Noetic Writing: Plato Comes to Missouri

Jeff Rice

This article extends Walter Ong’s concept of noetic writing to the specific space of St. Louis, Missouri. In doing so, it generates a digital writing practice.

Walter Ong tells us that the noetic—the rhetorical characteristics of feeling, sensation, and intuition applied to a given communicative situation or act—stems from the oral tradition. The noetic contrasts with the print legacy of argument in which “teaching something is the same as ‘proving’ it” (Ramus 156). Ong’s sense of the noetic deviates from a rhetorical reliance on proof. Instead, it taps into the emotional feature of expression by placing rhetorical exchange in bodies other than the textual body, and thus it works from a logic of the personal as much as the textual. Specifically, Ong draws attention to predominantly notable figures who dominate a rhetor or writer’s memory, and who do so in emotional ways. He calls their domination noetic. In particular, Ong notes that,

Oral memory works effectively with ‘heavy’ characters, persons whose deeds are monumental, memorable, and commonly public. Thus, the noetic economy of its nature generates outsize figures, that is, heroic figures, not for romantic reasons or reflectively didactic reasons but for much more basic reasons: to organize experience in some sort of permanently memorable form. (Orality and Literacy 69)

Ong contends that the noetic dissipated with the emergence of print culture. “As writing and eventually print gradually alter the old oral poetic structures, narrative builds less and less on ‘heavy’ figures until, some three centuries after print, it can move comfortably in the ordinary human life-world typical of the novel” (70). Following Ong, we do not have to limit the noetic or its emotional dimensions to oral culture; nor should we agree that narrative has eliminated the noetic from expression and writing. Indeed, Ong’s claim points to a larger rhetorical issue: how does the noetic allow for a shift away from a dependence on argument and a move toward a writing whose characteristics are shaped by personal attachments to noetic figures? Ong’s point might reflect contemporary discussions of the noetic, such as Brian Massumi’s definition of affect, “the virtual as point of view,” for how this type of expression is not rooted in representation or logical reasoning, but in the body (i.e., the figure) (Massumi 35). Though it is only one facet of affect, emotion, Massumi writes, is its “most intense (most contracted) expression” because of how it is not bound to one body or space (35). Af-
flect “escapes confinement in the particular body whose vitality, or potential for interaction, it is” (35). Affect organizes space in ways similar to that of Ong’s noetic of the “heavy” figure. It dislocates from one body (the rhetor or the subject of study) in order to locate meaning in another body (the figure, or what Ong calls “the heavy character”). Affect, therefore, is a type of heuristic.

The great, inspirational, personal, emotional and other types of “heavy characters” Ong outlines aid or complete information organization in affective ways. They also generate meaning and thus present a type of invention practice. Popular culture is the most notable space for this activity today. As Barry Brummett writes regarding popular culture and rhetorical expression, when making sense of experience, the tendency is to take the outside body (a personality, celebrity, or fictional character) and to make it a personal, or internalized, one.

The challenge for the average citizen today, then, is to personalize large and complex issues in ways that make them understandable, without distorting those issues so much that good decisions cannot be made. We personalize issues when we translate vast and impersonal problems into smaller, more manageable images, stories, and texts. Personalization, in other words, is a strategy of textualization or narrative. (158)

What Ong attributes to oral culture, Brummett contextualizes for popular culture. While we may not characterize our current literacy state as “oral” we also cannot deny the oral’s role within a larger network of literacy practices we experience in the twenty-first century: orality, literacy, and what many call the digital state of electracy. In other words, what Ong attributes to the oral tradition, we can understand as a major part of the current media tradition we belong within (one that includes popular culture as well). Ong argues in similar fashion when he writes, “To varying degrees many cultures and subcultures, even in a high-technology ambiance, preserve much of the mind-set of primary orality” (Orality and Literacy 11). The digital tradition we live within shapes contemporary and everyday usages of the noetic as a form of organizing experience whether or not one writes to a computer space. Gregory Ulmer has long demonstrated this point; in his work, digital theory is performed in print as opposed to only on the computer. A digital noetic invention practice, then, can be done in this essay or online. Either medium can, in Brummett’s terms, offer a space for the narrative personalization of noetic figures.

“With the control of information and memory brought about by writing,” Ong argues, “you do not need a hero in the old sense to mobilize knowledge in story form” (Orality and Literacy 70). And yet, heroic or iconic figures do help us organize experience today; as Brummett notes, we cannot discount nor simply reject their role in the ways invention operates within spatial arrangements. Tabloids, pop art, websites, TV shows, newscasts, and other media are often organized around heroic or notable figures. Barack Obama
ran his 2008 presidential campaign, for instance, while accompanied by a heroic image of himself with the word “Hope” boldly printed below his face. During Obama’s campaign, Frank Shepard Fairey’s now iconic red and blue, pop art-inspired image digitally made its way onto weblogs, posters, t-shirts, Facebook profile images, and eventually into an exhibit at the Boston Institute of Contemporary Art. While Obama did not initiate the image, its circulation by Obama supporters allowed for a specific type of new media experience to be organized. Users of this image found its heroic quality useful for a variety of compositional reasons. One reason, we can suspect, was its noetic value; it generated an emotional and personal connection (the promise of hope and change, the excitement for a new type of leader, the convergence of American flag colors with the promise of an African-American president) that a different type of display would likely not generate. Although the Associated Press challenged Shepard Fairey’s appropriation of its photo (originally taken by freelancer Mannie Garcia) based on an economic concern, that concern was sparked by popular usage of the image for disparate purposes of information organization: demonstrating candidate allegiance, website design, and social networking identification. The space of the campaign was greatly organized by this heroic image. The space supporters found themselves in (online or in person) was organized by this image and these supporters internalized and personalized Obama as their own sense of hope. Continuing with Ong’s observation, then, we can ask how the noetic, as shaped by monumental figures, might build on such moments and help teach a contemporary rhetorical organization, a way to invent and arrange expression through space in the age of media by focusing on noetic figures.

