *intelligibility*.

⁶ Barthes, *Camera*, 8.

⁷ Roland Barthes, *Writing Degree Zero*, trans. Annette Lavers and Colin Smith (New York: Hill and Wang, 1994), 88. The citation is brought in here, out of its context, where Barthes closes perhaps his most difficult text by acknowledging “Revolution must of necessity borrow from what it wants to destroy” (*ibid.*, 87). As Michael North observes, revolution as a figure of the new comes with a host of ironies and other problems. *Novelty: A History of The New* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2013), 41-47. Yet while Barthes is perfectly aware of such difficulties, his struggle is nevertheless far from over. In any case, my purpose here is to establish a stubbornness—even willful naivety.

Reading and Writing Barthes

The Pleasure of the Text and *Writing Degree Zero* offer some of Barthes' most explicit articulations on the matter of violence, which he felt was, in some ways, inextricable from the proposition itself. *Pleasure of the Text* associates the experience of its title with the structural satisfactions of meaning making in the usual sense of decoding symbolic information. Something else, however, lies beyond this everyday mode of reading; he names it "*jouissance*," an essentially untranslatable affective experience in for which "bliss" stands throughout the Miller translation. Miller's important prefatory note to the text alerts us that this bliss in French is not a state but an "action" that is explicitly erotic and with which we should associate orgasm.⁸ Barthes' appropriation is only partly metaphorical, as we come to learn that his desired *jouissance* is not only an emotional mood and hence explicitly associated with the body as opposed to a supposedly distinct mind, but also suggestive of a transient singularity we might juxtapose with the finality of the proposition, a basic unit of scholarly discourse: "the Sentence is hierarchical: it implies subjections, subordinations, internal reactions."⁹ For Barthes, such a sentence necessitates a tear from the kaleidoscopic motion¹⁰ of mental activity: an operationalization, a seizure from an analog constant. Barthes continues: "practice, here, is very different from theory. Theory (Chomsky) says that the sentence is potentially infinite (infinitely catalyzable), but practice always obliges the sentence to end."¹¹ We are now beyond the question of whether writing is an inadequate means of

⁸ Roland Barthes, *The Pleasure of the Text*, trans. Richard Miller (New York: Hill and Wang, 1975), v-viii.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 50.

¹⁰ In a coy interview, Barthes remarks that were he to write a novel, the effort would be less like a departure from criticism than the movement of the singular and yet amorphous toy: "I prefer the play of the kaleidoscope: you give it a tap, and little bits of colored glass form a new pattern." From "The Play of the Kaleidoscope," in *The Grain of the Voice: Interviews 1962-1980*, trans. Linda Coverdale (Berkeley: The University of California Press, 1991), 204.

¹¹ Barthes, *Pleasure*, 50 (Barthes' parentheses).

representation; the issue is instead a grander aesthetic posturing, and a sort of relationality among writers, writing, and content.

Now is a good time to recall that the status, nature, and goals of Barthes' work as scholarship have long been a subject of critical controversy. As Steven Ungar remarks,

[t]he obvious difficulty with writings since *The Pleasure of the Text* lies in the impossibility of determining whether they are to be read as texts of pleasure or bliss. To the extent that they succeed in transmitting a set of messages to a public of readers, they function within the mode of articulate pleasure and rely on determinable norms such as those of verbal meaning and implicit genre.¹²

Tough to shake those! But as Ungar goes on to explain, the desired effect is not so much to complete departure from transmission so much as qualitative augmentation or enhancement of transmission. Read literally, it is true that in some places Barthes sounds an either/or absolutist. Passages in *Writing Degree Zero*, for instance, seem wholly uninterested in communication itself when he dreams of a poetics that is “without foresight or stability of intention, and thereby so opposed to the social function of language.”¹³ But this apparently noncommunicative writing is only so if we approach it with a posture that expects clarity, the lucid disclosure of content, and the alignment of the reader's intentions with those of the writer. This is all good and well (we always remain *within*), however, Barthes asks us look not only *at* and *through* language, as Richard Lanham would have us do, but also *beyond*, to its horizon of potentiality: “[e]ach poetic word is thus an unexpected object, a Pandora's box from which fly out all the potentialities of language; it is therefore produced and consumed

¹² Stephen Ungar, “RB: The Third Degree,” review of *Roland Barthes*, by Roland Barthes, *Diacritics* 7, no. 1 (1977): 76.

¹³ Barthes, *Writing Degree Zero*, 48.

with a peculiar curiosity, a kind of sacred relish.”¹⁴ Gravy poetics. If asocial, this kind of writing is so only under a particular rubric of logic and representation that have historically arbitrated scholastic writing. But as Paul de Man points out in a posthumously released essay he originally drafted in 1972, Barthes work is to be “read and understood as an intellectual adventure rather than as a scientifically motivated development of methodology.”¹⁵ Texts like *Pleasure* and *Degree Zero* offer neither transparent content nor method but a hybrid of the two, each being stretched into the other.

Reading and writing in Barthes is associated less with calculated direction than impulse, contingency, and latencies. Best, he says, if while reading one “need[s] to look up often, to listen to something else. I am not necessarily *captivated* by the text of pleasure; it can be an act that is slight, complex, tenuous, almost scatterbrained: a sudden movement of the head like a bird who understands nothing of what we hear, who hears what we do not understand.”¹⁶ Again we see Barthes stretching the relationship between reader and critical text, though now in a different way. Here we have what feels like a hopeful glimpsing, if you like, a curious register of distant sounds in the woods at dark—the ripple of some remote tremor quietly rippling over some faint ledge in the topography of the cortex. It is a strange listening that seems to fuse active and passive states. An aestheticism for Jay Gatsby, maybe, who held “some heightened sensitivity to the promises of life, as if he were related to one of those intricate machines that register earthquakes ten thousand miles away.”¹⁷ An aesthetic of subtly and gradience as an alternative the force of direct broadcast.

¹⁴ Ibid. Cf. Richard Lanham, *The Electronic Word: Democracy, Technology, and the Arts* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1993), 5-6; 80-82. Additionally, this is why Gregory L. Ulmer makes much of Barthes in “The Object of Post-Criticism,” which posits a new kind of academic writing inspired by and predicated on the associational linkages of collage and montage. See the essay in *The Anti-Aesthetic: Essays on Postmodern Culture*, ed. Hal Foster (New York: The New Press, 1983), 83-110. This essay was discussed at length in Chapter 3, “Drop,” above.

¹⁵ Paul de Man, “Roland Barthes and Limits of Structuralism,” *Yale French Studies* 77 (1900): 179.

¹⁶ Barthes, *Pleasure*, 24-25 (original emphasis).

¹⁷ F. Scott Fitzgerald, *The Great Gatsby* (New York: Scribner, 1995), 6.

In his curious third-person autobiography *Roland Barthes*, he describes himself thusly: “[l]iking to find, to write *beginnings*, he tends to multiply this pleasure: that is why he writes in fragments . . . (but he doesn’t like the ends: the risk of the rhetorical clause is too great).”¹⁸ From Dutch, “clause” refers to a governing stipulation or law, and is often associated with contracts. The autobiographer seems fear the proposition itself. One immediately notices the extensive use of parentheses in his texts that serve as literal and figurative meanderings, driftings, cruisings away at the both the sentence and, effectively, the global levels of his writings that would otherwise be a series of “regular” propositions, all contributory to some great finality. Colons, often several in single “sentence,” also appear in Barthes and effect a series of extensions—leaps without proper bridges—or perhaps a series of anticipations strung one after another. What interests me here is not *what* Barthes is discussing, but *how* he is doing it—and yet, in such composition he complicates the distinction between those two levels of analysis, implying that the *activity* is itself the message.

It is a tricky tightrope walk, and neither difficulty nor irony is lost on Barthes. The point I want to stress is that he does *not* just exit out some magical trapdoor or aesthetic rabbit hole of delights. Instead, he remains very much situated *within* while nevertheless desirous of being without discipline, culture, and formality. I imagine Barthes as a yogi rather than sublimating into thin air.¹⁹ After all, “how can a text,” he asks, “which consists of language, be outside languages? . . . How can the text ‘get itself out’ out of the war of fictions, of sociolects?” Answer: “by a gradual labor of extenuation,”²⁰ a peeling away at the text to subject it to a liminal state in which its ontological status wavers.

¹⁸ Roland Barthes, *Roland Barthes*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Hill and Wang, 2010), 94 (original emphasis).

¹⁹ A colleague once remarked that because his ideas seem so fantastical as to bluff transcendence beyond the formative pressures of his cultural and historical situation, reading Barthes was like having a gnome come out and “dance on the [seminar] table for awhile.”

²⁰ Barthes, *Pleasure*, 30.

The issue is addressed somewhat differently in *Writing Degree Zero*, although there again we see Barthes in a conflicted, dynamic tension over criticism as an apparatus that comes with unacknowledged tolls. Yet this apparent inevitability is highlighted only in anticipation of movement beyond it, toward a relatively flexible writing. In one of the early *Zero* sections, for example, we get another set of slippery claims on the differences between speech and writing:

All modes of writing have in common the fact of being 'closed' and thus different from spoken language. Writing is in no way an instrument for communication, it is not an open route through which there passes only the intention to speak. A whole disorder flows through speech and gives it this self-devouring momentum which keeps it in a perpetually suspended state. Conversely, writing is a hardened language which is self-contained and is in no way meant to deliver to its own duration a mobile series of approximations.²¹

Alongside the passages cited earlier, pronouncements like this one reflect a career-long ambivalence in his responses to a plurality “writings” and “communications,” especially during his well known transformative period prompted by the limits of structuralism.²² Some varieties or perhaps variations on *relationships with* writing are dysfunctional and constricting, some disperse orgasmic delight, and still as yet unimagined others Barthes seems to await in hope. This last passage feels more like a lamentation than report, but the differences between the several writings and communications become indistinguishable when on the very next page he says that “writing, on the contrary [to speech], is always rooted in something beyond language, it develops like a seed, not like a line, it manifests an essence of a secret, it is an anti-communication, it is intimidating.”²³ Although the itinerary in *Writing Degree Zero*'s table of contents is designed to respond to several kinds of writing

²¹ Ibid., 19.

