Forgetting to be (Post)Human:
Media and Memory in a Kairotic Age

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If those arrangements were to disappear as they appeared, if some event of which we can at the moment do no more than sense the possibility—without knowing either what its form will be or what it promises—were to cause them to crumble, as the ground of Classical thought did, at the end of the eighteenth century, then one can certainly wager that man would be erased, like a face drawn in sand at the edge of the sea.

—Michel Foucault

At the end of the twentieth century, critical theory has posited itself as the event to which Foucault alludes primarily in terms of postmodernism. If humanism emerges as a part of the modern episteme—one based on hermeneutic depth rather than resemblance or taxonomy—then postmodern thought has sought to refute that episteme, thereby accomplishing the erasure to which Foucault hints. Postmodernism, however, has not proven to be the answer that many thought it would be. While postmodern criticism has enjoyed a certain amount of currency and has complicated our notions of identity, agency, and progress, the cost of this success has come in the form of detachment. Writers such as Teresa Ebert, Fredric Jameson, and Christopher Norris accuse postmodernists of ludic quietism. If postmodernism denies the efficacy of solutions offered by modernism or humanism, they argue, it also refuses to engage with the very problems that give rise to such solutions.

It would be both reductive and presumptuous to suggest that postmodernism has completely exhausted itself, that it has run its course. At the same time, it has lost some of its relevance in the last several years, and part of the reason for this loss can be attributed to what Jacques Ellul describes as our technological "milieu" (325-27). The onset of the information age has transformed the materiality of economic relations, and Marxist analysis has evolved correspondingly, often in ways that
would be unrecognizable to Marx himself. The saturation of our lives by mass media has both complicated and limited the role that the family plays in shaping our identities, suggesting that psychoanalysis may soon have more in common with media studies than it does with Freud's groundbreaking work in the field. Freud and Marx—two of our most recognizable "hermeneuts of suspicion" (and, as such, avatars of modernism)—still have much to teach us, but most of their insights now have acquired a historicity that they once claimed to transcend. As modernism has declined in relevance, postmodernism too has lost much of its exigency for us. Despite attempts to link postmodernism with emergent information technologies, thereby renewing its cultural force, this connection—or what George Landow terms a "convergence"—has been less than convincing (see Poster).

Into the void created by the exhaustion of the postmodern has come something called the "posthuman," but it is difficult to see this formation as anything more than a "new and improved" version of postmodernism. Indeed, in their introduction to *Posthuman Bodies*, Judith Halberstam and Ira Livingston imply as much. They observe, "The relation between the posthuman and the postmodern in a Zoo TV society relies on a new technological order with the body at its helm and a troubling relationship to history" (3). Rather than casting their work against the background of politics or philosophy, Halberstam and Livingston (and others) rely heavily on that "new technological order" to provide the sort of "brand renewal" that we expect from more traditional consumer products. In "Writing the Third-Sophistic Cyborg," Michelle Ballif explains that she is attempting to articulate what she calls "Third Sophistic postmodern posthuman transrhetorics," a conceptual move that seems to recruit the posthuman on behalf of what Halberstam and Livingston describe as "the proliferation of academic ‘post-isms’" (2).

Ballif's citation of both the postmodern and posthuman, however, marks a distinction that I want to pursue in the first part of this essay by claiming that the posthuman is not simply the latest in our academic procession of post-isms. In the first section, I turn to the work of Katherine Hayles and Bruno Latour in an effort to articulate a space for posthumanism that is distinct from the modern/postmodern complex. Following Latour, I work from a definition of the modern that relies on the separation of nature and culture, a separation that, according to Latour, postmodernism only exacerbates. The posthumanism that Hayles articulates closes this gap only after it takes advantage of its possibilities, a move that distinguishes the posthuman from the postmodern in fundamental ways.
This reconfiguration of the relations between nature and culture, I will argue, suggests that the posthuman provides us with a fresh perspective from which to examine rhetoric, an examination that I begin in the second section of my essay. There have been numerous attempts to locate rhetoric within the modern/postmodern debate, but such attempts have done more to describe the limits of the usefulness of those terms than anything else. James Berlin writes,

From one perspective, the postmodern theoretical turn is an attempt to recover the services of rhetoric, the study of the effects of language in the conduct of human affairs. In fact, postmodern discussions have put rhetoric back on the agenda of virtually all of the human sciences. After all, the primacy of signifying practices in the formation of subject and society means that language can no longer be seen as the transparent conduit of transcendental truths. (68)

While Berlin cites the "challenge of constructing a postmodern rhetoric," the challenge taken up by our field in the last twenty years is perhaps more accurately understood as the reduction of rhetoric to the terms of the debate between modernism and postmodernism (69). John Bender and David Wellbery, for example, attribute the return of rhetoric (after the demise of the classical model) to modernism, but the "conditions of impossibility" they identify (objectivism, subjectivism, liberalism, literacy, and nationalism) have faded not with the emergence of modernism but rather with its decline (22). In the absence of alternative explanatory schemes, we have attempted to fit the square peg of rhetoric into the round (w)hole of the post/modern. Turning to rhetoric with the frame suggested by the posthuman allows us to avoid this problem and focus instead on a revaluation of the canon of memory, where the distinction between nature and culture has been most forcefully inscribed.