By “space,” I mean the physical (where I am located), the rhetorical (where I compose or speak to) and the conceptual (where I arrange and organize). Henri Lefebvre, the great theorist of space, imagined the noetic as the everyday element of space. “Is space a social relationship?,” he asks in Production of Space (85). His response to his own question is affirmative. Space is materialism, it is formalism, it is emotion, it is a “network of exchange,” he argues (85). If we can embrace a critical practice of the urban, Lefebvre argues, it must be based in the everyday (like the everyday viewing of a campaign poster, for instance). Lefebvre’s critique is that space is often controlled by decision makers: architects, urban planners, politicians, or those who embody instrumental reasoning (often enacted through argument or proof). Only the everyday can deliver a critical practice capable of overcoming instrumental thought, Lefebvre argues. Only the everyday can overcome “the justification for assigning priority to what is known or seen over what is lived” (61). Only the addition of the everyday, the noetic, or what Lefebvre calls “strategy,” can assist the development of critical practice. Strategy means that “spaces are produced” as a variety of forces come into contact with one another on an everyday basis (84). We might say, for instance, that these everyday contacts are associative in logic; they
are not instrumental. “Strategy,” Lefebvre writes, “contains a key element: the optimal and maximal use of technology” (Urban Revolution 143). One element Lefebvre advocates regarding technology is the network.

Networks and their associative characteristics, however, have been defined largely as economic, structural, political or other modes of information control and delivery; i.e. instrumental reasoning conduits. Very little attention is given to the noetic nature of networks, those elements that do not fit into a structural concept of a given network’s organization. Kai Eriksson writes, “Structure is obviously one of the most central general metaphors against which network is organized” (319). Indeed, an everyday network based on noetic organization would not resemble the complex economic, computer, or social network structures described by writers as diverse as Manuel Castells or Albert-Laszlo Barabási. A noetic understanding of space—and the network organizational strategies that compose that space—would, I suggest, be based on non-instrumental or non-structural modes of communicative organization: feeling, sensation, and intuition. And borrowing from Ong, I contend that this organization would employ the “heroic” or the “outsized figure” that dominates memory, much in the way that the “Hope” poster did for the campaign network Obama’s supporters built. Important moments and figures within a rhetorical expression, in other words, can shape the arrangement of a given space. They can do so within networks of information.

One definition Lefebvre poses regarding the everyday is that any critical practice of the urban must segregate moments and activities, and out of this segregation draw conclusions without a fixed object or subject, what we would call a topos (Urban Revolution 140). In place of the fixed topos as a tool for organizing space and meaning (i.e., this is a specific city, this is the square, this is the economic makeup of a given neighborhood, this is the history of a dominant figure who once lived in this space), Lefebvre advocates the “problematic” (142). Lefebvre defines the problematic as “a path, not a model of totality” (144). In other words, Lefebvre teaches rhetoric to treat space as a path, rather than a fixed place of meaning. As a path, the noetic—the intuition or feeling that drives rhetoric—is always moving. Sensation drives writing, and sensation is not a static space of meaning. “I shall no longer believe in interpretation,” Roland Barthes writes (A Lover’s Discourse 215). Interpretation, for Barthes, is the dependence on topoi and the rejection of sensation, what has “come to correspond to the specialty of my desire” (34). In the type of spatial organization that Barthes and Lefebvre advocate, meaning is not rejected; instead, the fixity of meaning is questioned. To compose without topos is to do the kind of rhetorical work akin to Edward Casey’s understanding of the topos. In his critique of Aristotle’s concept of place, Casey writes, “Since a minimal requirement of place is to be selfsame—to be the same place for different things located in it—Aristotle must add to the first definition the rider that place cannot itself be changing or moving: it must be ‘unchangeable’” (The Fate of Place 55). Both Casey and Ulmer draw from Plato instead of Aristotle, noting
how the forgotten Platonic rhetorical concept of *chora* rejects fixed spaces of meaning and favors spaces that move. *Chora* is an associative, moving site of meanings, not a fixed one. It can form networks.

Lefebvre makes a similar point when he argues that “We are confronted not by one social space but by many—indeed, by an unlimited multiplicity or uncountable set of social spaces which we refer to generically as ‘social space’” (*Production of Space* 86). An unmoving place of the heroic, therefore, would be a composition of the figure *in place*; i.e., it would not be a social space. Composing with the figure in place might be a biography of the figure, an argument regarding the figure within society, an analysis of the figure, a breakdown of the figure’s lack of equal access or representation, or some other gesture that does not allow the figure to move or become a social *space*. In that sense, such a composition would be less noetic, and more instrumental in structure.