²² For an illuminating discussion of this transformation, see Michael Halley, “Argo Sum,” *Diacritics* 12, no. 4 (1982): 69-79. “What Barthes attends to is [the text's] coming into meaning, the dynamics of signification it effects as he reads it, and he is thus liberated from the domineering and didactic presence of the classically conceived text too full with an already elaborated and rigidified meaning meant to be thoroughly understood as such.” Ibid., 74. Such accords with Barthes' emphasis on the primacy of the experience of reading.

²³ Barthes, *Writing Degree Zero*, 20.

(“Political”; “Novel”; “Poetic”; “Revolutionary”; “Bourgeois,” and so on), the weavings and contradictions within even individual chapters coupled with what seem like rather sweeping claims testify to the fact *writing is contradictory and more so multiple*—within and without the grammar and stability ascribed to disciplinarily sanctioned texts.²⁴

As critic, Barthes wants to recall an forgotten epistemological leap taken by writing when it operates in this “hardened” capacity. He observes that “power, or the shadow cast by power, always ends in creating an axiological writing, in which the distance which usually separates fact from value disappears within the very space of the word, which is given at once as description and as judgement.”²⁵ A eufunctional and formulaic writing’s rhetorical inner workings that make possible the very constitution of value are barely perceptible, unnecessary; simply execute the program. The cause and effect of this cyclical and self-reinforcing composition is, in a certain sense, a totalitarian discourse “in which *definition* . . . becomes the sole content of all language, [and] there are no more words without values attached to them, so that finally the function of writing is to cut out one stage of a process: there is no more lapse of time between naming and judging, and the closed character of language is perfected.”²⁶ We have come a long way from writing as an activity of dispersion, but as Barthes makes (un)clear, there are multiple degrees of writing distinguished by the relative interpretive force they command and demand.

Back in *Pleasure*, Barthes writes that text of bliss “imposes a state of loss,” and “unsettles the reader’s historical, cultural, psychological assumptions, the consistency of his tastes, values, memories, [and] brings to a crisis his relation with language.”²⁷ Here we have a relatively open composition, yet one that can hardly be described as a cozy alternative to the

²⁴ In her preface to the text, Susan Sontag notes Barthes’ ambivalence apropos of such generic “myths” as a potential source of confusion. *Ibid.*, xx.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 20.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 24.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 14.

rigid stoppage we saw in *Writing Degree Zero*. Here we come upon another violence, one for which Barthes becomes a glutton. This alternative violence is vulnerable—an engagement with a text that reaches out and touches the supposed subject in an uncanny fashion.²⁸ Interpretive machinery stalls and the *pathos* of the textual encounter widens, not displacing so much as augmenting or exceeding its *logos* in such a way as to release a sequestered dynamism.

Before closing this section, I want to return to *Writing Degree Zero* and its essay “Is there any Poetic Writing?” to emphasize the meta/physical weight of this second violence. Under the heavy handedness of closure and the name, referents are supposed to be recalled and served up for the purposes discoursing. “For what does the rational economy of language mean,” asks Barthes, “if not that Nature is a plenum, that it can be possessed, that it does not shy away or cover itself in shadows, but is in its entirety subjected to the toils of language?”²⁹ Setting up a distinction between a linguistic “prose” and “poetry,” Barthes flips the script with this second violence: “classical conceits involve relations, not words: they belong to an art of expression, not of invention. The words, here, do not, as they later do [in what Barthes calls a “modern,” preferable poetics], thanks to a kind of violent and unexpected abruptness, reproduce the depth and singularity of an individual experience.”³⁰ When poetics departs from the differential network of language as a system of differences, referentiality is necessarily decentered; in fact, “this implies a reversal in our knowledge of Nature” and our will to seize and represent it.³¹ A tidal wave looms and crests: Barthes describes “the bursting upon us of the poetic word”—“words adorned with all the *violence of their irruption*”; “this erect discourse is full of terror.”³² Here we have a poetics wherein a

²⁸ Recall that *punctum* inflicts a “wound.” Barthes, *Camera*, 26.

²⁹ Barthes, *Writing Degree Zero*, 49.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 45.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 49.

³² *Ibid.*, 50 (emphasis added).

violence is done independent of and perhaps *unto* the reading subject, which rephrases that second violence as a relatively affective enterprise. Displacing the ego that would systematize the text, this violence induces a state of astonishment—a surprise: awe at the power of poetics to create a multilateral intimacy between world and reader. It is for such a relation in journals and classrooms that I advocate.

Importantly, the mood of this encounter is liminal: the will of the subject to locate and verify intelligibilities, and sense gives way to sensation. We have here an “erotics of reading,” perhaps, “a critical *practice*, a perspective, an attitude, not a critical methodology or technique.”³³ While the reader would be engaged, she would be so without paradigmatic directive—not because transcendental, but because surprised at inadequacy of familiar narratives and the necessity of a constitutive improvisation to make the text new, different, singular. In the eponymous “autobiography,” Barthes associates an active erotization with a curious process of *making* distinct from identification:

It is not the *erotic*, but *erotization* that has a positive value. Erotization is a production of the erotic: light, diffuse, mercurial; which circulates without coagulating, a multiple and mobile flirtation links the subject to what passes, pretends to cling, then lets go for something else (and then, sometimes, this variable landscape is severed, sliced through by a sudden immobility: love).³⁴

This sense of astonishment as baffling “love” is especially interesting since it characterizes a desired *attitude* or *posture* to safeguard against the violence of intelligibility so as to unleash that second violence lurking in the latent, productive capacities of the subject. Similarly, Barthes concludes but more so rebegins his study of images in *Camera Lucida* with a relatedly ironic embrace, sensing “a sort of link (or knot) between Photography, madness, and something whose name I did not know. I began by calling it: the pangs of love.”³⁵ Love,

³³ Brian Ott, “(Re)Locating Pleasure in Media Studies: Toward an Erotics of Reading,” *Communication and Critical/Cultural Studies* 1, no. 2 (2004): 202 (original emphasis).

³⁴ Barthes, *Roland Barthes*, 62 (original emphasis).

³⁵ Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, 116.

perhaps, for that which is necessarily cut in the violence of declaration: alternative, idiosyncrasy, supplement, enhancement, juxtaposition, surprise, and so on. Such a posture would embrace a sort of interpretive vulnerability for the sake of an epistemic ethics, given that “[o]bliging the loving and terrified consciousness” is prerequisite “to confront . . . the wakening of intractable reality.”³⁶ Stated thusly, Barthes’ project fuses aesthetics, ethics, and epistemology as he stretches one violence into another. He blurs not only the status of texts, but also his own as critic.

Impostors

A curious fragment in *Pleasure of the Text* with the heading “Nihilism” explains that, for Barthes, such an orientation is not a passive or careless attitude, but rather a sort of active unraveling or exposure of vulnerabilities during which “superior goals depreciate.” Yet he distinguishes this processual nihilism from antagonism: “[h]ow [to] *install* the deficiency of any superior value? Irony? It always proceeds from a *sure* site. Violence? Violence too is a superior value, and among the best coded.”³⁷ If this nihilism peels away at standardized knowings, doings, and makings, such an affront is not itself violent, nor should it be construed as contrarian or even oppositional. Conflict cannot help, after all, since it only institutes a new paradigm, valuation, or code.³⁸ Barthes is not so much interested in a refuting or replacing so much as spinning and stretching so as to reveal an original violence of undecidability. For me, the most interesting thing about this fragment is where he goes next in search of a tactical bliss: “the most consistent nihilism is perhaps *masked*: in some

³⁶ Ibid., 119.

³⁷ Barthes, *Pleasure*, 44 (original emphasis).

³⁸ I am reminded here of Barthes’ maxim, “[d]ifference is not conflict,” which poses a relative and/or pluralist reading. “To the Seminar,” in *The Rustle of Language*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Hill and Want, 1986), 334.

way *interior* to institutions, to conformist discourse, to apparent finalities.”³⁹ Active “nihilism” in hopes of bliss here takes on the role of smuggled contagion or a sneaky insider job.

With this in mind, I observe this sort of limit-work from the inside-out underway in rhetoric, composition, and feminist studies in the innovative work of Lynn Worsham, Cynthia Haynes, and Gayatri Spivak. I read each of these thinkers as enabled but also disabled by their disciplinary apparatuses, and therefore consciously seeking a way to live within but to minimize epistemic violence. In short, impostors I admire. These three women practice an attitude or desire to augment prevailing methodological assumptions as a response to perceived violences in disciplinary procedures. Impostor posture.

Worsham addresses the phallogocentric quality of hermeneutics itself and the problems that situation creates for philosophers who would be feminists. Noticing that traditional philosophy pretends to be “the regulative discourse on discourse” and “launders the practices that wash the body in a sense of its own positivity,”⁴⁰ Worsham asks how women oppressed by a historically masculinist tradition can rely on its assumptions for feminist progress. Epistemologically, she doubts “the discourse of hermeneutics and its promise to unlock the secrets of the human spirit across temporal and cultural distance or to excavate a truth hidden deep within the individual” from an apparently transcendent position.⁴¹ Insofar as hermeneutics create “understanding in terms of the code of domination and submission,”⁴² the resultant knowledge is *pornographic* in the sense of

³⁹ Barthes, *Pleasure* 44 (original emphasis).

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 41.