In the final section of this essay, I identify some of the problems associated with a rhetoric grounded in the modern division of nature and culture. Such a rhetoric threatens to disembody our rhetorical practices, leaving the binary between nature and culture in place even as we render it increasingly invisible with the sophistication of our information technologies. The posthuman provides an important answer to this dilemma by refusing to restrict our understanding of memory to the Platonic axis of presence and absence. I transpose Hayles' own "semiotics of virtuality" to the field of rhetoric, suggesting that the revision of memory that results may provide us with our best hope for tempering the will to
knowledge that is one of our modernist legacies, an inheritance that has been intensified with recent advances in technology. In this way, the posthuman may provide us with the means of taking our field beyond the post/modern impasse, the "necessary or regrettable failure to imagine what's next" (Halberstam and Livingston 2).

That Which We Call Postmodern by any Other Name
There are as many definitions of the postmodern as there are accounts of its break from modernity, and each discipline that has attempted to appropriate the postmodern has done so in different ways. One of the difficulties facing anyone who wishes today to write about the postmodern is precisely this surfeit of definitions, examples, and disciplines. The posthuman, in contrast, suffers from novelty. As is the fashion in academic circles, it has functioned more as a striking neologism than as a stable concept. This is certainly one reason why we might be tempted to understand the posthuman as a term that has merely appropriated the trendy status once reserved for postmodernism.

Nevertheless, as we begin to articulate the posthuman in its conceptual fullness, this temptation to conflate the two terms should start to disappear. How We Became Posthuman—Hayles' account of particular developments within the history of cybernetics—provides some of this articulation. Cybernetics, according to many of its founding figures (for example, Norbert Wiener), was, as Hayles explains, a means to extend liberal humanism, not subvert it. "Yet the cybernetic perspective," she continues, "had a certain inexorable logic that . . . also worked to undermine the very liberal subjectivity that Wiener wanted to preserve" (7-8). The posthuman, in Hayles' account, is one of the unintended side effects of the development of cybernetics. But although Hayles relies on a number of sources that we have come to associate with postmodernism, her account of cybernetics is notable for its attempt to resist the modern/postmodern binary.

Normally, this resistance would suggest that using Hayles' book as the starting place for a contrastive account of the posthuman and the postmodern would be difficult; she herself studiously avoids the latter term. But there is one place where Hayles herself brings these two terms into contact with each other. At the end of her book, Hayles notes that "Bruno Latour has argued that we have never been modern; the seriated history of cybernetics . . . suggests, for similar reasons, that we have always been posthuman" (291). Hayles has little opportunity to elaborate on, much less to justify, this connection (which comes on the final page
of her text), or those "similar reasons" that she appropriates on behalf of her argument. The analogy is one worth examining, however, for Latour's estimation of the postmodern is not one that Hayles mirrors on behalf of the posthuman. Indeed, at first glance, it is difficult to understand why Hayles would rely on Latour for support.

Latour's book, We Have Never Been Modern, is a compelling account of the emergence of modernism and postmodernism. He asserts that modernity itself—and thus any movement claiming to follow it—has never been fully realized. Latour identifies two operations, translation and purification, each of which is crucial to modernism and yet is at odds with the other. To be "truly modern," Latour argues, would require us to continue to view each of these operations as separate, even as they depend on one another, a paradox that hundreds of years of history has been unable to resolve. Latour's answer to this paradox is not postmodernism; on the contrary, he writes, "I have not found words ugly enough to designate this intellectual movement" (61). If, in Latour's view, being modern is to be committed to a set of misguided principles, postmodernism represents those same principles minus the somewhat mitigating virtue of commitment.

It is not difficult to understand why Hayles might avoid a more specific comparison of her position with Latour's; indeed, such a comparison seems to raise more problems than it solves. But it is not so easy to simply reject the connection either. "Modernity is often defined," Latour explains, "in terms of humanism, either as a way of saluting the birth of 'man' or as a way of announcing his death" (13). Although he refuses to reduce modernism in this way, humanism remains an important component in Latour's account of the birth of the modern. Latour's answer to the question of the modern—something he describes as "nonmodernity" or "amodernity"—likewise incorporates a concern with the human. He writes, "Before we can amend the [modern] Constitution, we first have to relocate the human, to which humanism does not render sufficient justice" (136). Insofar, then, as Latour calls for a rearticulation of the human, a call echoed by Hayles, the relationship between the modern and the human cannot be overlooked.