Thus, a challenge is posed for rhetorical organization and the overall question of heuristics. What if I could isolate heroic figures—grand figures who stick out in *my* memory for emotional reasons—and use them to compose a noetic space? Could I then engage in a spatial organization that is neither wholly *chora* nor *topos* in structure, but that takes up the everyday as critical practice? Could this gesture be extended more generally as pedagogy or research? What I would do, then, is invent a method of organization based on noetic figures that would generate a personalized narrative, like the one that Brummett claims for popular culture or the one that the Obama poster achieved for a specific group of people at a specific moment. Each noetic figure I choose to isolate from my memory, when networked together, would allow me to fashion a digital spatial organization. This challenge is one I consider to be generalizable to the teaching and practice of rhetoric in the age of the network. My project is rhetorical, for its concerns are with the fundamental characteristics of rhetoric: invention, arrangement (or organization), and delivery of ideas. And what space, in this experiment, would I arrange so as to avoid what Lefebvre calls the generic “error” often made when writing about space, the moments when we “consider ‘things in isolation,’ as ‘things in themselves’” (*Production of Space* 90)? I am not looking to consider my figures in isolation of one another or only in themselves. In this exercise and in this response to the “heroic” theorists I am working with, I am looking for a way to organize with all of my figures at once in a networked, associative manner. I need a space that is emotional, important, and personal to some degree. To meet the challenge I pose, I have decided to choose the city of St. Louis as the space of my writing.

**St. Louis**

Out of all the noetic sites to choose, why would I choose St. Louis? I wasn’t born in St. Louis. I don’t live in St. Louis. I first encountered St. Louis almost four years ago when we moved to Missouri. Every four to five weeks, my wife and I follow I-70 East two hours from Columbia to St. Louis to shop...
for a type of “everyday experience”: to take our little girl to some place of entertainment and to eat in a nice restaurant. What is, I might ask, my overall connection to St. Louis beyond the desire to be a consumer in the urban environment, one of the elements of the urban that Lefebvre sharply criticizes? How does St. Louis generate the noetic for me?

My connection to this city emerges out of a series of personal juxtapositions and a network of moments that have interpelled me into a position of wanting to write about this space (just as Ong claims for the noetic). The city, as a heavy figure itself, calls me into an exigence of composition despite my supposed lack of personal investment. St. Louis, as Barthes claims for the text in general, “can wring for me only this judgment, in no way adjectival: that’s it! And further still: that’s it for me!” (Pleasure of the Text 13). By wanting to write in the space called St. Louis, I follow a tradition of invention set out by figures such as Gregory Ulmer who calls the juxtaposition of interpellative moments of experience the popcycle (see Ulmer, Heuretics). The popcycle is an invention tool that allows a rhetor the space to organize various moments of experience in juxtaposition (as its appropriation of Plato’s chor a allows for), rather than in isolation or complete segregation of one another. Ulmer defines such everyday areas of experience as School, Entertainment, Family (motivated by the anecdote), and Discipline. “Each of these institutions has its own discourse, including a matrix of logics, genres, modes, and forms relevant to function in the society” (Heuretics 195). The popcycle is designed for digital writing whether a computer is used or not; its principle organizational strategy is based on conduction, not deduction. That is, associations move the everyday items organized via the popcycle’s categories. Each area within the popcycle, on its own, provides a worldview. But worldviews, Ulmer argues, are shaped by a variety of experiences in relationship with one another, not as separate noetic moments in one’s life. At their point of convergence, we find a pattern, and the pattern provides insight. This insight allows a network (a digital space for composing), and its various components, to be organized and delivered to an audience as an idea. “The popcycle is so named to reflect the circulation of ideas or memes through all the institutions, with any of the discourses being a potential source for materials used in any of the other discourses” (Electronic Monuments 19). The categories Ulmer presents, the designation of each discursive area, of course, are exchangeable. Any segregated moment or activity—to quote Lefebvre—can be put in relationship with any other and allowed to conduct, or shape, a space. Ulmer’s point is that invention, as a rhetorical act, must allow for pattern formation at its core. Once you have discovered that pattern, arrangement may take place. For Ulmer, such arrangements take the form of narratives, not arguments. The topos of writing, argument, is rejected as the only representation of meaning.

St. Louis is such a space of juxtapositions for me; it presents itself as a potential narrative of networked noetic figures. If I were to compose a St. Louis without a fixed topos, I would choose the heuristic of juxtaposition that
Ulmer proposes, but I would do so without using the categories established within the popcycle. Though my categories are spatially, not conceptually, bound, the popcycle teaches me a method of invention relevant to the everyday, and applicable to my concerns with invention, arrangement, and delivery. In other words, in order to meet the challenge the noetic poses to networked organization, I can choose categories already tied to St. Louis, or Missouri, in general. These are categories that I consider “heroic” because of their place within my memory (someone else, organizing a different space for invention purposes, would identify other types of figures based on her memory). As an English professor interested in writing and technology, my categories are also personal—they have emotional connections to my professional experience and desire to invent writing practices for the age of new media. Ong argues that Peter Ramus removed the personal from scholastic practices—and particularly from the invention of new pedagogical practices—by insisting that the object of study and the one who does the studying be separated, segregated, from each other, and that no emotional attachment be encouraged (the personal is rejected). “With all rhetorical organization governed from outside rhetoric by this ‘arrangement’ (syllogism and method),” Ong writes, “the role of voice and person-to-person relationships in communication is reduced to a new minimum” (Ramus 289). Put into a visual display, Ramist organizational practices became the outline, a method for spatially organizing experiences prior to composing. The outline divided the writer from the area of study or space she desired to compose. The outline established a writing antithetical to noetic rhetoric. It depersonalized composing and forced a writer to organize in a non-conductive or non-associative manner.