⁴¹ Lynn Worsham, “Reading Wild, Seriously: Confessions of an Epistemophiliac,” *Rhetoric Society Quarterly* 22, no. 1 (1992): 45.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 55.

emphasizing the “penetrability and accessibility” of the truth.⁴³ In a naive extreme, hermeneutics becomes a kind of epistemological “rape.”⁴⁴

Like Barthes, Worsham favors an eroticized reading that acknowledges the interpretive energy within the realm of the subject instead of an exterior hermeneutics that domineers its subject into doing its service. Here a crucial distinction is necessary between the erotic and the pornographic: “Simone de Beauvoir defines eroticism as ‘a movement toward the Other.’ The pornographic, which is often mistakenly defined as the erotic, actually aborts that movement and instead eroticizes a hierarchical relation of dominance,” and usually the subjugation of women⁴⁵. I recall here Barthes’ aversion to another sexualized violence. His suggestion was that the ultimate pleasure is not in seizure but rather its possibility: “is not the most erotic portion of the body *where the garment gapes?*”⁴⁶ His aesthetic is one of “intermittence,” “flashing,” and “appearance-as-disappearance”⁴⁷—erotization precisely in *not* exposing, *not* penetrating; rather, a flirtation with virtuality.

Critically, Worsham knows her move in the very structure she “confesses” to professionally reside within cannot be a simple counterpoint against it.⁴⁸ She seeks, instead, a confession from hermeneutics itself. In asking hermeneutics what its logical apparatus thinks about its own claim that the supposed space of its epistemic activity occurs *in-between* subject and object and therefore exterior to each produces an interesting result: “though hermeneutics claims the in-between as its rightful place—mediating between subject the Self/Same and the Other, or more originally, between gods and mortals—the Self/Same is clearly the master of the hermeneutical situation, for once again the discourse of the Other

⁴³ Ibid., 46.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 59.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 44.

⁴⁶ Barthes, *Pleasure*, 8 (original emphasis).

⁴⁷ Ibid., 10.

⁴⁸ Worsham, “Wild, Seriously,” 43.

must pass through, and submit to, this discourse to achieve intelligibility.”⁴⁹ Worsham helps us understand just how removed the epistemology of hermeneutics is from something like Barthes’ “variable landscape” of transient associations and what now seems like the flux of nature. Heavy handed violence can only produce understandings that flatter the ego, and Worsham therefore concludes brilliantly in a way that Barthes would have liked: “intimacy is not identity. One respects difference; the other annihilates it.”⁵⁰

“Offshore,” Cynthia Haynes is struggling with the overvaluation of our “exhaustive search for the explicable in the inexplicable—the why, the reason, the rationale” in composition pedagogies,⁵¹ the bread and butter of English departments widely understood as the university’s means of establishing argumentation skills featuring logical proofs and demonstrations. Writing in the *Journal of Advanced Composition*, Haynes intends to “draw us away from the shoreline of philosophical reason and its alluring beacon of argumentation” and point our sterns toward “abstraction. In casting off from *ground* metaphysics (a difficult and dissuasive move), we occupy a paradoxical position; we must stand with one foot on land and one foot on our vessel. The release—the letting go (*gelassenheit*)—shifts our stance in relation to *footing* in general.”⁵² Haynes is within and without when pursuing the Heideggarian suggestion that “philosophy, as a thing of reason, is the result of an oblivion of the fact that things do not depend on human justification, that they emerge before us on their own.”⁵³ Her suggestion is that the result of such ignorance and arrogance is writing curriculums emphasizing logic—always already ideological—believe the capacity for thought.⁵⁴

⁴⁹ Ibid., 54.

⁵⁰ Ibid., 60.

⁵¹ Cynthia Haynes, “Writing Offshore: The Disappearing Coastline of Composition Theory,” *Journal of Advanced Composition* 23, no. 4 (2003): 668.

⁵² Ibid., 671.

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ Ibid., 679.

Such a structure, of course, requires a structurality or scaffolding with which reason can simultaneously support and reaffirm itself as a governing epistemological principle. Inspired by the conceptual work of architect Lebbeus Woods—much of it never actually constructed—however, Haynes would have us “step back and view the *unground* (der *Abgrund*—abyss) beneath the structures, and to sketch a *rhetoric of the unbuilt*,”⁵⁵ or as yet unimagined structuralities.

The strength of this approach is that it gives instructors and their students a post-philosophical license to experiment with alternative modalities of thinking that are not beholden to rubrics of reason or logical proof and act instead on the basis of sensation. A rhetoric of the *unbuilt* therefore “suggests a mode of transgressing threshold that is between inside and outside”⁵⁶—which I take to emblematic of the way in which Haynes herself is stretching what composition is or could be. Her essay as an impostor text might callback Barthes’ involuntary “amassing of minor voices coming to me from the outside: I myself was a public square, a *sook*; through me passed words, tiny syntagms, bits of formulae, and *no sentence formed*, as though that were the law of such a language.”⁵⁷ In this strange metaphor Barthes becomes a hypothetical blueprint for an unbuilt bricolage structure, or perhaps more precisely a structure that promotes the authoring of unbuilt bricolage assemblages. The experience (encounter?) is less a writing in the traditional authorial sense than a *channeling*, less dictation than cataclysm. It would be a radical receptivity—an open door policy for thinking or, better, *ways* of thinking.

⁵⁵ Ibid., 667-668 (original emphasis).

⁵⁶ Ibid., 688. Haynes continues: “Let me wear the moniker of irresponsibility if it means divesting oneself of responsibility in order to probe the depths of a more responsive relation to students, to each other, and to each *Other*. It is time to put off the mantle of *autochthonous* authority, to disavow our discourse of desired roots from which we erroneously believe we are giving our students the gift of *ground*” (ibid., 674).

⁵⁷ Barthes, *Pleasure*, 49.

Like Barthes and Worsham, Haynes is quick to point out that this movement “is not as simple as countering the *ground* with *air* or *water*,”⁵⁸ but instead involves *working within* while pushing, stretching, striving to be *without*. She therefore proposes “(t)reason,” an compositional exercise that involves “putting *legitimacy* under quarantine (as we saw in Heidegger) in order to pressurize the realm of decidability so cleanly ruled by the lockstep ‘jackboots’ of reason.”⁵⁹ Under such a heading, the emphasis on reason and proof in mainstream composition pedagogies and curriculums is *not* negatively deconstructed, but perpetually *troped*: “displacing argument is rhetoric’s supreme task; disinventing *logos* is rhetoric’s sacred duty.”⁶⁰

Gayatri Spivak in her work on feminism and deconstruction, more than any other writer, has helped me understand how the *movement* of poststructuralism can be understood as a useful tactic for those like Barthes. She offers a hugely important corrective or refocusing on that which is accomplished by the processual unfolding of deconstructive reading in pointing out that “when it is understood only as a narrative, deconstruction is only the picture of an impossibility” and not the *activity* which brings it about.⁶¹ I associate this activity—which is the opposite of destructive—with the emphasis on the kinds of productive reading practices and postures Barthes advocated. As Spivak makes clear, it is not a question of simply declaring oneself free from strictures or structures, but a labor struggle with the regime of intelligibility: “if one looks at the deconstructive *morphology* (rather than simply reading it as the narrative of the decentered subject), then one is obliged to notice that deconstruction has always been about the limits of epistemology”⁶² as opposed to

⁵⁸ Haynes, “Offshore,” 694 (original emphasis).

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 704 (original emphasis).

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 707 (original emphasis).

⁶¹ Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, “Feminism and Deconstruction, Again: Negotiating with Unacknowledged Masculinism,” in *Between Feminism and Psychoanalysis*, ed. Teresa Brennan (London: Routledge, 1989), 208.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 209 (original emphasis).

simply jumping over the fence. Again: “it is not a matter of going to the outside, but being an outsider while inside.”⁶³

This association of deconstruction with epistemic thresholds calls to mind Barthes’ movement in his essay “From Work to Text.” In it, he describes a reading wherein, first of all, “the Text is not to be thought of as an object that can be computed,” but instead an object with which to commence relation: “*the Text is experienced only in an activity of production.*”⁶⁴ Compositions that deliberately set out to provoke these kinds of experiences might be a sort of “limit-work,” which for Barthes involves an irrational and strange aesthetic that “goes to the limit of the rules of enunciation (rationality, readability, etc.)”⁶⁵ to produce not gobbledegook for its own sake, but a kind of un/intelligible stretching of effect and affect. Hence, such an *activity* might, as Spivak phrases it, “open up a text towards an as yet unknown horizon so that it can be of use without excuse. Let us now call this: negotiating with structures of violence”⁶⁶—rather than simply opting out in fantasy or mirroring the terror of the structure in a contrarian assault. Not despite but precisely because of the political significance, Spivak’s posture takes on an empathetic tone in this “giving of assent without excuse, so much that one inhabits its [hegemonic] discourse—a short word for this might be ‘love.’”⁶⁷

⁶³ Victor J. Vitanza, *Negation, Subjectivity, and The History of Rhetoric* (Albany: The State University of New York Press, 1997), 19.

⁶⁴ Barthes, “From Work to Text,” in *Image Music Text*, trans. Stephen Heath (New York: Hill and Wang, 1997), 156; 157 (original emphasis).

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 157.

⁶⁶ Spivak, “Negotiating,” 212.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 213.

Full Squiggle

Is the present text complicit in the exact violence it hopes to exceed? Of course, but “is that all?”⁶⁸ As Barthes would, I hope to have attested to the desirability and necessity stretching the manuscript so as to register on both intelligible but also sensible—or, better, oscillation between these two poles, each false and naive as absolutes. What *opening* Barthes accomplishes for the aesthetics of reading and writing, I, along with Worsham, Haynes, Spivak would hope for rhetoric and composition. In “closing,” then, I offer the following reopening: in response to violence—aesthetic, epistemic, pedagogical, gendered, or otherwise—more than reactionary critique and more than paradoxical acknowledgements of complicity are required. Instead, we ought to take up an alternative relation to intelligibility itself by ceding and unleashing its aesthetic affordances beyond form, including conceptuality and proposition itself. Instead: implosion.

⁶⁸ Barthes, “Third,” 53.

CHAPTER FIVE

BRIDGE TO PEDGAOGY

[Interviewer:] What is the relationship between culture and art?

