Review

*Rhetoric as a Posthuman Practice*
*Casey Boyle*

Following the “posthuman turn” led by theorists such as Marilyn Cooper (“The Ecology of Writing”), N. Katherine Hayles (*How We Became Posthuman*), Collin Gifford Brooke (“Forgetting to Be (Post)Human”), Byron Hawk (*A Counter-History of Composition*), Sidney I. Dobrin (*Postcomposition; Writing Posthumanism, Posthuman Writing*), Thomas Rickert (*Ambient Rhetoric*), and Casey Boyle (“Writing and Rhetoric and/as Posthuman Practice”), rhetoric and writing scholars have become invested in the critical examination of humanist versus posthuman assumptions and affordances to inform compositional practices. Such philosophical exercise situates writing studies within important discussions that increasingly challenge its positionality in agency and subjectivity, (re)define the meanings of writing and thinking, and organize the pedagogy of these issues or topics. For Boyle, posthumanism can be a useful lens for scholars—especially those who have latched onto the ecological approach to writing and pedagogy—to explore humans’ intricate relationship with the nonhuman and material world(s).
Rhetoric as a Posthuman Practice is a book extension of Boyle’s 2016 College English article with a similar title. Boyle begins with an inquiry into the links between rhetorical actions, embodied activities, and human experiences (social as well as individual). This quest begins with the observation that new pervasive information-communication technologies are challenging our perception of the body—corporeal experiences—in the midst of digital mediation, informational intervention/interruption, and nonhuman (artificial) agency. Boyle positions rhetoric as a practice informed but not strictly controlled by human agency, that moves the understanding of rhetoric from functional habitus to an acknowledgment of rhetorical behaviors as subject to emerging factors in the material environment. A central question is how this view of rhetoric may inform our communicative practices in emerging technology or technological mediations through the rational and affective dimensions in these practices.

Posthuman conceptions allow examinations of how human practices are informed by material, technological, and social exercises, as Boyle emphasizes: “In response to the ‘posthuman predicament,’ practice becomes the only exercise that makes sense” (13). A posthuman view of rhetorical practices sees human agents as mediators, playing a role between machines or information instead of over them. Posthumanism removes the human from the center of activity. As Boyle deconstructs the human-centric ideals in information flow and communication, he contends that information should be “understood as an embodied, material practice of ethics” (14). This notion of rhetorical practice as an ethic of in-forming bodies serves as the driving theme of Boyle’s book.

Chapter 1 positions rhetoric as “an operation that activates and exercises bodies within ecologies of practice” (61). While posthuman practice does not diminish humanities actions or characteristics, practice is more than selective human activities. For Boyle, practice is beyond humanist, reflective exercises. Boyle noted that a majority of writing instructors today pledge to avoid a former pedagogical paradigm known as current-traditional rhetoric by exercising what he calls a reflective conception of rhetoric, or “current-critical rhetoric” (34), as a way to describe and evaluate rhetorical practices in process-based pedagogy. Boyle problematizes this current-critical approach as insufficient for a fuller understanding of nonhuman agents’ role in pervasive technologies and their global networks. He sees such conception as privileging human rationality and logic.
as centric to rhetorical power. To counter, Boyle offers a serial approach to conceptualizing rhetorical practice as extra-human—an orientation that considers reflection as a mechanism for growth without relying solely on human conscious thoughts in communities of practice. Instead, rhetoric’s power depends on its relationships to the material ecology encompassing it.

Boyle continues his argument for a nonhuman-centric rhetorical practice in chapter 2. He does so by demonstrating the transductive qualities of rhetoric through three case examples. Just as audible sound is transduced through air waves into the human ear and perceived as meaningful content through vibrations, Boyle uses Gilbert Simondon’s notion of transduction (On the Mode; “Position”) to understand information processing as a serial, evolutionary movement. Boyle provides a vibrant example of the viral sharing of a meme artifact that demonstrates the distinction between transduction and the conventional transmission model of information. Transduction generates difference without becoming something separate from the original content (62).