I, on the other hand, want a totally personal motivation for my study, a noetic methodology that can be generalized to others learning invention and organization in order to compose networked spaces. I choose what interests me, what feels right, not what is proof for an argument. I choose what functions as an emotional response directed toward my body: that’s it for me! “Intuition,” Ulmer notes as if arguing against Ramist thinking, “in contrast to analysis, operates in a global or Gestalt mode, crossing all the sensory modalities in a way that may not be abstracted from the body and emotions” (Heuretics 140). My motivation, then, is more akin to Roland Barthes’ method of study than that of Peter Ramus. My motivation is to compose with categories that are not distinct or segregated from me, but rather that reference me as much as they reference any other system of meaning. As Barthes writes in Camera Lucida (his exploration of visibility and meaning systems), I am the reference of every image (84). I, in other words, am the reference of every noetic category I use. Thus, I do not seek out representational categories (such as race, economics, government, etc.) but instead I look for personalized or folksonomic categories (they are heroic in the sense of ego as well). As Barthes describes his invention process: “I wanted to explore it not as a question (a theme) but as a wound: I see, I
feel, hence I notice, I observe, and I think” (*Camera Lucida* 21). A noetic organizational practice juxtaposes one’s self with a given category or representation. I feel that representation (it is me) as much as I see it (it is in another space, like St. Louis).

My heroic categories, which emerge out of my choice of St. Louis, are localized; they have some kind of relationship (no matter how tangential) to Missouri or St. Louis. From Theory (the category that informs thinking), I choose Marshall McLuhan who taught at St. Louis University. From Writing (the category of professional work), I choose William Burroughs, who was from St. Louis and is buried there. And from Rhetoric (the category of a disciplinary practice), I choose Plato, who has no connection to St. Louis but whose name appears as that of a small Missouri town, Plato, Missouri. My decision to choose these heroic figures is intuitive and conductive: they dominate my memory of St. Louis as they fit the three heuristic categories I work with. I don’t write to reject or critique their presence in a space I am composing; instead, I choose these items because they are noetic, personalized, everyday items. In what follows then, I will map out this noetic space as an example for a networked organizational practice. The example is not meant to be copied by students or other scholars, but to provide a possibility for composing and organizing space with noetic figures. The rationale for such a mapping is to engage with the critical practice of the everyday (as Lefebvre teaches me) and at the level of a personalized rhetorical production (as Ong, Ulmer, and Barthes teach me). The following example poses three of my everyday St. Louis moments organized around heroic figures. This organization, following the theory I have described so far in this lengthy setup, juxtaposes noetic figures with personal areas of experience (family trips to St. Louis). I narrate my map spatially (around figures) and temporally (around dates) and allow the pattern that emerges out of these fragmented moments to develop as my writing. I move, then, from theory (the first half of this essay) to practice (the second half). My rationale is to discover a new media practice of arrangement motivated by the noetic narrative, as opposed to the instrumental basis of argument common in various pedagogical and academic practices.

**Spatial moment #1 Marshall McLuhan**

1951. While teaching at St. Louis University, McLuhan writes his examination of advertising and media, *The Mechanical Bride*, with the promise that his method of analysis will not offer “conclusions in which anybody is expected to rest but are intended merely as points of departure.” McLuhan adds, “Where visual symbols have been employed in an effort to paralyze the mind, they are here used as a means of energizing it” (vi). *The Mechanical Bride*, therefore, is not written as a totality of advertising analysis nor as a way to alter behavior regarding advertisement reception. Instead, it begins the process of media knowledge in general: how do we read the ad and how do we respond to it? McLuhan connects the advertisement to a basic,
everyday organizing principle, the ubiquitous status of celebrity. As McLuhan comments on a print ad for International Sterling silverware entitled “First Breakfast at Home,” “If the scene is from the village past of the leading character, it must be such a past as never was, but it must be one suited to the present eminence of the star” (*The Mechanical Bride* 112).

Now recognized as a book that predicted the cultural and social dislocation of the information age, *The Mechanical Bride* was conceived and partially drafted just a short walk from St. Louis’s Grand Center, a location in proximity to St. Louis University. McLuhan’s contention was that advertising and media play roles in shaping cultural formations. Gary Genosko situates *The Mechanical Bride* as the temporal and theoretical space between two major theoretical movements associated with cultural studies: the Birmingham school and Walter Benjamin’s work (as a part of the Frankfurt School). He writes: “Still, it is McLuhan’s *Bride* that serves as a two-sided signpost, pointing toward both Paris and Birmingham from, of all places, St. Louis” (34). We could say that McLuhan put St. Louis between two cultural cities, creating a worldview in which St. Louis sits in the middle of European theory, neither rejecting nor embracing one belief system over the other.

The Grand Center—where McLuhan wrote—references Europe (which Birmingham and Paris belong within). One of the few remaining movie palaces in the country, the Fox Theater, is in the Grand Center. The Fox alludes to the grandeur of an aristocratic Europe where entertainment culture reigned. The St. Louis Theater on Grand may have been even more European in its design. Its “lobby resembles the Palace at Versailles—at least it was architects Rapp and Rapp’s version of a European palace” (Bagley 32). The Grand Center also highlights the cultural tradition of food. Along Grand Avenue, restaurants can be found, many of which are Vietnamese, not European, thus suggesting a rejection of familiar European values for the unfamiliar. Food, some might argue, is an emerging form of entertainment in contemporary, media culture. Within the Grand Center, this point is obvious: one of its main tenants is The Hard Rock Café, a restaurant that juxtaposes food with iconic and heroic artifacts of rock and roll history (guitars, shirts, records). To eat at The Hard Rock is to be entertained as much as it is to be fed. To eat at the Hard Rock is to sit among the artifacts of an American version of aristocratic culture, rock and roll. In one section on food culture in *The Mechanical Bride*, McLuhan writes about Coca-Cola. “Coke as soft drink naturally started out to appeal to the soft emotions . . . So that it would be hard to suggest a more central item of current folklore, or one more subtly geared to evoke and release the emotions of life today” (*The Mechanical Bride* 120). This emotion, McLuhan notes, is tied to the image of “the American girl” who is read as “cokes, hamburgers, and clean places to sleep” (118). The Hard Rock exemplifies such eating habits.