On one level, reconciling Hayles' embrace of the posthuman and Latour's dismissal of the postmodern is simply a matter of language—humanism and modernism are not coterminous. The relationship between the two runs deeper than this, however. Following both Latour and Hayles, we might explain the posthuman by saying that humanism represents an ideal that has never been fully realized, that the posthuman
is something that has always already been with us. This would suggest that the recent surge of interest in the posthuman is more a belated recognition than it is a theoretical innovation. Indeed, Halberstam and Livingston make this argument, explaining that the posthuman occupies "the overlap between the now and the then, the here and the always: the annunciation of posthumanity is always both premature and old news" (3). This instance of the "always already," familiar to us from postmodern theory, does have the virtue of being consistent with both Latour's and Hayles' accounts; but in the context of our discussion here, it does little more than paraphrase Hayles herself.

In fact, there is more to the relationship between Latour and Hayles—and between the posthuman and postmodern—than has been suggested thus far. The core of modernism for Latour is the distinction between nature, on one hand, and, on the other, the subject and society. His representative anecdote about the origin of this distinction places that origin "in the middle of the seventeenth century, when the natural philosopher Robert Boyle and the political philosopher Thomas Hobbes were arguing over the distribution of scientific and political power" (15). Each attempted to delineate a sphere of activity—science, on one side, and politics, on the other—whose authority relied on the exclusion of the other. According to Latour, we have inherited a world view that requires us to "see double," to eventually perceive nature and society as simultaneously and paradoxically both transcendent and immanent. In an account that moves from Kant, Hegel, and phenomenology to our contemporary critical circumstances, Latour presents the history of modernism as the slow, steady amplification of this distinction:

They raise what had only been a distinction, then a separation, then a contradiction, then an insurmountable tension, to the level of an incommensurability. . . . They imagine that there are not—that there must not be—any mediators. On the subject side, they invent speech, hermeneutics and meaning, and they let the world of things drift slowly into its void. On the other side of the mirror, of course, scientists and technocrats take the symmetrical attitude (59).

Latour's solution to the problematic of modernism is to "retie the Gordian knot" severed by the distinction between nature and culture, a project he describes as nonmodern. It is not that the kinds of hybrids and networks that Latour would have us recognize do not already exist; rather, our problem has been a modern world view that keeps us from perceiving
them as such. More to the point, the postmodern represents for Latour the perpetuation of this blindness rather than a rejection of it.

Hayles' posthuman occupies a much different position than the postmodern does in Latour's scheme. Hayles is concerned in her work with closing a gap as well, although she locates it within the development of cybernetics. Hayles characterizes this development in terms of three interrelated stories: the disembodiment of information, the invention of the cyborg as a technological and cultural artifact, and the emergence of the posthuman (2). Much of Latour's work parallels the first of Hayles' three stories in that each of them carefully explains how we have seized on false distinctions—between nature and culture, between the body and information—and grounded our epistemological order on them. If there is a distinction to be drawn between Latour and Hayles, it can be located in the sense of urgency in Hayles' work, which Latour's more meditative style precludes. Hayles notes that the account she provides is by no means complete, and so *How We Became Posthuman* is a call to "contest for what the posthuman means" (291). As such, it is less a history of cybernetics than an attempt to come to grips with the present:

If my nightmare is a culture inhabited by posthumans who regard their bodies as fashion accessories rather than the ground of being, my dream is a version of the posthuman that embraces the possibilities of information technologies without being seduced by fantasies of unlimited power and disembodied immortality, that recognizes and celebrates finitude as a condition of human being, and that understands human life is embedded in a material world of great complexity, one on which we depend for our continued survival. (5)

Hayles' narrative begins with a gap similar to Latour's, but she finds in it the conditions for the possibility that she describes as posthuman. With the development of information theory in the middle of the twentieth century, cybernetics began to abstract information from its material substrate, defining it as distinct from any specific embodiment. The danger of such an abstraction is familiar to us as the (cyberpunk) fantasy that suggests that we will someday be able to leave our physical selves behind for cyberspace. Where Latour finds in this process of abstraction only a fall from grace, Hayles sees reason for hope. One positive implication is that by constraining our focus primarily on information we began to allow the lines separating humans and machines to blur. After all, humans and machines are linked together regularly in systems defined by information, and following writers such as Hayles and Donna Haraway,
we understand those systems as cyborgs. The final stage in Hayles' account requires us to refuse the privilege that information has been granted in cybernetics (and still receives in texts like Hans Moravec's *Mind Children*), and it requires us to attempt an understanding of information that is inseparable from embodiment.