[Jean Dubuffet:] I think art is creation . . . and culture is creation done, already done—creation of the past. And I'm sure that studying the things already done is a danger for artists, because what is wanted from an artist is [that] he [*sic*] invent new things, not to confirm what has already been done by others in the past. He has *la contrevie*, he must do something new.¹

For me, it is rhetoric's attention to invention that differentiates it from all other practices and fields of [English] study. —Sharon Crowley²

A piece titled “Learning to See Data” in the *New York Times* from last year describes collaboration at Albert Einstein College of Medicine among geneticists and artist Daniel Kohn, whose painting and installations explore themes of science and information. For about 250 words, it sounds like popular media is going to hear what the arts have to say about the project of human knowledge in a way that surpasses the superficial, sentimental, and ornamental lip services often paid to arts and humanities by even their own universities. Too soon, however, readers learn the piece is a missed opportunity of an article, replete with an embarrassingly facile replay of warm and fuzzy clichés that ultimately do more harm than good for the humanities so often framed as needing defense and justification.

The gist of the report is that scientists are drowning in their own massive data sets, and Kohn's role is to propose alternative ways of approaching and visualizing the

¹ *The Artist's Studio: Jean Dubuffet*, directed by Michael Blackwood (New York: Michael Blackwood Productions, 1973), online video trailer, <https://youtu.be/v0HvEJnyRJo>.

² Sharon Crowley, “Composition Is Not Rhetoric,” *Enculturation* 5, no. 1 (Fall 2003), http://enculturation.gmu.edu/5_1/crowley.html. The context of the quotation concerns various emphases of instruction in Departments of English.

information. The artist as token is brought in for “expert” analysis, watered down and dreadfully misrepresentative though it seems—“What if the data were turned sideways? Or upside down?”³—but only before the heavy lifting. When a visualization strategy seems to make data comprehensible, sensory-perceptual triggers and cues observed during successful absorption can be identified and operationalized for instructional purposes, the ultimate goal being to “fast-forward a person’s gut instincts both in physical fields, like flying an airplane, and more academic ones, like deciphering advanced chemical notation.”⁴ By noticing trends in “gut reactions”⁵ to everything from the instrumental cluster of the cockpit to “aestheticized” visualizations of genetic code, the team is able to adjust the presentation and streamline apprehension and accessibility. It is a basically Aristotelian process of accounting for means of persuasion.

Although researchers hope to stockpile visualization-to-body-to-information transfer strategies, “for now it’s a lot easier to invite a visually creative expert over to the lab to see what he or she can add.”⁶ But worry not. We won’t have to rely on thinking forever. The popularized version of scientific disclosure will come up with a fix for that too:

The most important question when dealing with reams of digital data is not whether perceptual skills will be centrally important. The question is when, and in what domain, analysts will be able to build a reliable catalog of digital patterns that provide meaningful “clues” to the underlying reality, whether it’s the effect of a genetic glitch, a low-pressure zone or a drop in the yen.⁷

Un/Fortunately, this is not about some sentimental appeal to “the gut” we only need “for now.” This is about being existentially involved with the invention and ongoing maintenance of information and knowledge itself—nothing less is at stake. The use of the phrase

³ Benedict Carey, “Learning to See Data,” *New York Times*, March 27, 2015, <http://www.nytimes.com/2015/03/29/sunday-review/learning-to-see-data.html>. What appears here is not a quotation from the artist but a hypothetical attribution to the artist by the writer. I encourage the reader to view Kohn’s work at <http://kohnworkshop.com>, where anyone can see the relationships with information in, for starters, the metaphors and color of his work are a far cry from simple rotation.

“underlying reality” reveals ignorance of what Kohn, the arts, and humanities in general offer in the writer’s own concluding paragraph, where the artist explicitly states the matter is one of “frameworks of recognition; how you choose to look, rather than what you’re trying to see.”⁸ Instead, the quotation serves only as a misconstrued soundbyte, a temporary bow on this neat and tidy chapter in a naive chronicle of human progression toward omniscience and the elimination of surprise. It is a dangerous simplification of both the arts and the sciences.

Ideas and arguments about the function of the humanities, how they constitute or enhance education, and their “worth”—economic and otherwise—are typically fraught with overaggressions, silent treatments, and/or defensive tonalities that make substantive dialog unnecessarily difficult, nostalgic, and, at least to some outsiders, quaint. Reliance on such strategies diminishes the rhetorical effectiveness of associated arguments, and besides, misrepresent the point: the relationship between the aesthetic and the generalized progression of human cultures—both its successes and failures—is perfectly serious business. The view that arts and humanities are “creative” while disciplines like engineering and sciences are not is, to put it gently, uninformed.⁹ Each has so much to learn from the other(ed) that the factionalization is disgraceful. Tightening economic conditions beget institutional compromises, politicizations, and ideological scapegoatings, but let us not forget: lines drawn between narrative and demonstration (aesthetic/epistemic, feeling/thinking, experiencing/knowing, whatever you like) are themselves narratives, and it’s not just a theoretical point. False dichotomies such as these make shrinking the arts and humanities

⁴⁻⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Students in my courses report and appeal to this distinction-identification semester after semester. What creativity “is” *is*, of course, a notoriously difficult question presenting the same difficulties we saw above with surprise and the new as referents. But I might posit that one relevant skill or attribute is the ability to relate to information in alternative ways, and to generate or invent new relations altogether.

seem not only expedient, but necessary for social progress. However, such cuts may come at the cost of intellectual stagnation, a possibility I explore and attempt to counter throughout this final chapter on the teaching of writing.

Here, I take composition as a locus and event during which students might not only compile and manipulate information, but also begin to investigate their “relationship” with paper topics, inquiry in general, discourses, informations, and writing itself—that is, how the performance that is the engagement of information reveals, affects, and participates in the composition of an otherwise disorderly world, profession, or life. Related emphases are sometimes seen in “social-epistemic”¹⁰ pedagogies and those with civic angles. My attention here is on something even more fundamental and yet relatively broad, prior and/or anterior to operations within a given social configuration and its prevailing notions knowledge and reality. More simply, I have tried to show that engaging information—phenomenal or reflective—from texture to terabyte, is a mutually affecting activity whose constituents do not wield essential control or the capacity to determine whether any course is the best way to go.¹¹ Marvels like antibiotics and the combustion engine give us immunological defense mechanisms and high speed transportation, but they also yield superbugs and oil dependencies (to say nothing of geopolitical turmoil). Information *may* empower only in a limited and provisional sense; it can also surprise and instigate anxiety—and we should let it. To say as much is not to advocate for a nihilistic spiral of meaninglessness and relativity seen

¹⁰ “For social-epistemic rhetoric, the real is located in a *relationship* that involves the dialectical interaction of the observer, the discourse community (social group) in which the observer is functioning, and the material conditions of existence. Knowledge is never found in any one of these but can only be posited as a product of the dialectic in which all three come together.” James Berlin, “Rhetoric and Ideology in the Writing Class,” *College English* 50, no. 5 (1988): 488 (emphasis added). Berlin contrasts social-epistemic rhetoric with “cognitive” and “expressionistic” rhetorics, which view the real as situated in material conditions external to the subject or within the subjectivity of the self, respectively. *Ibid.*, 474-494.

¹¹ Victor J. Vitanza, “Three Counter-Theses: Or, A Critical Inter(ven)tion into Composition Theories and Pedagogies,” in *Contending with Words*, eds. Patricia Harkin and John Schilb (New York: Modern Language Association, 1991), 142.

in caricatured postmodernism. The point is simply that when and where pressing decisions on the most troubling problems we face are required, we need better relationships with information characterized neither by relativistic paralysis nor naive faith in the ultimate power of reason. Greater epistemological nuance is necessary—yes, at the undergraduate level.¹² Such issues seem well suited to rhetoric and writing instruction, where engagement, invention, and relation with information is the featured “content.”

The argument here does not define (i.e., limit) the value of arts or humanities as being equal to x, y, or z, but it does suggest that an invaluable *relational* quality is perceptible in research from biochemistry to civil engineering—all of which, not incidentally, must exceed protocol when presented with novel circumstances or pressures. Craft, improvisation, and contingency are necessary when experts in these fields approach, engage, and relate to their professional worlds—on both good and bad days—eureka moments and meltdowns included. Given their magnificent flexibility and frequent status as general education requirements, rhetorics and writing instruction do seem uniquely positioned to help students see and feel this point as well as possible ways of meaningfully integrating such relationality into their studies, professions, and lives beyond the writing classroom. In particular, then, I am after a pedagogy capable of instigating and engaging *surprises* by means of aesthetic or relational treatments of so called “objects” in critical research papers that are the cornerstone of most composition textbooks—and for good reason. Again, even the critical manuscript is itself an aestheticized relation with its supposed “content,” formal and formatted appearance notwithstanding. Teachers, students, and professionals alike need viable ways of bringing forth phenomena into the domain of legibility in such a way that preserves meaningful

¹² I find the watering down of instruction, particularly at the freshmen level, abhorrent and irresponsible. There may well be a line of diminishing returns, but the assumption undergraduates will not understand challenging ideas is a shameful bet against one’s own students.

intellectual growth. Based on the foregoing chapters, I submit aesthetics of information itself is one possible avenue for developing awareness of the sensibility of intelligibility. Again, what is meant here is not beauty or taste per se, but rather the conceptual blur between the phenomenal experiences of reading or writing and reflective knowledge making. Toward pursuit of meaningful acknowledgement and performance of such conditions during writing instruction, the discussion offered below attempts to formulate and design a pedagogy promoting healthy, flexible, and resilient relationships with information.

How do you do?

