Response to Horizons of Possibility Panel
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These papers show us two horizons, one deep inside the brain, one far outside, beyond the ivory tower. Both offer promising agendas, both challenge our habitual modes of scholarship, and both make me somewhat uneasy, in different but not unrelated ways. Possibly I'm simply not up to either challenge. In any case, this response is going to come across as somewhat curmudgeonly, but I offer it in the spirit of provoking discussion.

Ceccarelli, the horizon of external audiences, the goal of influence

Leah Ceccarelli challenges us to leave the *curriculum vitae contemplativum* for the *CV activum*. Perhaps we have nothing to lose but our ineffectual irrelevance, low status, and inability to procure external funding and thereby to participate fully in the 21st century research university and make our deans happy. Indeed, some rhetoricians of science have made important strides in this direction, several of whom will be in the room with us on November 14 (David Berube, Celeste Condit, and Carl Herndl), and it will be useful to hear their stories. The changing nature of public support for higher education and the recent enthusiasm for "engaged scholarship" beyond the extension functions rooted in the 19th-century rationale for land-grant universities make Leah's challenge timely and relevant.

Generally, it seems to be our grounding in the humanities that has made many of us reluctant to undertake such engagement. Some time ago in a study of the characteristic topoi of literary criticism, Fahnestock and Secor identified the *contemptus mundi* topos, and I think it's fair to say that this topos infects much of the scholarship of the humanities (Fahnestock and Secor), including that of rhetoric of science. Our characteristic positionality as critics, objectifying and evaluating the discourse of others, invites us to a kind of contempt, perhaps one of our occupational psychoses.

Can we retain the critical position and lose the psychosis? Can we "shift from understanding to action" (p. 3) and retain the critical position? Should rhetoric give up the critical position and adopt a more "affirmative" one (Muckelbauer)? Some who have worked with scientists and engineers on funded projects have found themselves unwillingly positioned as public relations agents, tasked with selling an agenda to a resistant public, a role where the critical position is not welcome—I've been in this position myself, and I know some of you have, as well.

An NSF IGERT grant[1] at my university (on which Bill Kinsella is a co-PI) focusing on genetic engineering and society deliberately involves humanities graduate students with those in the natural and social sciences, but the rhetoric student in this program must guard against being cast in the role of logographer. Projects like this that address problems of pest management, disease prevention, and ecosystem deterioration challenge our role as critics but offer the opportunity to bring rhetorical arts to bear in a consequential way. But such projects also raise more questions: Who should set research agendas? How isolated or autonomous can and should the ivory tower be? Can we and should we maintain a distinction between basic and applied research?

Many of us find the most congenial mode of engagement to be teaching, and those of us in departments of English play this role a bit differently from those in Communication because our teaching tradition has emphasized production over criticism, with our many courses in technical and scientific communication designed to help engineers and scientists become more effective communicators in their future professional roles. But the question we have always faced in this instructional setting is exactly the question at hand: where do standards come from—from practices that many agree are ineffective yet widely used? or from academic precepts and theories drawn from grammar, rhetoric, organizational sociology, and elsewhere? (Miller "What's Practical"). Inquiries into organizationally sanctioned practices often find that "bad writing" is the rhetorically obvious result of differential hierarchy and status, disparate professional cultures, and the like; these conditions make improvement in rhetorical performance difficult to achieve without social or organizational change (e.g. Brown and Herndl; Schryer).

By the same token, Leah points out that the two areas where we may have the most lasting effects, teaching and extradisciplinary service, constitute "unrewarded work" in the academy (p. 5). The current pressures for accountability and outcomes assessment in higher education may produce the organizational change needed to reward this work, and such change could do more to reposition the humanities than any concerted effort by ARST.