January 12, 2008, Grand Avenue, Lemongrass. At lunch, my one-year-old daughter Vered orders Vietnamese food. We were two miles from the Grand Center, the area where McLuhan shaped his thinking. To order suggests
the grand gesture of organization (whether food or rhetorical expression). “Does ‘freedom’ mean the right to be and do exactly as everybody else?” McLuhan asks about a Quaker State print ad. “How much does this kind of uniformity depend on obeying the ‘orders’ of commercial suggestion?” (117). Contemporary dining organizes its experiences around the figure of ethnicity and the suggestion that such dining allows for heterogeneity (the foreign body) within an ordered and uniform experience (the local body): Vietnamese, French, American hamburger. Later during our weekend trip, we went to eat at the “aristocratic” European-styled bistro Franco (positioned less than three miles from the Grand Center). Normally, Vered behaves at restaurants. But at this age, restlessness kicks in, particularly when nothing entertains her. To top it off, the restaurant, located in Soulard Market, had no highchairs. We swapped her back and forth while we ate. The waiter nodded affectionately and called her “little boy.”

Lemongrass, St. Louis.

In The Mechanical Bride, McLuhan writes, “And so it is that not only labor saving appliances but food and nylons are consumed and promoted with moral fervor” (33). The name of the part of the book where McLuhan makes this point is called “Know-How.” In our Franco moment of consumption, we rush to finish with a moral fervor. We feel embarrassment or discomfort that we are not representing the grand dining experience, that we are rejecting this practice in order to enjoy the everyday habit of a family
eating together. We feel embarrassment and discomfort that Vered is not read as an “American girl.”

**Spatial moment #2 Burroughs**

1959. William S. Burroughs’ rhetorical contribution to the vocabulary of new media organization is the cut-up method employed throughout his food-inspired title, *Naked Lunch*. “You can cut into *Naked Lunch* at any intersection point. . . I have written many prefaces” (224). *Naked Lunch* is a food narrative as much as it is a cultural or new media one. Burroughs explains the concept of *Naked Lunch* as “a frozen moment when everyone sees what is on the end of every fork” (xxxvii). At one point in the novel, Burroughs writes: “Illinois and Missouri, miasma of mound-building peoples, groveling worship of the Food source” (11). A section devoted to A.J., financier of Islam, Inc., revolves around dining. “A.J. once reserved a table, a year in advance *Chez Robert* where a huge, icy gourmet broods over the greatest cuisine in the world” (148). This cuisine is perfected by Robert's brother Paul, who, after Robert's demise, rejects traditional haute (or European) cuisine and concocts the notion of “Transcendental Cuisine.” It is described accordingly: “Imperceptibly the quality of the food declines until he is serving literal garbage, the clients being too intimidated by the reputation of *Chez Robert* to protest” (149). A sample menu of Transcendental Cuisine features “Clear Camel Piss Soup with boiled Earth Worms,” “The After-Birth of Supreme Boeuf, cooked in drained crank case oil,” and “the Limburger Cheese sugar cured in diabetic urine, doused in Canned Heat Flamboyant” (149).

Burroughs exaggerates food, as he does almost every element of cultural representation, reception, and production in order to cause discomfort or disrupt everyday practice, much as Lefebvre offers via the concept of strategy. The noetic, for Burroughs, is an engagement with instrumental reasoning by offering hyperbolic declarations and confusing narrative development as a response. “There is only one thing a writer can write about: what is in front of his senses at the moment of writing” (221). Sense of food, of rhetorical value, of engagement, these are moments of the hyperbolic, what Plato critiqued as “ornamentation and sophistry” (30). Taste, too, is a hyperbolic feature of writing. Our sense of representation (how one image or term refers to something else within a deductive or critical logic) is confused because of taste, what Barthes calls “the murmuring mass of an unknown language” that blocks “the regional and social origins of whoever is speaking, his degree of culture, of intelligence, of taste, the image by which he constitutes himself as a persona and which he asks you to recognize” (*Empire of Signs* 9). Burroughs exaggerates representations so that we no longer maintain familiar recognitions of ourselves or of our everyday habits. In *Naked Lunch*, for instance, Dr. Benway presses Carl on how sexual taste is shaped by noetic representation, showing Carl pin-up girl photos and watching the ensuing pleasure. “You have good taste, my boy,” Dr. Benway tells Carl. “I
may tell you in strictest confidence that some of these girls . . . are really boys” (Naked Lunch 163).

In addition to these references in Naked Lunch, a great deal of Burroughs’ work is devoted to food. In The Ticket that Exploded, he writes: “Present time leads to an understanding of knowing and open food in the language of life” (100). And in Nova Express, he situates food as a method of delivery: “And if there is one thing that carries over from one human host to another and establishes identity of the controller, it is habit: idiosyncrasies, vices, food preferences” (56). Food, a type of habit, defines the everyday for most of us. Our everyday experiences revolve around a heroic or heavy figure *topos* of food: dining out, take-out, and delivery. Or our everyday experience is shaped by the icons of a quotidian fast food experience: Ronald McDonald, Colonel Sanders, and Wendy.

