Toward a Rhetoric of Network (Media) Culture: Notes on Polarities and Potentiality

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The desire for simplicity has long inspired efforts to explain the world in terms of simple systems that function smoothly and simple laws that can be reduced to simple equations.

—Mark C. Taylor

The desire for simplicity has haunted rhetoric and composition for most of its history, from stock forms for producing oral speeches in ancient times to simple processes for the production of written texts in contemporary times. Even though the desire to utilize simplicity to understand the world was the driving force of science, Taylor recognizes that science is at root a metaphysical if not theological enterprise (137). Simplicity is always abstracted from complex realities. This has certainly been the tendency in rhetoric and composition, whose primary debate has been between two opposing methods for simplifying the complexity of writing. On the one hand, expressivists responded to writing’s complexity by abandoning system altogether. On the other, rhetoricians of various stripes have tried to produce simple systems that make writing teachable. Neither faction has fully addressed the complexity of writing, and I think the value of Taylor’s book is that it may lead the field to confront this reality. Though some of his conclusions regarding education in general are debatable, the book does a good job of summarizing much of the work in complexity theory and applying it to various fields—art, architecture, theory, and communication. One of the fields that Taylor does not directly address, however, is rhetoric. Just as rhetoric and composition is currently confronted with the complexity of writing, rhetorical studies is in the process of trying to determine just what rhetoric would be in our current cultural situation. The ancient civic space that led to the emergence of rhetoric has been replaced by contemporary network space. In

its place, however, are few rhetorical theories that adequately address the complexities of this new social space. Simply applying rhetorical systems developed in the context of ancient Greece to our contemporary period seems to fall into the desire for simplicity that Taylor hopes to counter.

Consequently, rather than produce a counter-response to Taylor, this essay aims to extend his work into rhetorical studies by examining certain traditional rhetorical concepts in relation to concepts articulated in Taylor’s book. In order to lay some initial groundings for a rhetorical theory based on the topoi of complexity and networks, it is important to create compositions or polarities between key terms: Heuristics: Schemata; Dissoi-Logoi: Polarities; Rhetorical Situation: Complex Adaptive Systems; Kairos: Emergence; Logos: Network; Ethos: Screen; Pathos: Affect; Process: Evolution. These initial linkages cannot provide a fully fleshed out rhetorical theory in a short response, but instead enact strange loops, set ideas in motion. My purpose is to suggest the potential relevance of Taylor’s work to contemporary rhetorical theories and to call for further inventions in the areas of new media environments and network cultures.¹

**Heuristics: Schemata (Grids)**

A heuristic is a set of questions, a mental grid, or a generic process that aids its user in inventing and articulating ideas. The writer sets this grid between him or herself and the world in order to impose order on its chaos. Though most who discuss heuristics tout their openendedness (each enaction will generally produce unpredictable results), in practice they inevitably function as grids—the heuristics themselves remain unchanged. Taylor’s use of “schemata” revises this grid-lock. The grid maintains both stability and simplicity—the heuristic questions remain the same or the tagmemic grid remains the same (23). But schemata actually move such mental grids from a synchronic position into an evolving process. Schemata change in response to input: “Emerging schemata identify, compress, and store the regularities of experience in a way that makes it possible for the system to adapt by responding quickly and effectively” (206). In other words, we start with experience, generalize a pattern or schema from that experience, turn that pattern on future experience, and then adapt the pattern to devise a new schema. Taylor turns this position/process onto the modernist notion of grids, revising it for a postmodern context. Using Chuck Close’s painting as an example, he shows how a grid can actually produce work with greater complexity. Each cell in the
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grids comprising Close’s paintings contains an abstract painting in itself. Each individual cell-painting combines to create the effect of a larger work, thereby emulating a network logic where the whole extends beyond the sum of the parts. As the example of grids shows, a schema (like the notion of a grid itself) is caught up in complex networks that evolve and adapt to new circumstances. This basic process has implications for rhetorical heuristics: (1) students need to develop their own schemata to fit their particular topics/situations, and (2) if we give them schemata first, their goal should be to revise those schemata as a part of the invention process rather than follow them prescriptively.