This chapter is written in response to disaffected relations among students, their writing, teachers, textbooks, and institutions. I perceive a tendency—on the part of both students and instructors—to relate with “the material” or subject as mere data to be manipulated, mere content to be arranged advantageously for the sake of winning arguments. University becomes a content delivery mechanism, content becomes trivia, and written work includes identifications without relation; A+ student as Watson, the Jeopardy! supercomputer. Indeed, machines help use with storage, counting, and other repeatable tasks (why would we bother with these in the classroom?), yet students reaffirm such preconceptions when they arrive to class expecting to learn “how to write” in a single semester. But higher education ought to—and does—exceed content delivery. It’s worth noting some of the most prestigious and richest institutions in the country including MIT, Yale, Harvard, and The University of Texas system, and more have simply made available introductory content online for free, and, increasingly, low cost certification options as well.¹³ The in-residence university degree

¹³ See, for example, content from several institutions at edX (<https://www.edx.org>), Open Yale Courses (<http://oyc.yale.edu>), or Harvard’s Online Learning Initiative (<http://online-learning.harvard.edu>).

as proof of lecture attendance and download access to notes will not and cannot endure. Relatedly, metrics and “measurable” assessments including “student learning outcomes” are generally, though not necessarily, content-oriented and, I would therefore argue, are poor longterm strategies. I am in agreement with Gregory L. Ulmer when he says “learning is much closer to invention than to verification,” although a survey of prevailing instructional methods hardly reflects it: “the modes of academic writing now taught in school tend to be positioned on the side of the already known rather than on the side of wanting to find out (of theoretical curiosity) and hence discourage learning how to learn.”¹⁴ This twenty year old statement is still too true. As more content goes online and the rise of tuition skyrockets, I suspect the university will need to adopt relatively inventional, generative, and yes, experimental pedagogies and learning experiences for students.¹⁵

In terms of interacting with research, arguments, and writing situation are sometimes framed as a double-bind. The conflicting impulses involve, on one hand, the necessary task of outfitting students with skills, *habits*, and practices for engaging information and composing arguments for contexts beyond any given writing course. On the other hand, the aesthetic and affective dimensions of reading and writing that reveal even the most bland and prosaic

¹⁴ Gregory L. Ulmer, *Heuretics: The Logic of Invention* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1994), xii.

¹⁵ Needless to say, free content or non-degree earning certifications are no substitutes for the immersive enculturation of attending college (at least not yet). While apocalyptic and utopian forecasts for higher education abound, it's simply too soon to know the full scope and consequence of free content composed specifically for instructional purposes. Democratic implications notwithstanding, drawbacks that come to mind include reliance on self-direction, universal design and accessibility issues, impersonality, and assessment at scale, to name a few. Of course, a range of voices on all sides of the conversation would swoop in here to console and corroborate this cursory list of concerns. Moreover, just what exactly a Massively Open Online Course (MOOC) *is*, could, or should be for composition remains a question even those in the field are still working out. See James E. Porter, “Framing Questions about MOOCs and Writing Courses,” in *Invasion of the MOOCs: The Promises and Perils of Massive Open Online Courses*, eds. Steven D. Krause and Charles Lowe (Anderson: Parlor Press, 2014), 14-28. “[W]e have to identify and challenge a number of related some-for-all substitutions that synecdochically threaten to diminish what a university education is supposed to mean: Course = course materials. Course = lectures. Course = content. A university education = a collection of courses.” *Ibid.*, 19.

information as something with which student writers can have a relationship characterized by something grander than disaffected, managerial tasks of processing, compilation, and synthesis. This chapter does not propose to resolve the double-bind, but it does suggest that these tensions are not *always* mutually exclusive. Much has to do with the relational frame with which these necessary research tasks are presented to students. The problem is not procedure and program as such, but that these vocationalist orientation tend—not always, and certainly not necessarily, but tend—to promote and reward careers, lifestyles, thinking, and relationships within already existing structures of composing and interacting with information. No surprises. A concomitant approach to teaching writing is perhaps *too* bound up in efficiency, expectations of presumed audiences, and prevailing parameters of valuation and assessment. I agree with Steven B. Katz that related instructional emphases, in overdoses, make for a pedagogy prey to a potentially disastrous “ethic of expediency” that too easily infects deliberative rhetorics such as the argumentative manuscript. He argues that which is expedient, cost-effective, and (too) narrowly focused on a decontextualized set of particulars “gives impulse” or directs nearly automatic relations with information as they appear in workplace communications like technical writing, which of course reflects broader, cultural sensibilities and intelligibilities.¹⁶ Ironically, the emphasis on information command and rhetorical opportunism disempowers students because it promotes the notion of humans as rational, autonomous agents while at the same time remaining conformist in the patterns of its thought all along.¹⁷ I think of Antonio Gramsci’s hierarchy of intellectuals: “at the highest level would be the creators of the various sciences, philosophy, art, etc., [and] at the lowest the most humble ‘administrators’ and divulgators of pre-existing, traditional, accumulated

¹⁶ Steven B. Katz, “The Ethic of Expediency: Classical Rhetoric, Technology, and the Holocaust,” *College English* 54, no. 3 (1992): 257.

¹⁷ Victor J. Vitanza, “Three Counter-Theses,” 156-157.

intellectual wealth.”¹⁸ As I have tried to demonstrate in the previous chapters, such a relation with information, i.e., deaestheticization, is untenable even as widespread belief in this myth corrodes knowledge making practices (ironically, this is nowhere more evident than the humanities). Regulation and arrangement of information and research in strategic configurations presumes, even in novel syntheses, that what is available to be known is already done, over, open to revision by means of deconstructive latency, but de facto *the given*. However, as Thomas Rickert says of rhetorical studies in general, “there is too much emphasis on a rhetor’s powers for leveraging kairos and not enough sensitivity to what the situation itself affords” in its “ambient” dimensions.¹⁹ That salience can operate as a blind spot is crucial because it creates the possibility of surprise, not knowing, and knowing that we don’t know—at least not by means of heavy handed coercion of content represented by the critical manuscript. Another relationship with information is prerequisite.

Engagements

Several composition scholars have addressed the merits of affective, emotional, or otherwise engaging pedagogies to cultivate meaningful and enlivening student relationships with writing. Several articles from *Journal of Advanced Composition* in particular have already taken up these questions about affective pedagogies in ways that are resonate with my figuration of “aesthetic” as a relational and mutually affecting engagement with text, object, or idea. Christa Albrecht-Crane, for example, seeks a pedagogy of desire in the Deleuzian-

¹⁸ Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks of Antonio Gramsci*, trans. and eds. Quintin Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell Smith (New York: International Publishers, 1971), 13.

¹⁹ Thomas Rickert, *Ambient Rhetoric: The Attunements of Rhetorical Being* (Pittsburgh: Pittsburgh University Press, 2013), 76.

Guattarian and Lyotardian senses, in which desire is figured as production rather than lack.

The position is one that runs counter to the necessarily regulatory nature of higher education.

We know that, as a disciplinary mechanism, school enacts and maintains systematic repression and domination *However*, this normed and norming system is never leak-proof, sealed. It is *porous*. What escapes, then, is desire that manifests itself, for instance, in . . . intensive/affective moments of writing This sort of desire comes from within the system, within the school, is immanent to it.²⁰

The image here suggests the authentic as embedded within the inauthentic, the institutional, and the procedural; the direction is from inside to outside—emissions and catharses.

Surprises in this pop-up figuration, here and there as infrequent but inevitable occurrences, might seem to jive with the discussion of “impostors” in the previous chapter. However, I am inclined to agree with Thomas Rickert when he freely admits “teaching writing is fully complicitous with dominant social practices,” and hence the idea of teaching anomaly is not only ironic, but harmful.²¹ Albrecht-Crane and Rickert are not exactly at odds, then, though their relationships with the challenge of engaging students are quite different. Both, however, unambiguously associate schools as sites of conflict capable of producing, on the one hand, students “prone to disaffected attitudes and behavior, including cynicism, apathy, disregard, and violence,”²² and, the other hand, a naive and ultimately circular attempt to create “empowered and liberated students and teachers”²³ through pedagogies of resistance.

Another prominent voice in composition on affect and engagement is none other than Geoffrey Sirc. His arguments on behalf of experimental compositions inspired by

²⁰ Christa Albrecht-Crane, “An Affirmative Theory of Desire,” *Journal of Advanced Composition* 23, no. 3 (2003): 581-582 (original italics; emboldening added).

²¹ Thomas Rickert, “‘Hands Up, You’re Free’: Composition in a Post-Oedipal World,” *Journal of Advanced Composition* 21, no. 2 (2001): 290; 314. Cf. Albrecht-Crane’s article, which “argues that affect, and what makes affect possible—namely desire—form the conceptual turning points through which individuals experience and in fact struggle with and against places of learning.” Albrecht-Crane, “An Affirmative Theory of Desire,” 564.

²² Rickert, “‘Hands Up, You’re Free,’” 291.

²³ Albrecht-Crane, “An Affirmative Theory of Desire,” 587.

Situationist and Happenings arts movements as inspiration for writing curriculums necessitates a new understanding of the notion of curriculum (more on these as they appear in Sirc below). In his article “Godless Composition, Tormented Writing,” Sirc indicts the entire field: “composition, as I read it, is ascetic” to an extent that students are done a disservice and cannot relate to their own work.²⁴ Specifically, Sirc identifies the formal rigidity as the problem in writing instruction, whose “measured style is debased, slavish; to give students a space to develop as sensitive people, able to communicate, we need more.”²⁵ For Sirc, “more” is that which experiments stylistically or gives students license to partake in their alternative forms for credit. As we will see below, such impulse is driven at least in this case by a nostalgic quest for the genuine, the sublime, and an emancipated subject. Though he rightly rails against the empowerment narratives of all too narrowly defined writing instruction, he too posits another empowerment²⁶ predicated on mystique of the arts practices and revolutionary pathos.

Affective classrooms, however, may need massage and repair. Lynn Worsham approaches the engagement question at the level of *paideia*, by which she means today’s generalized cultural sensibility that constitutes an “affective relation to the world” whose trained incapacities are the erasure or marginalization of emotion.²⁷ Her insightful article on “Pedagogic Violence” observes that schools have historically set up false and

²⁴ Geoffrey Sirc, “Godless Composition, Tormented Writing,” *Journal of Advanced Composition* 15, no. 3 (1995): 556.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 553.

²⁶ “What would empower students more—teaching them how to accommodate to the rules of academic discourse; or teaching them that if they organized they could demand that they be allowed to write any way they wanted, that they would not have to waste so much time learning to speak like us (their own language being almost all right)?” Geoffrey Sirc, *English Composition as a Happening* (Logan, UT: Utah State University Press, 2002), 222. Analysis of key essays in this book is developed below.