Hayles fully admits that posthumanism is an unfinished project, and, as such, we cannot safely conclude that the postmodern and posthuman necessarily occupy mutually exclusive positions in the models of Hayles and Latour. While the postmodern represents an exacerbation of the problems that Latour attributes to modernism, it remains unclear whether or not the posthuman will do the same. However, there is a final sense in which we might distinguish the two, one that has less to do with Latour and Hayles than it does with the term *posthuman* itself. Although Hayles offers a tentative outline for what the posthuman entails, she does not spend time explaining the term as such. The term *postmodern*—like the various academic post-isms that precede and follow it—emerges in direct response to the *modern*, and, as such, is caught up in a critical economy whose limits we are now beginning to perceive. While we might analogously conceive of the posthuman as a direct response to humanism, the meaning of the term runs deeper than this. The process by which humanism has frayed has existed long before a term such as *posthuman* emerged to name the movement. At the same time that the posthuman designates a response to humanism, it signals the possibility of something other than human, or at least a merging of the human and nonhuman in ways that both Latour and Hayles call for. While postmodern critics have been quick to seize Haraway's cyborg as an exemplum of their theories, that figure is more properly, and literally, described as posthuman. As R.L. Rutsky explains, "The cyborg is less a matter of identity than of a relationality that acknowledges difference within itself, rather than simply externalizing it as a monstrous other.... A posthuman subject position would, in other words, acknowledge the otherness that is part of us" (19, 21). The posthuman is a site where the distinction between nature and culture, between human and humanism, is internalized. If we are to remain true to Hayles' vision, it is a site where that distinction can be relieved of its critical, modernist force. The posthuman does indeed represent a meeting of theory and technology. But unlike the convergence asserted by Landow and others, it is a convergence of theory and biotechnology. The posthuman in this model would be nothing like the postmodernism that Latour decries: in place of the "hyper-incommensurability" of nature and culture, the posthuman represents a terrain where
the two can again begin to be thought together. As Foucault suggests, "It is nothing more, and nothing less, than the unfolding of a space in which it is once more possible to think" (342).

**Memory: The Raw and/or the Cooked**

A question worth asking at this juncture concerns the relationship between the posthuman and rhetoric. Does rhetoric need a new space in which it is possible once more to think? At first glance, perhaps not. In *Breaking Up [at] Totality*, Diane Davis identifies the "posthumanist paradox" with the fact "that we both make and but are also (more so) made by History" (23). This is hardly a new development within the history of rhetoric, and Davis does not identify it as such. In fact, the network of relations among speaking and being spoken, nature and culture, and agency and determinism might seem to us the very sort of Gordian knot that Latour seeks to retie. The inclusion of ethos and pathos in our considerations of rhetoric speaks to the type of embodiment that Hayles would return to information. Indeed, according to Davis, "That (post)modern question [of what it means to be human in a posthumanist world] has, paradoxically, re/turned many to the premodern, the pre-Platonic (specifically, Heraclitean) notion of Being as Becoming" (23). Rather than looking to the posthuman for new articulations of rhetoric, we arguably should be training our posthuman sights on ancient rhetoric. To do so, however, would involve giving in to a nostalgia that is perhaps best left unsatisfied. It would also require us to ignore thousands of years of history and development in rhetoric. We have not severed the knot as cleanly as other disciplines, but we have devoted a great deal of energy to loosening it, motivating ourselves with the possibility that one day, we might succeed in untying it altogether.

Gorgias provides us with perhaps the earliest statement of the power of the knot—indeed, we might go so far as to describe it as the "Gorgian knot," at least insofar as we consider it within a rhetorical context. In his encomium of *Helen*, Gorgias expounds on the natural force that rhetoric possesses, comparing it to magic, drugs, and the physical force of men. While we normally acknowledge the natural power of rhetoric (what Thomas Conley calls its "motivistic" aspect), Gorgias' rhetoric is truly powerful because of its cultural aspect as well. It is not simply that a good speaker can sway his or her audience—moving them to tears, provoking their laughter, inspiring their devotion—but also that he or she can teach this ability to others. Were this ability simply a natural talent, then there would be no such thing as rhetoric. It is the sophists' claim that this ability
can be taught and deployed as though it were natural that makes rhetoric as dangerous as Plato (and, after him, philosophy) finds it to be.