September 7, 2008, The Cupcakery. The Cupcakery in St. Louis’ Central West End is two miles from The Grand Center. In this establishment, the cupcake represents an everyday food habit (birthday party favor, snack) as an elegant or aristocratic experience (expensive, unique flavorings). A framed picture in our dining room shows Vered at the Cupcakery, stabbing a cupcake with a fork. This is the frozen moment I see every time we sit down to eat at home. In this moment, she has recently learned to use utensils in a manner that will allow her to eat with minimal mess. Burroughs situates the meaning of cake as belonging within the space of discomfort and pedagogical mess. At the Interzone University, the Professor reads to The Students:
“She wake shivering in the gentle pink dawn, pink as the candles on a little
girl's birthday cake, pink as spun sugar, pink as a sea-shell, pink as a cock
pulsing in a red fucking light” (Naked Lunch 86).

For Burroughs, our habits undermine us when they are media controlled. Television, movies, novels, advertisements, arguments, narratives, and so on control expression and behavior. They dictate the know-how of eating. Nova Express begins with a cry against media control—thus evoking a strategy of the everyday—by drawing on the giant figure of soft drink production as a force that must be contained. “For God’s sake, don’t let that Coca-Cola thing out” (3). Later, Burroughs asks, “But what in St. Louis?” His own response is “Memory picture coming in” (20). To read Burroughs is to read with heroic and iconic figures embedded in memory and not in argumentative structure. Coca-Cola is a memory image; let out, it is a daily consumption. Vered stab-
bbing a cupcake with a fork is my own memory image; let out, it controls my parental feelings to protect and shelter her from problematic representations (how women should differentiate themselves from boys) or from bad food (fast food, of which I include drinking Coke products). Burroughs has his own set of culinary and non-culinary figures whose memory images parade throughout his work: A.J., The Rube, Dr. Benway, The Subliminal Kid. “Program empty body,” we are told (Nova Express 73). Bodies are empty so as not to be things in isolation, things in themselves, memories without spatial placements into social relationships or networked spaces. These bodies, these figures, are networked codes for cultural behavior.

Indeed, Burroughs uses food to decode the cultural coders, to take up McLuhan’s call in The Mechanical Bride: “Why not use the new commercial education as a means to enlightening its intended prey?” (Mechanical Bride v). In other words, why not turn consumer culture—of which eating is a part—back on itself? Such is the promise of the cut-up method Burroughs employs. “The first step is to isolate and cut association lines of the control machine” (Ticket that Exploded 217). This gesture, too, is a form of know-how. It suggests that we know the limits and possibilities of cultural representation. We engage with the representation while also removing it from context, refiguring its position, and resituating within a new context. We allow, in other words, a topos to move. This type of know-how suggests that we know how to eat, in a metaphorical yet rhetorical way. This type of know-how allows a noetic composition to move with spatial and temporal moments, cutting and pasting noetic figures and their writings, rather than to depend on instrumental reasoning for the purpose of argumentation or the offering of causal proof.

Spatial moment #3 Plato

I do not know if there are any restaurants in Plato, Missouri. I have never been there. A Google Maps request of the town’s dining options reveals the least European of foods as being available: Hardee’s, Sonic, McDonalds, and Pizza Hut. I am not comfortable around fast food. I try to keep it away from
my daughter. I feel more comfortable about Vered’s new daycare than her old one because they refuse to serve the kids cupcakes, a popular snack at her old daycare. As the previous photo represents, however, I have mistakenly allowed her to eat a cupcake possibly because the establishment serving them (The Cupcakery located in St. Louis’ Central West End) is represented as an exaggerated “upscale” or sophisticated “taste,” and thus my sense of representation shifts (some of these cupcakes aren’t cupcakes). We might assume that Plato would not have been comfortable with fast food either, as is evident by how he writes about food in order to reject rhetoric. In Robin Waterfield’s translation of Gorgias, Socrates says, “So now you know what I think about rhetoric. It corresponds to cookery: as cookery is to the body, so rhetoric is to the mind” (33). Cookery is a knack, Socrates argues, because “it lacks rational understanding.” (32). Unlike medicine, the area of experience Socrates poses as an acceptable contrast, rhetoric “doesn’t involve expertise”; it is “good for guessing” (30). It relies, we can infer from this critique, on intuition or conductive association. “I call cookery a kind of flattery,” Socrates argues, “because its aim is pleasure” (32).

What Socrates fears, it seems, is power, and the role pleasure plays in generating discursive control. Rhetoric produces control over the everyday for how it taps into the pleasure of everyday experience. When Polus asks Socrates about rhetoricians, the exchange is as follows:

Socrates: I myself don’t think people have any opinion at all about them.
Polus: But of course they do! Rhetoricians are the most powerful members of their communities, aren’t they?
Socrates: No, not if you believe that power is a good thing for its possessor.

(33-34)

“The writer of pleasure,” Barthes writes, “has the right and power to express it” (Pleasure of the Text 21). As Burroughs and McLuhan demonstrate in this space I am organizing and calling St. Louis, power is the ability to code or decode, to understand representation (hyperbolic or otherwise) for its hegemonic role as well as to pose representation as an experience of pleasure, of the noetic. The duality is a workable contradiction. Experiences are mixed with one another in non-causal narratives, as I am doing here. The result is not a totality of meaning, but, as Lefebvre calls for, a path towards teasing out possible meanings. There is, then, a rhetorical rejection of totality at play.

Love Mary? – Fuck the shit out of me – Get up off your big fat rusty-dusty – It’s a long way to go, St. Louis woman – prospect of red mesas out to space – Do you love me? (Ticket that Exploded 44)

The pedagogical value of these types of pleasure contradictions (i.e., knowing the power of representation as it may oppress meaning, while not entirely rejecting that power either), unlike what Peter Ramus taught, is
found in the juxtaposition of personal and cultural experience as a type of know-how. It is a way to metaphorically eat; it is what Greil Marcus calls “a corpse in your mouth,” the consumption—and not the critique or rejection—of mass imagery on a daily basis. I consume the heroic figure (McLuhan, Burroughs, and Plato) and the personal narrative all at once.

