

Ambient Rhetoric: The Attunements of Rhetorical Being, by Thomas Rickert. Pittsburgh: U Pittsburgh P, 2013. 334 pp.

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If the intent is to “attune” its readers to the necessity of retheorizing or rethinking aspects of rhetorical theory, then Thomas Rickert’s *Ambient Rhetoric: The Attunement of Rhetorical Being* is profoundly successful. If, however, Rickert intended his book to transcend the boundaries of a space in which theory simply *takes place* to a place which allows for an examination of what those theories might look like in action, then, as the author admits, much work remains to be done. For it seems that Rickert’s call to action is ultimately this very (re)attunement itself: rhetorical theory’s grounding in humanism, its support of the subject/object paradigm, prevents exploration of the human/world relationship as reciprocal, and as the world in which rhetorical theory exists continues to change, becoming a progressively complex ecological web of networked-weddedness, “we need conceptions of rhetoric that keep pace with these transformations” (33). In other words, his reworking of what rhetoric is requires “some action” because “rhetoric from an ambient perspective can no longer be situated solely in human subjective performance” (29). However, Rickert’s action seems to imply more than just intellectual engagement with or epistemological restructuring of traditional notions of rhetoric, as he questions the ways in which an attunement to ambience would change the ways we write and compose, the concerns or interests we have as teachers, writers, and rhetoricians, while foregoing a discussion of what those changes might look like in practice. The negation of an answer to these and other questions essentially categorizes the book as a highly insightful and minutely detailed block on which to build: “Ambient rhetoric . . . is less an answer in itself than an invitation to disclose anew, to build further, and so begin to dwell” (37). Dwelling, in the sense that Martin Heidegger uses that term, is a crucial component of Rickert’s thoroughly researched scholarly work that presents rhetoric as a concept with an ontological, a priori weddedness to the material world. The author seeks to convince us of our inherent enmeshment with our surroundings, claiming that who we are, how we invent—and pointedly—how we engage each other rhetorically can no longer be considered a product of human subjects acting on objects, but rather a result of ambient osmosis, a blending of place, people, and materiality: “The boundaries between brain and body, self and world, language and thought, beginning and end, are permeable” (100). Indeed, Rickert makes an almost impenetrable argument as to why rhetoric needs to be rethought from an ambient perspective and provides conclusions as to the future of what such

rethinking will bear, while leaving the practical application of his theories in the hands of his readers.

Engaging with scholarly work by Julia Kristeva, Jacques Derrida, and Gregory Ulmer, Rickert begins with a reconceptualization of the Greek terms *chora* and *kairos*, seeking not to abandon their traditional interpretations, but rather to expand on them and further their complexity. Working with Plato's understanding of *chora* in the *Timaeus*, Rickert argues that the *chora* cannot be relegated to the Aristotelian theory of place, or interval—also frequently referred to as a receptacle—in which we find the genesis of invention, because it also refers to mobility, a certain kind of navigation “a movement, a going beyond boundaries and returning, that nevertheless cannot give a specific place to invention” (72). Plato's idea of a vibrant and generative universe informs Rickert's theory of ambience in that the world becomes more than just a background for human inhabitation; the world is a suffusion of everything that exists in a coadaptive space, which ultimately contributes to invention. In other words, *choric* movement relates to the navigation of thought, Platonic form, body, place, and space, toward a locus of creation. Likewise, traditional conceptions of *kairos* need to be reconsidered. *Kairos*, for Rickert, is more than just an opportune time or place for rhetorical activity; *kairos* itself is capable of *willing* invention. In perhaps his most lucid and compelling example of a culmination of the *choric* and *kairotic*, Rickert describes the rhetoric of Keyser Soze in the film *The Usual Suspects* (1995). When Soze—believed to be a patsy named Verbal—is interrogated by detective Kujan, Soze makes use of Kujan's questions and the room itself in order to weave a tale of such persuasion that it convinces the interrogator of its own validity, thus, “[demonstrating] that the environment is always situating us in arrangements that simultaneously unleash some possibilities and foreclose on others,” concluding that “ambient environs generate various affordances that invent us in kairotic moments” (96). The interrogation room provides Soze with the necessary tools to complete his story, willing the story into creation in a way specific to that context, representing the rhetor's necessary *choric* navigation of a *kairotic* moment in an ambient space. The example of Soze and Kujan is perhaps the most illuminating in regard to the potentiality of a practical application of Rickert's theories in the field, a topic I will return to later.