From the perspective of this Gorgian knot, Plato’s criticism of rhetoric is of crucial importance, particularly as it is laid out in the *Phaedrus*. Plato attacks writing in the *Phaedrus*, but as Gregory Ulmer explains, “Plato is condemning writing not just as “writing-down” but as a whole theory of the relation of memory to thought. Plato’s diatribe against the sophist condemns artificial memory (hypomnesia) in general, including mnemotechnics, the system of topoi, or commonplaces . . . developed for rhetorical training” (69). Speaking through Socrates, Plato explains, “If men learn this, it will implant forgetfulness in their souls; they will cease to exercise memory because they rely on that which is written, calling things to remembrance no longer from within themselves, by means of external marks” (*Phaedrus* 520). While we typically understand this strategy as the attempt to place, and thereby oppose, philosophy and rhetoric along the axis of internal/natural and external/artificial, Plato’s argument carries deeper implications than this. From its inception, rhetoric does not claim to be anything but artificial; indeed, it is its artificiality that renders it transferable and teachable. What Plato does in the *Phaedrus* is to situate nature and culture, both of which are operative in the rhetoric of the time, as an either/or. In effect, Plato loosens the Gorgian knot by isolating two of its primary threads.

As most of us will acknowledge today, Plato’s distinction is a false one. Jacques Derrida notes in *Dissemination* that “The outside is already within the work of memory,” but this has all the force of a retraction after the fact (109). Plato’s argument—insofar as it sets the natural and artificial at odds with each other—also sets particular limits on rhetorical theory that have lasted to the present day, despite our attempts to defuse them (see Neel; Ulmer). Whereas once Gorgias might have taken pride in the fact that rhetoric could function as if it were a natural force, Plato guaranteed that rhetoric would be useful only if it appeared perfectly natural. Plato drives rhetoric underground, enabling what Paolo Valesio calls the “rhetoric of antirhetoric”—or the inflection of rhetoric as artificial, deceptive, and manipulative (41). But his argument also carries important implications for the relationship between rhetoric and identity. Insofar as Plato consigns rhetoric to the pole of the artificial, he helps us to weigh in on one side of the paradox that Davis identifies. After Plato, rhetoric is an artificial construct, one that encourages us to conceive of our relationship to language as one of production and control. Even as he decries the forgetfulness associated with artificial memory, Plato’s attack
introduces its own brand of forgetting into the structure of rhetoric, rendering us incapable of remembering rhetoric in its fullness.

While Plato cannot divest rhetoric of its natural force by fiat, he distances the speaker from the results of a given rhetorical situation by posing nature and artifice as binary opposites. In a sense, Plato inserts the third term, the text, into the communications triangle that we now accept as the minimally sufficient condition for rhetoric. We are so accustomed to the exteriority of the text that accounts of contemporary orality, such as the following from Walter Ong, astound us:

The memory feats of these oral bards are remarkable, but they are unlike those associated with memorization of texts. Literates are usually surprised to learn that the bard planning to retell the story he has heard only once wants often to wait a day or so after he had heard the story before he himself repeats it. In memorizing a written text, postponing its recitation generally weakens recall. An oral poet is not working with texts or in a textual framework. He needs time to let the story sink into his own store of themes and formulas, time to “get with” the story. (60)

If nothing else, accounts such as this one point to a form of rhetoric that has lasted to the present day in spite of Plato’s influence. The oral poet in Ong’s account allows time for the story to speak him, to “sink into his own store of themes and formulas”—quite literally rewriting his memory—before he is prepared to tell it. In this example, there is a relationship between the speaker and the text that is irreducible to separate vertices on the communications triangle. In his Preface to Plato, Eric Havelock accounts for this relationship in terms of a broadly conceived definition of mimesis, where the term encapsulates not only aesthetic representation, but also memory, recall, and performance. According to Havelock, the distinction between act (natural) and art (artificial) did not exist for the epic poets, and there is no reason to suppose that it existed for the pre-Platonic rhetors either. In an oral society, memory was both natural and artificial. As a source of lore, it shaped their experience; as a condition for the performance of texts, it produced the cohesion and continuity necessary to hold their communities together.

In the time since Plato, discursive technologies have developed substantially, but their development is constrained by the terms through which Plato understands rhetoric. While the “Great Leap” theory of the differences between orality and literacy has come under a great deal of fire in recent years, the exteriority that comes with writing puts an irreversible distance between ourselves and our pre-literate ancestors (see Daniell).
While Plato could distinguish between natural and artificial memories, the advent of mass literacy seems to put such a debate to rest—at least to the extent that memory loses its most important claim to canonical relevance for rhetoric. Indeed, according to John Frederick Reynolds, "the tendency has been for modern rhetorical theory to abandon, remove, neglect, ignore, limit, simplify, misrepresent, and/or misunderstand" memory (3). Whether or not the shift from orality to literacy carries with it a corresponding change in mental faculties, it has a radical effect on the environment in which we think and act, which amounts to the same thing, according to Edwin Hutchins. Hayles glosses Hutchins’ point: "Modern humans are capable of more sophisticated cognition than cavemen not because moderns are smarter . . . but because they have constructed smarter environments in which to work" (289). If an oral culture requires the constant repetition of knowledge, its literate counterpart can store its information externally and ultimately build on it. Plato may be correct in suggesting that literate peoples will be more forgetful, but as a culture, their powers of recall are limited only by the material resources they devote to memory.