Yet such consumption does not always yield coherent or rational narratives, a point evident in Burroughs’ disjointed writings. Peter Elbow, known for rejecting control in favor of the free-writing heuristic that begins with confusion (with the hope to eventually settle on a rational, clear piece of writing), echoes Plato’s concerns with rhetoric when he writes, “At first I thought that writing freely was the secret of cooking. If someone who has always written in a controlled way takes off the editorial lid, he tends to produce a burst of cooking. Yet often this is not enough in itself to produce cooking. Sometimes it just makes a barren mess” (48). It is clear that Plato finds rhetoric to be a mess. “And what I’m saying about cookery is that it does seem to be a branch of expertise, but in fact isn’t; it’s a knack, acquired by habituation. Another branch of the same activity is rhetoric” (30). Without expertise, what Ong claims Ramus would have called “normal school exercises” (the repeated mastery, or totality, of an object of study) the organization of meaning is deemed suspect or professionally rejected because it lacks a fixed focus or subject (Ramus 154). Rhetoric, without this vision of fixed subject and with its emphasis on, in addition to other items, emotional appeal, is too messy, too disorganized. A reader of this St. Louis narrative I am composing, at this point, may be feeling that sense of Burroughs-styled disorganization even as I, the one who moves meanings through this space, feel the organization following patterns. A reader may feel that including fragmented moments of eating with my daughter along with fragmented moments of heroic figures is inappropriate; while I, composing with my noetic figures, feel that this move allows me a noetic methodology of writing that argument will not provide. It allows me insight that argument might deny me.

Whatever is perceived as mess comes about partly because of delivery. Just as Elbow is concerned with the pedagogical delivery of a mess, so is Socrates concerned with a rhetorical delivery that flatters, that confuses, that exaggerates, that is, as he repeatedly claims, a knack. “According to my source, the story teller’s ‘sieve’ is the mind; he used the image of a sieve to imply that the minds of fools are leaky” (Gorgias 81). Popular cooking sieves that deliver cookery to an individual include the colander and the cheese cloth. One content (milk, yogurt) passes through the sieve’s porous path in order to produce another content (cheese). St. Louis’ contribution to exaggerated food (such as that Burroughs presents) is Provel, a soft cheese mixture of provolone, cheddar, and Swiss with a low melting point. “Last round from St Louis melted flesh identity,” Burroughs writes (Naked Lunch 184). Provel tops the generic St. Louis pizza, if not a Missouri Pizza Hut’s output. It is the least rational of all main stream cheeses. It makes no sense
for cooks to use this juxtaposition of cheeses to top a pizza when so many other, pure, melting cheeses are available.

When Plato denigrates rhetoric in a manner suggestive of Provel cheese, a false representation of meaning (real cheese indicated by its purity and adherence to specific culinary principles), he makes the Burroughs gesture regarding representation (i.e., some of these girls are boys). He critiques or rejects a type of know-how. In this type of critique, instrumental reasoning is the supporter of false representations (much as Lefebvre needs the everyday to overcome urban planning’s errors—what he refers to in Urban Revolution as “the blind field” [26]). Argument. Representation. These are tools of instrumental reasoning, and they dominate pedagogy and institutional practice. They are the logical compositional choices we make when representing thought in various spaces, from the essay to the website to the urban city to parenting. Despite a theoretical culinary tradition of challenging representation and argument, one which St. Louis sits between (Frankfurt and Birmingham), the commonplace of academic writing is to work with both. Instead of discomforting representations, as Burroughs might do or as a noetic writing is doing for me, academics maintain representations through arguments. Academic writing does not feel comfortable being identified as a type of Provel cheese. A noetic narrative is, I add, one kind of such cheese.

Yet a representation like Provel does discomfort as it simultaneously represents or symbolizes St. Louis cuisine (much in the way Burroughs does with pleasure and critique). To eat Provel is to be disgusted (what is this taste) and also to be within a space’s cultural code or representation (St. Louis). I am interested in a metaphorical Provel arrangement, not the actual cooking of Provel cheese. In pedagogy and in research, I am interested in a discomforted topos, a path or strategy of sorts, that does not lead us so far away from representation that we do not recognize the space we compose within, but that still allows us to move topoi within compositions. For this reason, I have discovered a rhetorical cookery in my juxtapositions of St. Louis. In his fragmented and non-representational autobiographical narrative, Roland Barthes compares the rhetorician to a cook. In particular, the metaphor allows him to be a rhetorician who follows stereotypes, but not to keep such meanings in place. Barthes wants stereotypes to be topos that move: “Like a watchful cook, he makes sure that language does not thicken, that it doesn’t stick” (Roland Barthes 162). The clichés we organize experience by (the heroic figures of our memory) are not meant to thicken (i.e., to become arguments), but they are tools for organizing meaning within a rhetorical exchange. McLuhan argued that the “simplest definition of cliché is a ‘probe’ which promises information but very often provides more retrieval of old clichés” (From Cliché to Archetype 55). The topos as stereotype, as a type of cliché, is familiar to contemporary culture. The iconic figures who grace our tabloids or newscasts are stereotypes as much as they are real people. “Ryan to Wed Farrah, D-Day for Gosselins, Jen’s Hot New Love” read three National Enquirer headlines in a row. Failed romance signifies the rejection
of family values among celebrity culture. It is a fixed topos that headlines, as they are organized around noetic figures, depend upon. Plato as the fixed figure of rhetorical studies is another. McLuhan as the fixed figure of media studies is yet another. In any given writing on space, one could find numerous, commonplace citations to function likewise. But how is the stereotype, in general, familiar to the organization of rhetoric and food?