Upon laying the foundation for his argument, the origins of which are situated in antiquity, Rickert further develops his position through a heavily Heideggerian “lattice-work” that complicates contemporary understandings of being, dwelling, and language insofar as they relate to rhetorical theory, further contributing to a view shared by Heidegger and Kenneth Burke that suggests meaning “inhere[s] in the world” (182). In what becomes a fairly even divide, the book first introduces and persuades the reader that ambience creates a co-

adaptive space in which meaning, ideas, and action become reciprocal, before culminating in a lengthy conclusion which argues that a simple rethinking is not complete without “taking the necessary next step of acknowledging that rhetoric’s work is distributed and ecological” (221). Furthermore, “nonhuman elements and forces are always in play as part of human doing,” and the “accomplishments of rhetorical practice are entwined with (re)organizations of the world” (221). All of which seems fairly straightforward, though getting there is less than simple: if we accept and embrace the idea that rhetoric should be viewed from an ambient perspective, one derived from a blending of the actors and that which is acted upon in a kind of synthetic reciprocity, then the result is one of ecological ontology as opposed to a static epistemology. Plasticity is a term Rickert often invokes, and it seems to perfectly encapsulate the call to action which he promotes. We must be adaptive in our conceptualizations of rhetorical theory, lending exigence to materiality, resulting in an ever-evolving ecological practice that has more to do with being than with knowledge.

Although for all the reasons explained, *Ambient Rhetoric: The Attunement of Rhetorical Being* is well worth the read—the innovative and insightful ideas challenge perceptions of an academic discipline—I’m still left wondering what a practical application of his theories, from a methodological, pedagogical perspective, might look like, particularly in regard to the composition classroom. Indeed, as first-year-writing programs continue to be an academic mainstay in undergraduate education, rethinking our pedagogical approach from an ambient perspective offers potential solutions for mitigating student resistance and affecting positive engagement in discussions of difference, such as race, gender, and equality. Students who consider the composition course simply a means by which they learn to write correctly are often resistant to discussions of these issues because they view the classroom as a neutral site in which they learn the mechanics of writing, not interact with difficult sociocultural issues. Pedagogy often fails to overcome this resistance due to the prescriptiveness from which it originates; much of our methodology, our pre-course planning, remains static as we move into disparate classrooms with their own unique and individual needs. In other words, it is difficult to overcome student resistance if we, as teachers, rely too heavily on prescriptive pedagogies that seek to import critical awareness of diverse, sociological issues because they do not allow for adaptation in the moment. This suggests that critical pedagogies must become adaptive, and perhaps this adaptation should stem from an ambient perspective, which would allow pedagogy to become its own kind of ecology that responds to its immediate context and promotes plasticity in the moment. From this perspective, a composition classroom is much like the interrogation room in *The Usual Suspects*: each room allows for opportunities while foreclosing on others, and if we, as teachers, create our pedagogy using only the available

means, developing the content as we teach, we strengthen our ability to engage our students in the act of composing because we join with them in an act of collaborative invention.

If Keyser Soze can spin his way out of juridical indictment utilizing the nonhuman and human elements of the room in which he is situated, what might that mean, what effects might that kind of *choratic* navigation have in the *kairotic* moment of teaching? Although Rickert's work does not answer this question, future scholarship should explore the answer.

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Work Cited

The Usual Suspects. Directed by Bryan Singer, performances by Kevin Spacey, Gabriel Byrne, Chazz Palminteri, Stephen Baldwin, and Benecio del Toro, Polygram, 1995.