²⁷ Lynn Worsham, “Going Postal: Pedagogic Violence and the Schooling of Emotion,” *Journal of Advanced Composition* 18, no. 2 (1998): 216; 221.

counterproductive relegations of emotion to the feminine, the irrational, or the personal and hence illegitimate—a violence she argues may backfire, erupting in the form of workplace violence, school shootings, sexual violence, and misplaced hate crimes.²⁸ Though these incidents are often framed by news media as isolated and anomalous, the frequency of such terror²⁹ complicates the narrative of the troubled individual, divorced and detached from some pleasant normal and everyday. For Worsham, such tragedies are devastating and unbearable, but they are not surprising; in a specific sense, they are predictable—read: neither individually foreseeable nor immediately causal, but ambient consequents of a social order embodied by school and which denies students their own emotions and subjectivities through inscription of social positions and prescribed “patterns of feeling” deemed appropriate for race, class, and gender roles.³⁰ Her work shows how the ideology of intelligibility and concomitant interrelations among knowledge, culture, writing, school, and self might afford useful insight into otherwise paralyzing social conditions.

Most of the work cited here is fifteen or more years old. I revisit the conversation to ground my own thought in work on relationships with information and writing, but also to

²⁸ Ibid., 223.

²⁹ When mass shootings are defined as incidents during which four or more victims “generally . . . unrelated and unknown” to the murderer(s) perish, the average number of days between such shootings from late 2011 to late 2014 had dropped to 64; from 1982 to 2011, the average hovered consistently around 200. Amy P. Cohen, Deborah Azrael, and Matthew Miller, “Rate of Mass Shootings Has Tripled Since 2011, Harvard Research Shows,” *Mother Jones*, October 15, 2014, <http://motherjones.com/politics/2014/10/mass-shootings-increasing-harvard-research>. Violence wounding victims or ending the lives of *any* four or more people, regardless of their relationship with the murderer(s), of course, is even more frequent; see the rationale for the methodology of the analysis cited here. The authors are academics at Harvard and Northeastern. No peer-reviewed publication from these authors with a primary focus on this data is available at the time of this writing. All this does not even begin to address the separate and yet related atrocity of rape, which is also taken up in Worsham’s article.

³⁰ Worsham, “Going Postal,” 223. The article offers more nuance and greater explication of complex linkages than I present here. Crucially, Worsham warns that typically adversarial, so called “critical pedagogies” often carry precisely the same authoritarian pitfalls as the “traditional” teaching they purport to undo; “postmodern” pedagogy demonstrating the arbitrariness of everything cultural also fails students in its reliance on primarily “intellectual” process of “demystification” where affect is absent. Worsham, “Going Postal,” 235-236.

extend the conversation with aesthetic emphases that have been the focus of this dissertation. As the review shows, the conversation has primarily focused on the politics of affect and aesthetics in classroom. When I suggest supplanting this discourse with an aesthetic or relational tonality, I hardly intend to suggest aesthetics are somehow disassociable with politics or vice versa. In fact, the manner in which these simultaneities characterize and contribute to the building and maintenance of intelligibility is precisely the point. My feeling is that the aesthetic dimension, defined here in the Nietzschean, relational sense, was and is like the political always present in composition, but that it was perhaps obscured in conversations wherein the focus was on alienation, subjectivity, and reform. However, aesthetics is not presented here as a hero that can exhaustively dash the whole range of epistemic and political problems reviewed above in every situation. But aesthetics *are* advanced as a crucial inroad to developing a healthy relationship with information generated and “consumed,” if you like, in academic contexts like the writing classroom.

This, That.

In order to propose such a composition, I bring to bear key inspirations I will refer to as “aesthetic” and “electrate” pedagogies, which I figure below primarily under the guidance of work by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak and Gregory L. Ulmer, respectively. The primary advantages of such pedagogies are their abilities to withstand in meaningful ways “new” phenomena, even in traditional forms, while retaining affective and epiphanic engagements with information in student learning. “New” here includes the familiar seen and felt anew upon revisitation, as well as the capacity of information to reveal itself as an artistic invention in the sense of reserving the capacity to affect even the enlightened subject.

Aesthetic?

As we saw above, Friedrich Schiller asserts that the very awareness of an ambiguous “middle disposition” between physical sensation and rational thought creates the possibility for “the aesthetic” in the first place. Not despite but because of this epistemic slippage, he designates for the aesthetic a political or civic function wherein this “middle” is utilized so that art and letters function as a discursive tools. This arrangement may very well describe the reality of textual and aesthetic engagement, though in the practice of budget allocation and (core) curriculum designs, it is a foolish bet, a blank and rubber check for the beautiful. In her book *An Aesthetic Education in the Era of Globalization*, Spivak takes issue with this hope, “productively undoing” Schiller as the patron saint of the politicized aesthetic. The aesthete fueled by grant money and the “gracious permission” of a Prince,³¹ according to Spivak, shows too great of faith and not enough commitment to the challenging work of navigating between the aesthetic and practical.³² Spivak’s attempt is rather to “double bind” herself into the challenge of meaningfully implementing Schiller’s gulf into today’s increasingly careerist and econometricized university—to live rather than wiggle out and “resolve” this double bind in an age of information command and the regime of the intelligible. Hence it is a pedagogy that acknowledges its situation within the prevailing assumption that sensibility and intelligibility can be disentangled, managed, or perhaps just ignored—that is to say, Spivak acknowledges this pervasive orientation without succumbing to it. Her aesthetic education is “training the imagination for epistemological performance,” a vaguely defined notion in her text, but perhaps performance maintains humility and tolerance during the

³¹ Friedrich Schiller, *On the Aesthetic Education of Man: In a Series of Letters*, trans. Elizabeth M. Wilkinson and L. A. Willoughby (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1967), 3.

³² Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *An Aesthetic Education in the Era of Globalization* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2012), 514 n. 42.

traumatic condition of there being “no adequate analogical fit between the mind and the sense-perceptible world.”³³ It sounds like a mind/body division, however, it is “no mystical exercise this, but an effortful suspension,”³⁴ one I would associate with the anxiety of the a/new explored above.

Let’s double back to Sirc and demonstrate how his approach differs in terms of its figuration of arts practices and their relevance to pedagogy. In short, he positions alternative forms (particularly those of his choice-idiosyncratic tastes) as beyond and other than “traditional” writing pedagogies. Again, for Sirc composition always demands adherence to “the codified scripts of academia The search for intelligible structures is over; the goods have been found and now they need only be routinely delivered.”³⁵ Instead, Sirc suggests writing instructors embrace and allow alternative forms with whatever is at hand—“the operative grammar [of] the sound bite, the tee-shirt/bumper-sticker slogan, ad copy, graffiti, stadium bannerspeak”—suggesting that instructors position even “online chats as glitzy funhouse in the arid Mojave of university writing.”³⁶ He recalls and praises, for example, a collaboration of four students who dropped “a 20-line rap song on the subject of Mother Teresa,” a particularly impressive showing in Sirc’s judgement—“true Composition as a Happening.”³⁷ Indeed, Sirc’s text often resembles manifestos from the Happenings and Situationists movements quoted throughout the book: “we must pursue the world beyond disciplinary tradition.”³⁸

³³ Ibid., 197; 25.

³⁴ Ibid., 202.

³⁵ Sirc, *Happening*, 243.

³⁶ Ibid., 199; 233.

³⁷ Ibid., 199.

³⁸ Ibid., 185.

Clarification. While alternative forms of inquiry and production are most welcome in a pedagogy that wants to cultivate aesthetic relationships with research, framing these activities as portals to special or exclusive access to liberation is problematic. Again: because intelligibility is sensible, such an aesthetic relation is always already the case in all composition events, whether arid or juicy. Sirc's emphasis on formal experimentation positions the "Writing Classroom as Factory," an inspiration he takes from Andy Warhol's 1960s studio-hangout bursting with all sorts of experiments and innovative in production techniques. "The Factory," they called it, and "[w]hatever it was, it was the absolute opposite of the Academy."³⁹ As a model for composition instruction, Sirc's composition as not-Academy is a remarkable claim, for it posits the academy may not be the academy. While the contradiction is not an issue for the present writing, the use of the factory as a rhetorical frame for revolutionary purposes in the context of first world writing instruction is troubling. I have in mind Claire Bishop's undeniable critique of "relational aesthetics" movements of the late 1990s, which were typically installation and/or performance pieces with some participatory dimension within the institutional or gallery space. The textbook example is the work of Rirkrit Tiravanija, who cooked and served Thai food dinner party *as* an art show; participants were meant, by the artist's own account, to consider not the food but the relations and interactions among those attending the event.⁴⁰ As Bishop makes clear, such exhibitions deploy "metaphors like 'laboratory,' 'construction site,' and 'art factory' to differentiate themselves from bureaucracy-encumbered collection-based museums," but can only remain artificial, "feel good" environs conditioning the possibility of a "cozy situation [wherein] art does not feel the need to defend itself, and . . . collapses into compensatory

³⁹ Geoffrey Sirc, "Writing Classroom as Factory," *Composition Studies* 36, no. 1 (2008): 35.

⁴⁰ See Claire Bishop, "Antagonism and Relational Aesthetics," *October* 110 (Fall 2004): 55-58.

(and self-congratulatory) entertainment”⁴¹ indistinguishable from spectacle and cultural-industrial product, the very bane of the Situationists’ plight. Therefore, the notion that “legitimizing other forms and functions (and teaching them), even ‘frivolous’ ones like those of an e-chat transcript, might make the landscape less alienating,”⁴² is difficult to accept. In any case, things are a lot scarier than this traditional/experience appearance of choice let on. The IMRAD form itself, as I demonstrated above, is performative, relational, and aesthetic.

Electrate.