This externalization of memory has become an accepted and even integral part of our society, but we still have not shaken the effects of Plato’s critique. We have continued to define ourselves in terms of the opposition between the natural and artificial. Indeed, as Plato’s diagnosis suggests, there is a sense in which forgetfulness is implanted in our souls. We are separated from knowledge, and increasingly we come to rely on our environment rather than our own faculties. As Jay David Bolter suggests, however, "What changed with the invention of writing was the way in which humans deployed their facility to remember . . . . It is not that the mind has less to remember because of writing, but that the mind can now keep some knowledge intimately in memory and relegate other knowledge to written texts" (215). A second implication of the distribution of memory into the environment is that we do not perceive it as such. In many contexts, access to a text is accorded the same importance as knowledge itself. There are certainly situations in which this attitude towards knowledge will fail, but it is not so much “what you know” as it is knowing “where to look” that is important. Furthermore, knowing where to look for knowledge is itself a sign of self-reliance and individuality. We are encouraged to think of ourselves as autonomous, only relying on others for help when absolutely necessary. It remains a feature of academic discourse that a heavily footnoted, single-authored scholarly text is accorded more respect than collaborative work.
That we now recognize the dynamics of authorship as a constraint suggests that our discursive ecology is beginning to change. There has been an explosion of information technologies in the last century, and while we may lack the historical perspective necessary to characterize them completely, both Ong's notion of "secondary orality" and Ulmer's notion of "electracy"—which attempt to designate some form of post-literacy—go some distance towards doing so. Orality allowed ancients to capture (and to transmit) the general sense of an utterance, and literacy builds on this ability, enabling us to reproduce the exact language of a given rhetorical performance. What then shall we say about discursive technology in the twentieth century? Those technologies best understood as fostering secondary orality (radio, television, and cinema) preserve not only the exact wording of a performance but the performance itself. Anyone who has had cause both to read texts authored by a speaker and also to witness (to see or hear) those same texts (thanks to recordings) can speak to the difference introduced by secondary orality.

The differences marked by the term *electracy* are only just beginning to emerge. Just as the shift from script to print literacy resulted in the democratization of this technology, the ready availability of digital technology may render broadcast media much more accessible in the coming century. While this is a change of unquestioned convenience, the new forms enabled by electracy are still in the earliest stages, although multimedia, hypertext, and virtual reality show promise. A great deal of research has already taken place on immersive and participatory media, although the most recognizable forms of these media come to us from the entertainment industry. It is conceivable that digital technology's contribution to rhetoric will come from its capacity for simulation. While analog technologies enable us to record and review performances, the ability to stage multiple performances and to compare them—whether we are talking about multiple readings of a hypertext or hours logged in a flight simulator—may prove to be the next step in the development of information technology.

There is certainly a sense in which we can understand this development as evolutionary, and in so doing, we persuade ourselves that we were on the right side of Plato's binary after all. At the same time, portraying the changes in information technology as progressive leaves the terms of that binary in place and ultimately ignores the problem. It may prove more instructive to view our technological achievement in light of Kenneth Burke's "paradox of purity" (35). As our memories and technologies have become even more artificial, they have done so only insofar as they circle
back and approach the appearance of the natural. In our “hypermediated society,” we celebrate the paradoxical immediacy that our technologies provide for us, an immediacy that has supplanted the natural. We have become so adept at assuming the supplemental position that Plato set aside for rhetoric that we judge technology according to its ability to simulate the privileged position of the natural.

Remedial Posthumanism
At this point, important questions arise. If information technology has enabled us to approach the natural as closely as we have, if we can simulate the immediate to the satisfaction of billions of devoted television viewers world-wide, what need have we of the posthuman? Why not simply return to rhetoric as usual? Why k/not? One answer to this question requires us to return to Hayles’ account of the posthuman. The embrace of the artificial in rhetoric is analogous to the first of Hayles’ three stories in that account, the disembodiment of information. There is a sense in which rhetoric, as a nexus of theories about the function of language, cannot help but abstract from individual, embodied rhetorical situations. That abstraction, as Hayles notes, is an essential element of theorizing (12). But abstraction slides quickly into disembodiment when the sources for our abstraction—experience itself—are ignored or erased. In a sense, our contemporary rhetorical situation is marked by the highest technological achievement of the “rhetoric of antirhetoric” to date. This has wide-ranging implications for nearly every sphere of society—from our society’s desensitization to violence, to the completely staged activities of our political candidates, to the increased pressures on teachers to commodify their activity and market it as distance education.