In “The Meaning of Heuristic in Aristotle’s Rhetoric and Its Implications for Contemporary Rhetorical Theory,” Richard Enos and Janice Lauer attempt to interpret heuresis as more than techniques used “to find out or discover.” They argue that the term also means to create meaning through language, not just to discover what already exists. Heuristics under this reading enable the rhetor to create probable judgments—to assess a situation and co-create meaning with the audience. Though Enos and Lauer hint at the possibility of producing “entirely new proofs” beyond “existing topoi,” they are firmly situated in the autonomous subject who makes such a rhetorical choice (82). Their level of complexity doesn’t really move beyond a rhetor/audience dialectic for producing socially constructed meaning. They step back from a purely epistemic approach by noting that Aristotle “considers empirical investigation and syllogistic reasoning as processes of thinking that are not necessarily discursive” (83). But even this nod to reality doesn’t move them beyond the simplicity of the communications triangle, the linear movement of solving social problems, and the turning back to culture (and language) as the primary medium. Gregory Ulmer’s Heuretics: The Logic of Invention probably comes closer to addressing the implications of Taylor’s work. Ulmer’s use of heuristics sets out to make “students become producers as well as consumers of theory” (xiii). His heuretic becomes a method for inventing new methods through the loss of the subject in a complex system of discourse and the world. His grid (whether the CATTt or the popcycle) folds over into the new by immersing his students in electronic culture and asking them to map their own trajectories through the territory. Each specific node that they encounter or inhabit is a new cell that once collected together in a set, or a new grid, functions to produce a new whole, a new conception of the complex situation. Enos and Lauer are examining and using Aristotle’s heuristics/topoi; Ulmer invents his own and asks his students to do the same.
Dissoi-Logoi: Polarities (Strange Loops)

Dissoi-Logoi is an ancient rhetorical exercise based on making the weaker argument the stronger, or reversing the obvious argument to make an argument that is culturally/situationally counterintuitive. The exercise was meant to unfreeze rigid, accepted concepts/positions in the same way Taylor turns to the notion of the grid. Taylor's recurring position is that such oppositions are not really competing oppositions—each side exists because of its relationship with its "opposition." Rather than competing oppositions that produce a winner or synthesis, they are polarities, or nodes caught up in co-producing systems. Baudrillard, according to Taylor, argues that the oppositions implode—one pole, such as simulacra, engulfs its opposite, the real. But for Taylor, these polarities are caught up in "strange loops": "Strange loops are self-reflexive circuits, which, though appearing to be circular, remain paradoxically open" (75). Oppositions, then, are polarities caught in these complex relationships in which each side is evolving and changing in relation to the other. Polarities, like cells in a grid, don't function alone but in complex, co-adaptive relations with other polarities, creating a larger whole. One pole isn't overtaken by the other. It changes and thereby changes its opposition. Any rhetorical system that uses opposition or dialectics to privilege one pole or the other, such as James Berlin's heuristic, should recognize the ecological, co-productive nature of the "weaker" argument that can easily turn to become the stronger. Situations are more complex than dialectics accounts for.

In Rhetoric, Poetics, Cultures, Berlin constructs a heuristic that identifies key terms, sets up an opposite term, and then prompts the students to value one term over the other (126–28). Such a strategy follows the model of dissoi-logoi articulated by John Poulakos. Poulakos starts with the basic Protagorean position that on every issue there are (at least) two opposing arguments. Such a worldview is founded on difference rather than unity and is consequently fundamentally rhetorical. At any point on any issue a contrary argument can be found and put forth. But in order to act, people must be persuaded to one side or the other, even if temporarily. Poulakos gives an example from Prodicus: in the story of Heracles at the Crossroads both Vice and Virtue argue for their means to happiness. Both make arguments for their positions and against the other's, but in the end Heracles still makes no decision. Poulakos reads this as leaving the choice up to the reader, who in similar circumstances will have to choose: "since the imperative to action demands that an impasse be overcome and that a choice be made, the human subject must
in some way disturb the balance of perfectly opposed alternatives. This means that in the final analysis one must prefer one option over all others” (59; emphasis added). Such a position on dissoi logoi sets aside the possibility that action can occur even without such a choice based on the traditional model of the subject. If an alternate position is always on the horizon, why not work toward another, and yet another? This position is put forth by Debra Hawhee in “Kairotic Encounters.” She notes that in Gorgias’ Helen his approach to dissoi logoi doesn’t simply put forth two possible arguments, but several possible reasons Helen might not be responsible for her own actions: “Gorgias does not settle on one definitive explanation, but enumerates several viable ones” (26). Helen acted not because she chose between two options but because multiple forces moved her. Following Deleuze and Guattari, Hawhee notes, “The movement of Gorgias’ speech, then, occurs in the middle, in the realm of the between. […] Gorgias’ betweenness, not necessarily Gorgias himself, seeks not to replace the previously accepted ‘truth’ about Helen with another truth, but rather to undermine the very notion that one truth […] exists” (27). This logic of the “and” of an always expanding dissoi logoi situates the subject in a network of multiple forces and attempts to address the complexity of our current cultural situation.