A central argument in this chapter is to consider rhetoric as information, since rhetoric doesn’t have a distinct object of practice (unlike chefs and culinary art, or physicians and medicine—as demonstrated in Gorgias). Boyle distinguishes rhetoric as form versus information by discussing how rhetoric creates the infrastructure for communication. For instance, enthymeme can be seen as cooperation between audience and the rhetor to connect the missing premise or warrant to an argument (83). Accordingly, Boyle argues that bodies can be treated as media for the transduction of information. He states, “A body is the rhetorical practice of enveloping and amplifying tendencies that take place within any given ecology of practice” (79). In terms of such conception, one may see a connection to Asao Inoue’s 2019 CCCC Chair’s Address, where Inoue asserted that merely being present or occupying space in an oppressive context counts as an act of violence because the body is a rhetorical device.

In order to update rhetoric to reflect posthuman thinking, Boyle features in chapter 3 the signature rhetorical practice of dissoi logoi—arguing both sides—as framed in Richard Lanham’s “bi-stable oscillation” heuristic. Looking at the popular exercise of assessing the stability of texts (more prominently in genre studies), Boyle takes up Simondon’s posthuman concept of metastability to show rhetoric’s interest in in-betweenness and how a metastable orientation may inform the critique of mediated conditions.
Here, Boyle uses technological glitches (or production error) and corresponding glitch art (productive error) as a case in point to demonstrate the interactions between human and nonhuman agents that cultivate a more critical perspective toward rhetorical practices.

In chapter 4, Boyle focuses on another traditional study of rhetoric, *topoi*, the generative procedure for developing subject matter. After establishing such procedure as metastable, Boyle contrasts *topoi* with *chora* as a rhetorical invention conception more suitable for dynamic media. Using the urban exploration (urbex) phenomenon as an illustrative case example, Boyle channels Simondon’s topology concept (“Technical Mentality”) and shows that space- and place-based media practices complicate rhetorical invention, which is traditionally static and human focused. Through examining the affordances of networked media in facilitating viral social practices such as urbexing, Boyle argues that *topoi* is a temporal, topological exercise that requires posthuman understanding of human-nonhuman collective practices.

Following these observations, Boyle advances a “transindividual” view of posthuman rhetorical subjectivity through rhetoric’s practice of *copia* in chapter 5. By examining the DIY digital network known as the Homeless Hotspots at the 2012 South by Southwest (SXSW) convention, Boyle reveals the inhuman(e) logic of technological utility that motivates rhetoric to consider the affective forces in (trans)bodily events (158). This examination creates an exigence for ethical reviews of infrastructural needs and challenges in emerging technological practices. As Boyle puts it, “The emerging conditions necessitating *posthuman practice* persuade us to not only become aware of technological dynamics but they also compel us to develop sensibilities for tuning practices of moving and generating knowledge in response to the ‘demands of connectivity’” (161–62). By the end of this chapter, one may ask the eminent McLuhan and Fiore question if the medium is the message, or the mediators themselves.

In sum, Boyle’s project expands rhetoric’s influence and reach by explicating posthuman practices through conventional rhetorical conceptions. By the means of three overlapping discussions and corresponding case examples, Boyle exemplifies the manifestation of posthuman practice via the rhetorical concepts of *dissoi logoi*, *topoi*, and *copia*. To rhetoric and composition scholars, Boyle’s posthumanist agenda motivates us to advance our project in developing ethical frameworks for the (post)digital
age through an investigation of human-nonhuman agency. To that end, Boyle establishes the human condition as incomplete and complementary to the rhetorical ecology at a time when emerging technologies increasingly restructure our material and social experiences. This project opens the opportunity for further investigating socio-rhetorical theory through the posthuman lens.

This book would make a valuable resource for graduate seminars in modern rhetoric theories and emerging issues. Boyle's bold and masterful arguments can be useful to researchers who are building a posthuman scheme for understanding writing and rhetoric, critiquing digital media, designing multimodal artifacts, and studying the human condition in the growing ecology of pervasive technologies today. Writing and rhetoric scholars as well as instructors may continue to criticize Boyle's insistence on the reduction of reflective exercises as a central compositional practice. His argument for a posthuman recuperation of metacognition will require greater buy-in from those who have been trained in the so-called current-traditional and current-critical traditions; there needs to be stronger adherence to Boyle's call for less focus on individual agency but instead a greater sensitivity to the material and ambient effects between human and nonhuman enactments of rhetoric. Nevertheless, Boyle's project offers a solid departure point for the pursuit of post(/trans)human pedagogical and practical treatments of rhetoric and writing.

Works Cited


Inoue, Asao. “#4C19 Chair’s Address.” YouTube, uploaded by National Council of Teachers of English, 4 Apr. 2019, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=brPGTeWcDYY.


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