At least two decades ahead of his time, Gregory L. Ulmer foresaw the blooming of what he describes as the “apparatus” of “electracy,” something he describes as that which “is to digital media what literacy is to alphabetic writing.”⁴³ Importantly, however, the apparatus includes not only the technologies of orality and literacy, but also their assumptions, epistemologies, metaphors, institutions, and so on. Hence electracy refers not simply to computers or digital compositions, but moods and modes of (thinking about) knowledge production, with no apparatus winning out over the others. The key insight is that conceptual processes in digital composition necessitate a dramatic shift from the habits of

⁴¹ Bishop, “Antagonism and Relational Aesthetics,” 52; 79. Another, informal, and/but equally and perhaps therefore valid, comes from Hennessy Youngman, alter ego of artist Jayson Musson:

[S]omehow congregating in a gallery to take part in the same activities [that people do regularly out in the real world] is a socially autonomous refusal of capitalism, because we all know that a gallery is an ideologically-neutral environment that has nothing to do with the accumulation of wealth, or the advancement of global capitalism, or any of its sordid subpractices. And that’s, you know, why the walls are white in the gallery. Because white’s neutral, it’s good, it’s neutral—white: I can think, I can think—that’s why I’m here.

Hennessy Youngman, “Relational Aesthetics,” *ART THOUGHTZ* (vlog), March 15, 2011, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7yea4q\\$JMx4](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7yea4q$JMx4).

⁴² Sirc, *Happening*, 207.

⁴³ Gregory L. Ulmer, *Internet Invention: From Literacy to Electracy* (New York: Longman, 2003), xvii.

thinking associated with alphabetic text technologies of literacy.⁴⁴ Of course, multimedia have an ability to streamline linear, propositional thinking and communication as we have understood it in literacy, but taking advantage of electrate opportunities involve thinking *in* and *through* and *during* with media—images, sounds, and combinations of modalities for affective and temporal ends.⁴⁵ My task here is to address how electracy cultivates aesthetic relationships with information in which a mutually-affective capacity between writing and “content” is sustained for the (a)new.

Coming out of Eric Havelock’s work on orality and literacy, Ulmer reminds us these technologies were *invented* and bear no essential relationship to knowledge as such. Although once dominant, neither necessarily constitutes the pinnacle of knowledge making practices. Crucially, Ulmer’s electracy proposes something quite different from the algorithmic and mathematization associated in common parlance with technology—nor does it pursue enhanced communication in the sense of transmitting idea from writer to audience. With its focus on aesthetics, “electracy makes possible some new learning behaviors that do not have exact equivalents within literacy,”⁴⁶ namely an emphasis on interpretive idiosyncrasy. Although Ulmer uses different neologisms in different texts as he develops the notion across nearly thirty years of scholarship (electracy, video, teletheory, etc.), one sustained theme has been the student-scholar’s relationship with image and other rich media. As many have

⁴⁴ I hasten to add that the fashionable distinction between an allegedly static print text and the supposed dynamism of the digital is overblown; neither is entirely stable, and neither is wholly fluid. For me, it is crucial to harness the potential of media and multimodality while at the same time nourishing a critical consciousness attuned to abuses of computationalism, cloud feudalism, big data profiling, and a new politics of accessibility brought on by industry standard software you cannot own—only rent. To name just a few. Still, my feeling is that digital natives on our rosters are behooved by an approach to electracy characterized both by progressivism and caution.

⁴⁵ Hence the common critique of text-heavy PowerPoint presentations without design.

⁴⁶ Gregory L. Ulmer, “Electracy and Pedagogy,” *Internet Invention: From Literacy to Electracy*, <http://users.clas.ufl.edu/glue/longman/pedagogy> (supplementary online material on the author’s university webpage).

already argued, image and video in scholastic contexts figures learning as an enterprise that exceeds referentiality and explication with its affective, visual, sonic, and even tactile dimensions. The relationality of electracy, however, suggests the apparatus be exploited not for enhanced transmission, but for a relatively open-ended pursuit of epistemic surprise. Like Sirc, Ulmer also acknowledges “the projection of . . . forms onto writing itself,”⁴⁷ which is neither limited to the critical nor alphabetic manuscript. The difference between the two scholars, however, is that Sirc’s eyes are on a particular prize: the liberated student subject.

Speaking of eyes, Ulmer embraces a flip of the traditional frame of camera as a visual-prosthetic whose primary function is reproduction. Assignment of the device to this archival role is consistent with the truism that “knowing in the modern paradigm is scopophilic” deals a pleasure not unlike that of the “voyeur.”⁴⁸ (It also prioritizes visual and ocularcentric knowledges, a sonic complement for which was the focus of an earlier chapter in this dissertation). Metaphors like “capturing,” “taking,” and “getting” the photos reveals the camera’s alliance with the lack-based wisdom of acquisition seen in earlier chapters, but its rhetorics of display and reproduction are consistent with what we might call an “ideology of the visible” and an attendant “analytico-referential discourse.”⁴⁹ Inspired by experimental film that flouts logics of bread crumb narratives and overt *mise-en-scène*, Ulmer attempts “to use the machine of realism operating in our [academic] discourse to say something else, something more and other.”⁵⁰ Hence the literacy of scholarship is not abandoned or burned down, but augmented and reinvented anew.

⁴⁷ Gregory L. Ulmer, *Teletheory*, Revised 2nd ed. (1989; New York: Atropos Press, 2004), 22.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 24.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 25.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

Perhaps surprisingly, Ulmer makes much of installation and performance artist Joseph Beuys, figuring him as a tutor for invention in academic inquiry. An extended discussion of Beuys' *Fat Corner* figures the work as parallel or synergistic with the work of Jacques Derrida. Margarine or some alternative is spread where two walls of a room meet, erecting a small sort of triangular pyramid on the floor, crawling up the corner. The work appears utterly meaningless and foolish: "[t]he elements of the piece are the fat; the action of putting the fat into the corner; the corner itself, a geometric form; time and the process of putrefaction; and the viewer's response."⁵¹ But according to Ulmer, the piece calls our attention to the spread and sculpted mold of the material itself, which eventually turns limp and becomes contaminated by dust in the air. Ulmer also notes the foregrounding of corner's uncompromising right-angle limit, peripheral and yet ubiquitous in architecture. As glob and edge meet in this apparently ridiculous installation, "Beuys interrogates materials the way Derrida interrogates terminology."⁵² Curiously and in a particular sense, "there is no need to translate what Beuys is doing from art into pedagogy, since he is already engaging in pedagogy"⁵³ by performing how givens might be other and anew. Metaphors cycle in. One's relationships with fat and corner—cholesterol and the built environment in which they sleep each night—are renewed. Prior connotations and charges reveal themselves as provisional.

Such renewals in Beuys, while certainly different, are not unlike the renewal of the image for education discussed above. In both cases, commonplace understandings are surprised and challenged as orientations with these informations are overhauled during a statelessness that is surprise. Ulmer's electracy informs the dissertation less as a guide for

⁵¹ Gregory L. Ulmer, *Applied Grammatology: Post(e)-Pedagogy from Jacques Derrida to Joseph Beuys* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1985), 242.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 243.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 246.

digital media than the shock of its apparatus relativity. While things like television or the internet catalyze and motivate his writing, his own account refuses to hold any one media or discursive apparatus above another. Most important for his work is the liminality instigated by the shift from one to another.

Innovation

Transposed for writing instruction, my sense is introducing the idea that information is something with which one can relate will begin to respond and attenuate some of the dysfunctional engagements with discussed above. Specifically, the issue is a surprise-adverse discourse that too quickly chokes the new before rendering it trivia, data. The cumulative suggestion I take from the this interdisciplinary discourse above is that it is necessary to show how information work can and does involve more than the advantageous manipulation of identifications; *relation* is necessary for holistic, ethical, reflective thought and action. In the remaining section below, I begin to sketch ways of integrating contemporary art works into the writing classroom by drawing connections between their apparent energies and typical themes in composition courses and textbooks.

I also suspect that such features of a writing classroom are capable of responding to the zeitgeist of “innovation” currently permeating higher education—and do so in both “useful” and healthy ways to boot. I suspect the innovation discourse is a desperate response to the shrinking “failure loop” in business, the instability of longterm investments brought on by the shift from agricultural and manufacturing economies to volatile idea and service industries, dorm room startups, increasing frequency of career changes, and so on.⁵⁴ The

⁵⁴ See Adam Davidson, “Welcome to the Failure Age!,” *New York Times*, November 12, 2014, <http://nyti.ms/1yyqIVn>.

increasing prevalence of surprises, perhaps. While such conditions reflect the precarious neoliberal conditions in which we live, the issue is also beginning to show in composition. The subject will be the focus of Joyce Locke Carter's Chair's Address at the Conference on College Composition and Communication in 2016. In a teaser for the talk, Carter reveals her conflicted relationship with the concept: "while [innovation] sometimes evokes a mindless (and needless) overthrow of conventions, it also serves as an encouraging nudge for innovators upon whose inventions such disruption depends."⁵⁵ Saying "when" is tricky.

Jean Dubuffet's mythological fetish for the new notwithstanding, his epigraph above is nevertheless a helpful reminder that framework, if left unchecked and unvisited, can function as a blinder.⁵⁶ Even technical communication knows this well. A field unjustly caricatured for its alleged keep calm and carry on writing memos proceduralism, technical writing is in fact a creative sort of existential "conduct" that structures and builds communities in the broadest sense.⁵⁷ Figuring the field in this matter means "we can no longer view [technical communication] as merely the skill or art of information transfer," when indeed it is nothing less than the construction of communities, professions, and lives.⁵⁸ The plain and economic stylistics, the bulleted list, the deliberate reduction of excess—all these simultaneously belie and betray the constructed order of such documentation. I suggest we teach these implicit relationships with information here as a way to callback and recollect the sensibility of intelligibility.

⁵⁵ Joyce Locke Carter, "Making, Disrupting, Innovating," *Sailing the Four Cs* (blog), January 17, 2016, <http://joycelockecarter.com/CCCC/making-disrupting-innovating>.

⁵⁶ For a related discussion of Dubuffet's aesthetic sensibilities and motives, see Lucienne Peiry, *Art Brut: The Origins of Outsider Art*, trans. James Frank (Paris: Flammarion, 1997), 35-38.