Rhetorical Situation: Complex Adaptive Systems

The notion of the rhetorical situation has been an important concept in modern rhetoric because it turns toward an emphasis on social construction, or the recognition that situations generate discourse. Its early development as a concept participated in a generative polarity: Lloyd Bitzer argued that the situation causes discourse as a direct response and Richard Vatz countered that discourse is always already a part of the situation and can thus create or determine situations. The polarity of context-text operates as a strange loop, and the combination of multiple strange loops Taylor calls a “complex adaptive system.” Both biological and cultural complex adaptive systems remain open to their environments and adapt accordingly. Never static, they produce larger scale behavior, texts, and structures from the movement and interactions of smaller parts. Individual ants, a recurring example for Taylor, form the larger entity of the colony, even though the ants are unaware of this larger whole. The ant colony can react to environmental conditions and adapt/evolve accordingly, even though the colony has no equivalent of a “mind” at the level of the whole. Each ant reacts only to its immediate neighboring ants and circumstances but the larger flow of the colony nevertheless has a
coherent, complex movement. Such complex adaptive systems produce strange loops among their individual parts that create "effects disproportionate to causes"—the interaction of the individual parts will at some point reach a "tipping point" or a "moment of complexity" where their interaction and feedback loops produce a qualitative change at the level of the whole (165). In order to do this, these self-organizing systems have to process information in a way that goes beyond simple reaction. They also adapt. Schemata become critical elements in this development. A complex adaptive system has to (1) identify regularities in its environment; (2) generate schemata (or models, theories) that enable it to recognize these regularities; (3) have schemata that adapt to the changing circumstances as well as in relation to other schemata (different schemata in a complex adaptive system form a sub-network or complex adaptive system within a complex adaptive system); (4) have schemata that can predict environmental activity (as with evolution, reliable schemata continue to function, unreliable ones change or disappear); and (5) tie into its environment through feedback or strange loops (166–68).

The strange loop created by Bitzer and Vatz is but one polarity in such a larger system. Barbara Biesecker attempts to get beyond this initial polarity to a larger complexity in her contribution to the rhetorical situation debates. She questions Bitzer and Vatz's assumptions about the autonomous elements of the rhetorical situation and the causal logic that establishes the relationships among them through Derrida's notion of differance. Bitzer presupposes a causal chain from reality to speaker to text to audience to reality, positing the initial exigence as the origin of the causal chain. Vatz, she argues, simply starts the chain with the speaker who through interpretation of an exigence puts his intention into the situation via discourse. The "Bay of Pigs," for example, was created as an event because of the decision to create a particular type of discourse about it, which turned an "event" into a "crisis." In other words, the causal relationship is reversed: rhetoric becomes a cause not simply an effect.

The problem for Biesecker, of course, is the simplicity of this model. She initially problematizes the notion that an origin stems from an autonomous event or speaker. For her the originary moment is not in the situation or speaker but in their difference, in the absent space between them created by their relation. Rather than an event or speaker initiating a relation, their emergent relation co-produces each one through an ongoing development. Her example is Derrida's Glas which enacts differance by placing two columns of text side-by-side in the same book. The meaning of the text is not in the left side on Hegel or the right side on
Genet. It is in the absent space between them, in all the possible relations and connections between them that can arise during a reading of the text. Such a perspective displaces subject and event and "refuses to think of 'influence' or 'interrelationship' as simple historical phenomena" (Spivak, qtd. in Biesecker 121). If a speaker's subjectivity is formed through such a moment of differance, the same can be said of audience, not to mention language and the world. All the elements of a rhetorical situation are effects of their place in an economy of differences—they each form polarities with the others and evolve co-adaptively. Biesecker is after emergence and is using the Derridian lexicon to find an articulation of it. She comes close to the notion of emergence but doesn't move all the way to something like complex adaptive systems. Environment, rhetoric, texts, and audiences are complex adaptive systems in themselves and together form other complex adaptive systems. What we have are networks linked to other networks. Complexity theory can give us a new set of terms beyond the notion of differance through which we can understand and articulate the complexity of rhetorical situations, especially in a complex media-rich environment where so many events are co-produced through media.