We can cite numerous examples in which “rhetoric as usual” has failed to provide us with answers to our most pressing problems, but I would like to focus on two such instances. The first instance was the beating of Rodney King, an event that made our nation conscious of the degree to which we could participate in our own surveillance. Although the long-term effects for media have been largely innocuous (a fascination with so-called “reality television” and an inclination towards shows like America’s Funniest Home Videos), one of the things that went unspoken in the denouement of the King incident was the doubling of the violence made possible by technological advances. Avital Ronell explains, “For the duration of the trial, the temporization that reading video customarily entails was halted by spatial determinations that were bound to refigure the violence to which King was submitted” (306). In other words, the
experience captured by a home video camera was converted into an extensive frame-by-frame series of still photographs. The defense team in the trial committed a form of interpretive violence on the evidence itself, and ultimately justified, to a jury’s satisfaction, the physical violence that the police visited on King. “No one needs to read Derrida’s work on framing,” suggests Ronell, “in order to know that justice was not served in Simi Valley, California,” but we do need to begin to question the conditions that kept justice from being served (306). While the King incident may strike us as an extreme example, one implication of the disembodiment of information, according to Hayles, is the belief that information can be translated without alteration from one material substrate to another.

My second representative anecdote involves another, earlier trauma in the recent history of our country—namely, the Challenger disaster in the mid-1980s. The media coverage of this event was in some respects similar to the King incident. Television stations replayed the explosion repeatedly, capturing it in slow motion as though pinpointing the precise moment that the explosion began could somehow supply it with meaning. In *Statues* Michel Serres compares the Challenger to the ancient Carthaginians’ practice of sacrificing humans and animals by burning them alive inside a giant statue of the deity Baal (19). As Latour notes in an extended series of interviews with Serres, it is difficult for us to follow the parallel that Serres sets up: “... to be modern is precisely to accept that the Challenger has nothing to do with Baal, because the Carthaginians were religious and we no longer are, because they were ineffectual whereas we are very effective, and so on” (*Conversations* 138). The media blitz surrounding the Challenger elevated it to the status of national tragedy, in part obscuring the culpability of NASA. As we have since discovered, part of the fault for the Challenger disaster lies with NASA’s information design workers, who, had they been attuned to their limitations, could have predicted and prevented the explosion (see Mijksenaar; Tufte). The cultural investment in the incident prompted by the media helped to obscure the scientific failures that were directly responsible for it.

Both of these incidents point to the danger of assuming that our media can achieve the position denied to rhetoric by Plato some two-and-a-half millennia ago. The media promise to take us to the scene of the event, to simulate experience seamlessly, and such promises will only grow more impressive as virtual-reality technology improves.5 There is ample evidence to suggest that, as a society, we have already bought into these
promises. If at one time it was the unexamined life that was not worth living, today it seems that it is the unmediated life that is meaningless. How else can we explain the willingness on the part of thousands of people to engage in their own humiliation, for the price of plane fare and a hotel room, by participating in the scripted antics of talk shows? The line of causality linking Plato to Jerry Springer is undoubtedly more complicated than it appears in this essay, but the connection is suggestive.

We do not have to range too far from the ground we've already covered to formulate a response to the challenge of disembodiment. One strategy, which I'll briefly outline here, would require us to return to the very canon that has taken us this far. We must reconceive the canon of memory, complicating the binary that Plato provides and reopening a space within our hypermediated rhetoric for the recognition of experience. Plato defines and distinguishes the natural and the artificial primarily in terms of presence and absence, and it is on this ground that Derrida stages his deconstruction of Plato. This separation, however, detemporalizes the canon of memory; Plato restricts memory in a spatial economy. Either we are here—present and remembering—or our memories are absent and distributed to our environment, placed over there, serving us only as reminders. But memory also marks our shifting relationship to the past, a past that is both present (in the effect it has had on our present) and absent (in the sense that time has passed). Plato's binary is inadequate to the task of comprehending a memory that has not been divested of its temporal character.

In her description of the posthuman, Hayles maps the "semiotics of virtuality" along two different axes; I follow her suggestion here that the dialectic of presence and absence no longer provides us with an adequate epistemological framework. In discussing the construction of knowledge in virtual reality, Hayles explains, "Questions about presence and absence do not yield much leverage in this situation, for the avatar both is and is not present, just as the user both is and is not inside the screen. Instead, the focus shifts to questions about pattern and randomness" (27). Pattern and randomness provide Hayles with a second axis—one complementary to presence/absence—that we can transpose to our discussion of memory and rhetoric. The reinscription of the axis of pattern and randomness as the canon of memory allows us to retemporalize this canon, and requires us to recall the two competing models of time that we have inherited from the Greeks—namely, chronos and kairos.