⁵⁷ Carolyn R. Miller, "What's Practical about Technical Writing?" in *Technical Writing: Theory and Practice*, eds. Bertie E. Fearing and W. Keats Sparrow (New York: The Modern Language Association of America, 1989), 22-23.

⁵⁸ Stephen Doheny-Farina, *Rhetoric, Innovation, Technology: Case Studies of Technical Communication in Technology Transfers* (Cambridge, MA: The Massachusetts Institute of Technology Press, 1992), 220.

Information Aesthetics for Composition

The discourse of “participatory art,” wherein some degree of agency is allotted to the spectator, is sometimes motivated by a “desire to invest art with nonart social or political intent.”⁵⁹ Entertaining briefly the faulty art/nonart division, I would turn it right around by trying to learn from artistic practices modes of engagement for writing. Rather than see art as an escape or escapism from composition, I would suggest we note the similarities between these two separate practices while letting each remain different. Stated thusly, “open spaces for undefined interactions could radically change our general perception of the institution as an inflexible, deadening container.”⁶⁰ While participatory utopianism has been critiqued by Bishop and others, the formulation here is interesting in that it specifies alteration of *perception* and relation rather than a revision of the institution’s material or ontological configurations.

My point would not be to position art works as alternatives to so called “traditional” forms like *the dreaded five paragraph essay*, but to help demonstrate that “even . . . the most chaste discursive prose” cannot shed its metaphorical or tropological qualities—that is, its *relation* unto its “putative subject matter.”⁶¹ Needless to say, the forms, functions, institutions, contexts, audiences, and other rhetorical variables of works typically considered “art”—e.g., those painted, photographic, plastic, cinematic, sonic, participatory, installed, and so on—are understood, engaged, and interpreted in different contexts, with different (though overlapping) audiences, and for different purposes. Erasing all difference between

⁵⁹ Rudolf Frieling, “Toward Participation in Art,” in *The Art of Participation: 1950 to now*, ed. Rudolf Frieling (London: Thames & Hudson, 2008), 34.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 47 (emphasis added).

⁶¹ Hayden White, *Tropics of Discourse: Essays in Cultural Criticism* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978), 3; 4.

the two would be irresponsible. But the material and affective capacities of art do seem to me crucial affordances for writing instruction. Specifically, they make the aesthetic encounter we have with *any* object or “text” more palpable and apparent. The word and the letter, the pH test, and the chi-squared analysis—not unlike pigment or pixel—are *media* constituting a relation with “content,” be it concrete or abstract, “known,” intuited, or invented during the creative act. I would like now to present some examples of art works I have recently brought into the classroom with surprising success.

Specifically, I look for conceptual works that don’t look like art works to those unfamiliar with contemporary art. Try sharing, for instance, Damien Hirst’s *The Physical Impossibility of Death in the Mind of Someone Living* and asking students whether the work is art or a museum exhibit. Squints, smirks, raised eyebrows. The piece is a nearly eighteen foot long “tank” and consists of an actual shark suspended in formaldehyde, poised to chomp a nearby victim. As the cheeky title alludes, this work permits one to safely engage danger, fear, threat, and the relative vulnerability of otherwise comfortable humans in the food chain. In one more turn, however, the shark is not any of these things because it is not real, which makes the joke less on the shark than the unreflective spectator. This vicarious threat is secured for indefinite contemplation, access, and retrieval; it is hyperbolic preservation also seen in the critical manuscript, which affords control found through acquisition and catalog.

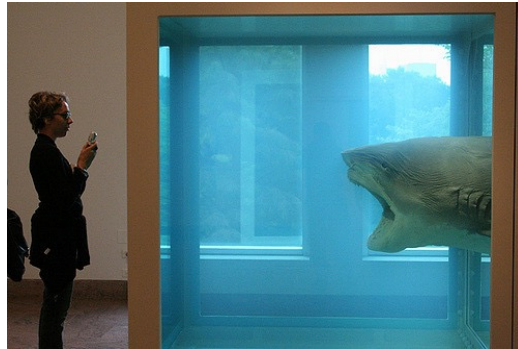


Figure 5.1: Spectator with Damien Hirst's *The Physical Impossibility of Death in the Mind of Someone Living*. "capturing the art shark" by Art Siegel is licensed under CC BY-NC 2.0.

Other Hirst pieces with medicinal themes such as *Pharmacy* or his "Pill Cabinet" series also make good provocations. These pieces work with rhetorics of display, sterility, and, along with the shark, archive.



Figure 5.2: Detail photograph of a Hirst "Pill Cabinets" aestheticizing pharmacology. "Damien Hirst" by Johnny Vulkan is licensed under CC BY 2.0.

Behold: the creation of industry, of proprietary research, of chemical synthesis—advantageous configuration of worldly materials. Students typically note the cleanliness of the piece and the almost "too perfect" configuration of materials. In fact, it does not resemble a lab or a pharmacy, which is almost assuredly messier. Something about it seems plastic and

artificial—airless. Is this our library, our database? Is information just sitting on a shelf, waiting to be plucked and popped?

Next, try displaying Minimalist works and asking the biologists and chemists in the room for help making connections among the elementary geometric shapes, the apparent minimization of the artist's hand, or the machinic repetition. The flat grids of Agnes Martin or Frank Stella's early work, for examples, have worked wonderfully for my courses. Typically students are off and running, noting the imperfect precision (look closely, divisions are not quite equilateral) whose symmetry I suggest might come to inform our discussion of methodology in a Science Writing course. Grids function in these conversations as quantization cookie cutters for the otherwise inchoate constant of material reactions and the qualitative decisions that transpose observation into replicable quantity. Not quite perfect, but pretty darn close. Invariably, a group of students forms and rallies for the interpretation that the grids are somehow "pleasing" or "comforting." Almost like a method.



Figure 5.3: Detail Photograph of “Frank Stella, The Marriage of Reason and Squalor, II, 1959, Whitney.” Image by Sharon Mollerus is licensed under CC BY 2.0.

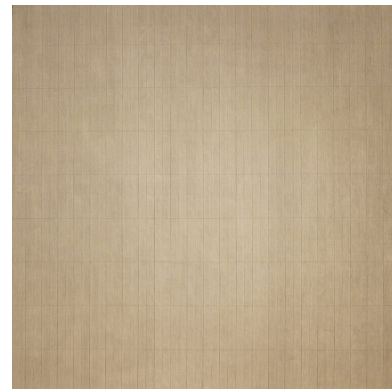


Figure 5.4: Detail photograph of “Agnes Martin, Untitled #12, 1977.” Image by Sharon Mollerus is licensed under CC BY 2.0.

Finally, share Hans Haacke's *MoMA Poll*, a pioneer work of institutional critique that

aestheticizes the survey instrument. This piece is simply two voting boxes appearing beneath a sign that prompts visitors to cast their responses right into the work:

Question:

Would the fact that Governor Rockefeller has not denounced President Nixon's Indochina policy be a reason for you not to vote for him in November?

Answer:

If 'yes'
please cast your ballot into the left box
if 'no'
into the right box.



Figure 5.5: Photograph of “MoMA Poll by Hans Haacke in the Museum of Modern Art.” Image has been released to the Public Domain via Wikimedia Commons.

The piece is a jab at Nelson Rockefeller, a Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) trustee at the time, but it also creates an aesthetic relationship with polling as such. It makes the process of collecting and counting a creative effort to engage and come to relate with the political attitudes of a sample population. The work actually performs and temporalizes the social scientific effort of the survey probe. What are they thinking out there, and why? Not unlike the shark, an indirect worldview is here operationalized, contained, measured, and tallied in real time. The theatrical frame of it all helps students understand the relationship with information constituted by the survey instrument: a controlled but wide netted scoop of preference and disposition.

Relations

My intent has been to develop ways for students to cultivate nuanced and subtle relationships with research capable of instigating and sustaining the surprise of new and aestheticized understandings of information itself. The ideal writer is sometimes caricatured as a hyper-practical synthesizer of source material, but arranging the already known in advantageous configurations is an apolitical proceduralism that erases or, at best, downplays the aesthetic and inventional qualities of composing. If we construe the educator's task as something grander than mere certification for the immediate, contingent, and, (let's face it) temporary, then the tension between satisfaction and invention ought to occupy a sustained role in courses setting out to help students process, relate, and compose information. What is at stake is nothing less than an existential effort to get along in the world—to variously secure, enhance, entertain, or conserve professions and lives. It is not a grandiosity to say that students are tomorrow's knowledge builders and decision makers. They need and deserve the chance to examine the formative pressures and aesthetic assumptions governing their intellectual work in school and beyond, and learning from the arts is one way to provoke this investigation.

APPENDIX

APPENDIX

Notes on the fair use of copyrighted materials

organized by the criteria of judgment stated in Title 14 Chapter 1 §107 of the U.S. Code.

- 1. The purpose and character of the use of copyrighted works:** The works are sampled in the chapter for the purpose of citation in a scholarly analysis and for the sake of exalting the aesthetic achievements of the artists. The samples are explicitly discussed as the works of others and should not be construed as writer's own inventions.
- 2. The nature of the copyrighted work:** While the partially reproduced works are creative in nature, the present writing and its scholarly audience is qualitatively different such that the creativity of the present author is manifest in an altogether separate medium: alphabetic writing.
- 3. The amount and substantiality of the portion used in relation to the copyrighted work as a whole:** Samples of the copyrighted works are typically 20-30 seconds in duration. The sole exception (Clip 3.6) itself remixes another copyrighted work. The full range and development of the copyrighted works cannot be heard in the chapter.
- 4. The effect of the use upon the potential market for or value of the copyrighted works:** The brief clips in this essay would make poor substitutes for the original works, even in spite of electronic music culture's association with sampling and remixing. The samples are so brief as to be useless for DJ sets. Further, the present

writing and the original works have different audiences, although overlap is conceivable. I encourage readers to explore electronic music, including but not limited to artists cited here, and to pay for creative works at one of many digital outlets such as Beatport or iTunes.

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