**Stereotyped Organization**

St. Louis as Provel is a culinary topos. It is a gastronomical stereotype. August 2, 2008. My daughter played with the Provel cheese in a sandwich served at Blues City Deli, near Soulard (four Miles from the Grand Center). Iconic figures of rock and roll and blues culture graced the walls as folk art. Vered threw the cheese on the table. She tossed the cheese on the floor. She made a mess. The stereotype of the industrial city—like St. Louis or where I once lived, Detroit—is ruins—the great industrial mess. Transcendental economics destroys the urban environment, this stereotype tells us in a variety of narrative forms. The stereotype of an academic paper is delivery (reading an argument aloud to an audience, presenting an argument in written form for publication, or for the student, writing an argumentative essay for a course). The stereotype of media arguments is decoding (as McLuhan does in *The Mechanical Bride* or as the Birmingham School taught, beginning with the analysis of the heroic, noetic figure James Dean in the 1964

Blues City Deli, St. Louis
Stuart Hall and Paddy Whannel book *The Popular Arts*). The stereotype of organization for academic writing is causality.

But a noetic organization, as I lay out here, is a probe of sorts as well. It is a type of everyday practice, a Lefebvre rejection of what is known or seen over what is lived. It is the intuition of a conductive organization (for me, the organizer of this space, it feels emotionally right putting three heroic figures in proximity with each other and with myself and daughter). What is more everyday than the cliché or stereotype? A St. Louis restaurant acting like a European bistro. A child playing with her food. Quoting Plato when writing about rhetoric. Associating St. Louis with two principle figures of this space—McLuhan and Burroughs—is, after all, hardly novel in the world of *topos*-driven writing. They are embedded figures in many narratives of this city. Every city, indeed, functions by its iconic and heroic figures (“so and so slept here”; “this is where so and so grew up”). My *topos*, however, moves out of that embedded space. It moves with the emergent pattern of food. Its food driven narrative does not stay still. “From Plato we learn that receptivity is connectivity” Edward Casey writes (48). Casey rethinks the *topoi* not as fixed places, but as places of connection. Carolyn Miller, too, offers a similar position when she argues that the *topoi* are containers (or spaces of decorum) while simultaneously being spaces where “novelty and innovation are possible” (137). Miller emphasizes the moving nature of *topoi* that do not settle on fixed or specified meanings as sites of invention:

To be rhetorically useful, then, as well as comprehensible, novelty must be situated. Rather than offering the radically new, it must occupy the border between the known and the unknown. It will be just that which cannot be defined or specified beforehand but which can be recognized and understood afterward. The metaphor of the topos captures this requirement by specifying a region of general conception without specifying its exact contents or connections. (141)

Connectivity is the rhetorical act of organization and delivery in my narrative, and it is the basis of a type of networked pedagogy that teaches rhetorical invention, organization, and delivery. It is, to quote Plato, knackery, for it does not rely on a sense of argumentative expertise but rather on a noetic sense of intuition. I embrace that knackery for my own writing, but also for the students with whom I work.

Our family trips to St. Louis are still organized around food. Where will we eat? Should we stay overnight at a hotel so that we can eat at a specific restaurant that only does dinner service and thus avoid a late night drive home? I can’t help but think of my daughter eating in St. Louis. Vietnamese. French. Deli Food. European-styled meals. “In a social and economic sense,” McLuhan writes about media representations of the family, “success, it would appear, means the virtual rejection of the parents” (65). My wife and I have gone to great lengths regarding food delivery to steer our daughter towards “good” food, hoping she will not reject our food habits. We try to set a cu-
linary path for her, one which, our own parents tell us, will be problematic and difficult to maintain as she grows older and is influenced by a variety of culinary noetic forces and representations we reject fully, like Coca-Cola and McDonald's, or half-heartedly, like cupcakes. “You just wait,” my mother warns me. “She will want a Happy Meal like you once did.” Vered ate her first sweetbreads when she was one year old. She eats homemade ice cream. She loves hummus. She likes olives, onions, and blue cheese (whose smells discomfort many people and lead to culinary rejection).

If there is an exaggerated food topos learned from my noetic St. Louis, it is to be found in the pattern I have already identified in this essay, rejection: McLuhan rejecting advertising, Plato rejecting rhetoric, Burroughs rejecting cultural representations of dining experiences. Academic writing rejecting narratives (like the one I present here) that do not follow causal or argumentative organizational trajectories. Pedagogy, too, rejects models of writing not based in argument or whose heuristics are based in affect and not reason. Scholarship may reject a digital rhetoric composed on paper and not on a computer. McLuhan sarcastically reads a Squibb Cod Liver Oil ad featuring a mother glancing down upon her baby boy as an appeal to parental care and familiar comfort. “The baby boy in the ad will grow up to say in a thousand different ways: ‘Look, Mom, I’m dancing! I owe it all to you, Mom!’” (The Mechanical Bride 78). The stereotype of the ad, then, is the boy rejecting the father; consumerism rejecting the girl's presence in her mother's life (some of these girls are boys). Following Lefebvre, the conclusion I can draw without a fixed subject is that I am discovering how to move through a pattern or network of rejections even as I hope to not encounter a final familial one (the child rejecting the parent). I leave rejection open-ended, however, as a networked narrative of noetic moments, not as a declarative totality. The noetic space I write may produce rejection, but it also produces a type of digital narrative we have not yet begun to explore as writing. This noetic space provides a series of food hubs. A rhetoric of the noetic. An unfinished practice. A pedagogy of writing. A critique of the everyday.

Works Cited