*Chronos* is the artificial patterning of time, its division into equal, measurable segments. It is the time by which we set our clocks and
watches, conduct our classes, organize our history. **Kairos** is the time-sense at the other end of the spectrum, the opportunities that emerge to be seized in a particular situation, unrepeatable and unsystematizable. If **chronos** represents our triumph over time as a cultural achievement, as Davis observes, then **kairos** "is tied to a nonrational **physis** that is excessive and unmasterable" (28). It is the unwillingness of the kairotic moment to submit itself to our control that, according to James Kinneavy, has led to its "neglected" status in rhetorical theory. While a postmodern rhetoric might privilege **kairos** over **chronos**, a posthuman rhetoric would find room for both.

Returning to my representative anecdotes, we might accuse the police in the Rodney King incident—and subsequently the defense team at the trial—of transforming a kairotic moment by translating it chrono-logically. This translation, as Ronell suggests, allows the event to be "articulated as a metonymy of the war on drugs," and the event's insertion into that larger pattern enabled the defense to justify the actions of the police (307). The Challenger disaster signifies a transformation in the other direction. The explosion was predictable and preventable insofar as it was part of the larger pattern of the space program, but it was reframed as **kairos**, a senseless tragedy because of the randomness of the event. Our information technology has grown far too sophisticated for us to blindly accept the binary of presence/absence as the sole criterion by which we measure it. A posthuman rhetoric would call on us not only to complicate those criteria, but also to question the assumption that our experience must always be measured.

To put it another way, posthuman rhetoric, as a return to embodied information, involves a revaluing of partiality. A posthuman rhetoric would allow us to turn our backs on omniscience and the humanist values of mastery and control that derive from the will to knowledge. As systems theorist Niklas Luhmann says, "it is not enough that society delegitimized representation and consequently authority. It is not enough, to put it another way, to allow critique and protest to run amok. Society must be able to survive the communication of ignorance" (90). While Luhmann's view of partiality is an intriguing one, it is important to understand that the communication of ignorance is little more than the willingness to communicate from positions that are necessarily and self-consciously incomplete. As our technologies tempt us with the possibility of absolute (patterned) knowledge via the purified technologies of mediation (absence), a posthuman rhetoric would require us to temper that possibility with the materially situated emergence (presence) of opportunities (ran-
domness). As we are only just beginning to discover, the darker side of our distributed memory is information overload. Like Jorge Luis Borges’ character Funes the Memorious, we are learning what it means to remember too much. In the face of this immense knowledge, and at a time when there is so much we can know, we must begin to ask the question of how much we should know. A posthumanist rhetoric should prove indispensable to us as we form such a question.6

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Notes

1. Both Woodward and the Critical Art Ensemble have suggested that our disciplinary fascination with “communications technologies” have served to obscure more important, and potentially dangerous, developments in biotechnologies. At the same time that we celebrate, for example, the postmodern instantiations of a technology such as hypertext, medical research and biotechnological development are being driven by modernist, humanist assumptions.

2. Latour’s account of the Gordian knot is inflected in broader terms than my own consideration of it here. He writes: “this fragile thread will be broken into as many segments as there are pure disciplines. By all means, they seem to say, let us not mix up knowledge, interest, justice and power. Let us not mix up heaven and earth, the global stage and the local scene, the human and the nonhuman. ‘But these imbroglios do the mixing,’ you’ll say, ‘they weave our world together!’ ‘Act as they didn’t exist,’ the analysts reply. They have cut the Gordian knot with a well-honed sword” (3).

3. To engage in nostalgia for our lost rhetorical origins is to fall back into the Platonic binary of presence and absence, a constraint that has already shaped our understanding of rhetoric for centuries, and one that I critique in the section to follow. I understand the posthuman as an affirmative movement, one that avoids the reactive temptations of nostalgia.

4. The appeal of so-called extreme sports provides an excellent example of this transition. These activities are no less mediated or controlled, no more “natural,” than other sports, yet their appeal consists in their ability to temporarily overcome our awareness of that mediation. Television’s reality programming attempts the same sort of erasure of mediation by using video cameras, often poorly handled, and filming without scripts.

5. Hollywood has already begun to make promises that virtual reality will be hard put to keep. See, for example, Strange Days, The Matrix, The Thirteenth Floor, eXistenZ, and even less VR-oriented movies such as The Truman Show.
and *EdTV* for a fairly consistent view of how our culture has conceived of the relationship between mediation and immediacy.

6. I would like to thank my colleagues Juanita Comfort, Joel English, Joyce Neff, and David Metzger for their insight, support, and advice while writing this essay.

**Works Cited**