Harris, the horizon of the brain, the goal of scientific understanding

Randy Harris points us toward a horizon in the opposite direction: how to move from uninformed action to better understanding. The "snake-oil" of cognitive science will help us understand persuasion better, as distinct from the teaching tradition, which has spent a couple of millennia trying to help us "*achieve* persuasion" (p. 1). This sounds benign: an approach to understanding that looks to brain-work, rather than to contemptuous criticism or to a pedagogy of knacks. The

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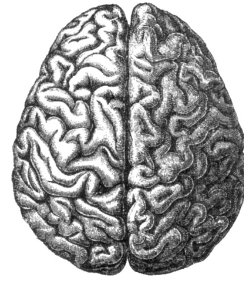
[1] Integrative Graduate Education and Research Traineeship, http://www.nsf.gov/crssprgm/igert/intro.jsp

brain provides the warrant for the claim of universality and thus for rhetoric as science.



http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Human_brain.png

Look closely at the way this argument is developed: it hooks onto a figure, a metaphor of a fluid in grooves. Randy quotes Sapir to the effect that language “flows” in “well-worn grooves of expression” (p. 6); however, his own claim is that “rhetorical figures operate in the grooves of the mind” (p. 5). This turns Sapir’s observation about the conceptual affordances of different languages into a claim that brings vividly to mind the human brain, a new and somewhat scary form of rhetorical materialism, as the metaphor takes on metonymic power. His examples are persuasive (and seem similar to Gestalt theory): repetition, edges, contrast, etc., are central to the human perceptual (and thus conceptual?) system, and linguistic expressions that flow in these grooves are more likely to be not just comprehended but believed.

And then what? If, in the pursuit of scientific understanding and in escape from weakly warranted pedagogy, we can establish rhetoric as cognitive and thereby understand it better (as a science), then we are faced exactly with the situation that Leah has presented to us: What do we do with this knowledge? It should inform our teaching, surely, and it should allow us to help correct judgments to be formed about the true and the just (Aristotle 1.1.12), particularly, in the present case, about scientific truths.

Harris acknowledges Plato’s concern, “that being directed in a series of movements by the ‘form’ will get us moving with the ‘matter’ as well” (p. 3), i.e., that we will become puppets in the hands of eloquence, or, perhaps, of glib hucksterism. But if “the form of signification profoundly affects the response of human organisms” (p. 9), then the ultimate promise of cognitive rhetoric is that we can learn to use form to control other humans. This has been the rhetorical dream: it’s what some thought the sophists were selling. It’s what the advertising industry and political campaign consultants are selling. My question is how distinct “the impulse to *understand* persuasion and the impulse to *achieve* persuasion” (Harris, 1) can be. From knowledge to power is, as Francis Bacon saw, but a short step, and knowledge of the means to achieve persuasion is but a short step away from coercion. And this raises again the question about whether the distinction between basic and applied research can be sustained.

Randy assures us that he is not claiming that there are “laws of suasion” (p. 8). But if cognitive linguistics becomes cognitive rhetoric, if the science of rhetoric that Socrates outlined for Phaedrus finally becomes realized, how credible will that disclaimer be? Is any of this good reason for refraining from a research program? Can we ever justify turning away from knowledge? I’m not prepared to answer these questions, but only to suggest that Randy’s research program should entail an equally ambitious inquiry into ethical obligations. Or perhaps, as I have speculated elsewhere, mutual knowledge of the mechanisms of influence will

simply cancel out their power, leaving us trusting each other that much less (Miller "Should We Name").

Another horizon

I was somewhat surprised that neither of these papers mentions new communication technologies, since they seem to shape so much speculation about the future in other forums, whether academic, civic, or commercial. It seems important to at least put this on our agenda. For example, the proposal for Alan Gross and Jonathan Buehl's collection-in-progress on *Science and the Internet* offers this rationale: "the Internet has utterly transformed the ways in which science is practiced, produced, and proliferated. But while rhetoricians of science have enlightened us concerning the structure and nature of the scientific article as it existed up to the end of the 20th century, they have yet to come to terms with its 21st century counterparts, communicative forms evolving so rapidly that it is difficult to capture them in flight." This collection contends not only that rhetorical forms of science are changing but that science itself is undergoing change perhaps as profound as the 17th-century scientific revolution, which took shape in the shadow of the printing press. Authors in this collection will be exploring changed boundaries between science and its publics, evolving scientific and public genres, new procedures of peer review, open access, data visualization, new possibilities for accommodated science.

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