BOOK REVIEWS


Reviewed by Sharon Crowley, Arizona State University

Changing the Subject is a provocative read. Marshall Alcorn’s project is to introduce talk about desire into the discourse of composition. Put another way, he wants composition teachers to enlarge their understanding of the forces that move human beings to thought and action. If modernism celebrated the persuasive force of reason, and postmodernism foregrounded the pull of ideology, in Alcorn’s post-humanism the power of desire takes center stage. His argument about the centrality of desire to human motivation draws on a first principle of Lacanian psychoanalysis: that humans spend their lives wanting to recover access to the Real, the Real that vanishes with our emergence into language. Desire to fill this lack flows through and works on the subjectivity that is partly inaugurated by immersion in the symbolic. Everyday desires, then, constitute an ongoing series of substitutions or supplements, a means of compensating for the original lack. Everybody desires, whether they want love, recognition, identification, strawberry cake, a faster computer, a Lexus, or all of these at once. And while desire is not the only force that moves us, Alcorn thinks it ought to have a place on the list of pulls or pushes that motivate human beings, right alongside reason and ideology.

The book moves from critique of the status quo in composition theory to recommendations for change. Alcorn devotes the opening chapters to analysis of contemporary models of subjectivity circulating in composition. Here it becomes clear that the book’s title is a pun, insofar as “changing the subject” means “talking about something else” as well as “taking a different model of subjectivity into account.” In chapter three, entitled “On Unfree Speech and the Pedagogy of Demand,” he illustrates the insufficiency of reason or logic as explanations for human action by means of a chillingly detailed analysis of the Milgram experiments in which students were asked to administer pain to another person and did so, even giving doses they supposed to be lethal. Alcorn shows that neither the philosophy of process pedagogy nor Bakhtinian dialogic can explain such responses because both rely on a humanist model of subjectivity that represents people to be in control of their desires. Nor can the social constructionist model of subjectivity explain why students resist radical teachers’ desire to persuade them to intervene, or even to sympathize with, people who suffer hardship and inequity. The mere provision of knowledge about hardship or discrimination does not suffice as a means of moving students away from beliefs that may actually cause suffering, Alcorn claims, because students’ attachments to such beliefs are libidinal or emotional rather
than simply ideological. A psychoanalytic reading of students’ resistance to changing their beliefs, on the other hand, would point out that “desire is not changed by knowledge but hardened into an even more defensive reaction formation” (39).

In short neither the humanist or social-constructionist models of subjectivity, both of which are popular in composition instruction, take desire into account. This is not surprising, given Alcorn’s insight that one of the effects of Enlightenment was to break up the “primordial attachments” (the term is borrowed from Clifford Geertz) that were more or less firmly in place in premodern cultures. “In premodern society, human attachments of blood, race, language, region, religion, and custom provided clear formulas for how people thought and acted. These attachments established social groups and set up the potential for war with other different-minded folk” (4-5). The breakup of allegiances to clan, church, and king that came with modernism created multiple possibilities for the construction of new identities and new objects of desire, but at the same time talk about desire went underground. The importance of reason in modern thought helped to minimize (and feminize) desire, so that serious discussion of its workings took place only in the new human science of psychoanalysis. Modern rhetoricians seem to have forgotten how to talk about desire, unless of course marketing and public relations are included in the domain of rhetoric. Clearly, though, the aim of work in these two fields is to manipulate desire rather than allow it to flow freely within communities, generating sympathy for others, as Alcorn wishes it were allowed to do.

The heart of Changing the Subject is Alcorn’s discussion of a psychoanalytic model of human subjectivity and his proposal for a pedagogy that takes libidinal attachments into account. In order to lend authority to his reliance on Freud and Lacan, Alcorn cites postmodern theorists who urge the centrality of psychoanalytic thought to their own work: Judith Butler, Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, Diana Fuss, Ernesto Laclau, Renata Salecl, Paul Smith, and Slavoj Zizek. Alcorn is also familiar with the work of the handful of rhetorical theorists—Diane Davis, Victor Vitanza, Lynn Worsham—who have explored the implications of Lacanian analysis for composition studies.

In chapter four, Alcorn introduces Lacan’s theory of the four discourses and uses them to articulate an ethics and a politics for composition. Interestingly, he compares the four discourses discriminated by Lacan (discourse of the master, the university, the hysteric, and the analyst) to the four kinds of discourse outlined by his teacher, Jim Kinneavy, in A Theory of Discourse (1971). Lacan’s discourse of the master is analogous to persuasive discourse, while the discourse of the university is analogous to what Kinneavy called representative discourse. While both of these have their uses, Alcorn argues that master discourses subordinate the desire of any audience to the master’s desire, while university discourses circulate as though desire and emotion do not exist. As such, neither is a sufficient ground from which to theorize an ethics or a politics of composition because they do not allow for the free flow of desire—a state of affairs, in part, in which people can identify with the desires of others. In the final chapters, Alcorn discusses mourning—the work that must be done before people can loosen the libidinal attachments that keeps desire from flowing freely because it is attached to various master signifiers: “To disinvest social constructions, one must do more than use language or be rational, one must do the work of withdrawing desire from representations” (117). He concludes by sketching a pedagogy of mourning.

Throughout the book Alcorn ties his argument to his vision of an ideal society. He writes: “The problem of politics is a problem of desire. It is an argument about who gets what and why. If politics is to be fair, we must fashion a culture in which everyone understands who suffers, why they suffer, and what those who suffer desire” (4). Clearly we do not now live in such a culture. Last night my television screen displayed starkly beautiful photographs of America’s newest military helicopter. The thing looks like a fire-breathing dragon. A voice-over asked us to marvel at the massive destruction this machine can perform with little risk to its pilots, particularly because it operates under cover of darkness. Those who designed and deploy such a device, as well as those who praise its capabilities, are apparently unable or unwilling to identify with the people and animals who will inevitably become targets for its missiles. Alcorn might say that such people (all of us, really) need to work on disinvesting ourselves from the master discourses that disable our ability to identify with the desires of others, who want, after all, what we want—not to be killed in the night, not to suffer, but to love and to prosper.

Even though Changing the Subject focuses on the composition classroom, it seems to me that Alcorn is well on the way toward developing a rhetorical theory that takes desire fully into account. In the preface he writes: “I would like to see an account of rhetoric that could imagine an American student’s anxious half-thought about race in the classroom as a significant event in the context of some larger web of human communication, where in response to this half-thought, there are global implications for legal arguments about justice in Indonesia” (ix). He is quite correct to opine that we need such a rhetorical theory, and this fine book suggests that Alcorn may be just the one to give it to us.

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