**Kairos: Emergence**

Kairos is the classical rhetorical term for chance and timing—both the situation's apparently random ability to seize a rhetor and the rhetor's ability to recognize the right discourse for a given situation. Rather than pure chance or chaos, kairos is complex and requires the rhetor's ability to participate in the co-adaptive development of a situation by infusing discourse into it. Taylor regularly makes the distinction between chaos and complexity. Chaos theory was developed in opposition to Newton's mechanical physics and examines situations that cannot be conceptualized (schematized) due to the lack of information. Complexity theory examines situations that emerge between the polarity of chance and order where "self-organizing systems emerge to create new patterns of coherence and structures of relation" (24). Polarity is essentially a balancing act between too much order and too little order, but it is this dynamic that fuels emergence. Emergence refers to that moment of complexity when the interaction of parts or system components generates unexpected global properties not present in any of the local parts. Microscopic and macroscopic systems operate in loops that have both negative and positive feedback. Negative feedback turns the balance toward equilibrium, which shuts down the movement of the system. Positive feedback
interrupts equilibrium by increasing both speed and heterogeneity. Speed increases the interaction among parts and increased interaction creates more diverse components—more diverse components move the system from linearity and stability to recursiveness and complexity. These two properties can give rise to effects disproportionate to the immediate causes, thus producing emergence (143). The polarity of order and chaos also tends to follow a particular sequence from order to complexity to chaos to complexity to order (146). The transitions in this sequence are generally unpredictable, though we can determine them in retrospect. As they are happening it appears as if chance is a predominant cause that accounts for “effects disproportionate to their causes,” but in retrospect we can determine many of the patterns of complex activity and interrelatedness of the system parts. Emergence, then, operates in the moments of complexity between the polarity of chance and law (149). It is this point of emergence that signifies kairos.

Carolyn Miller notes that there are “two different, and not fully compatible, understandings of kairos” (xii). One places the importance on the rhetor, choice, and decorum (adapting to what is already culturally established as appropriate for the situation); the other places importance on “the uniquely timely, the spontaneous, the radically particular” (xiii). This position asks the rhetor to be creative in the face of human life’s “lack of order” (xiii). E.C. White takes up the latter in his seminal work *Kaironomia*, which addresses the notion of emergence. Noting that kairos traditionally meant the right moment or opportune time, White argues that we can never manage present opportunity, even provisionally. Success depends on “adaptation to an always mutating situation. [. . .] Such an activity of invention would renew itself and be transformed from moment to moment as it evolves and adapts itself to newly emergent contexts” (13). White uses the concepts of *dissoi-logoi*, or polarities, and a Heraclitean worldview of flux and becoming to theorize the emergent space between polarities. We end up with a polarity of rhetor and context. A rhetorical choice in the moment only solves the “tension between contrarities” by a force of will in the hope that chance produces an utterance that has meaning within a situation (16). Again, I think complexity theory can give us a language that articulates the two apparently incompatible conceptions of kairos—one that favors the rhetor and one the situation—within a single system. Seizing the moment means being able to anticipate it, unconsciously as well as consciously, not just reacting to it but adapting to it, with it, and often times quickly. We may never be able to completely predict complex behavior, only recognize
elements of it in retrospect, but being able to recognize more of it as it is developing and to understand how we might co-adapt along with it will become a vital rhetorical skill. As Miller notes, “The most complex and interesting rhetorics, both ancient and contemporary, include both dimensions of kairos in some way, keeping them in productive tension” (xiii). It is just such a polarity that can be fruitfully theorized for contemporary media culture via complexity theory.

**Logos: Network**

Logos in traditional rhetorical terms refers both to a narrow notion of logic that generally follows the enthymeme, a fairly simple system, and to a larger conception of language and the power of the word, a fairly abstract or chaotic system. For Taylor, of course, “far from opposites, simplicity and complexity [. . .] are braided ‘like hair intricately tressed and knotted.’ Such knots create binds and double binds that transform seemingly simple questions into exceedingly complex puzzles [. . .] and we [have] become ever more deeply enmeshed in the logic of networks” (199). Logic, Taylor argues, is not just the imposition of simplicity, linearity, and system onto the world or the chaotic power of language but also the knowledge that emerges from networks of relations, complexity, and noise (200–01). The simple sequence of emergence outlined above isn’t really a sequence; it functions through a network logic, which has three basic characteristics: its basic structure is a set of nodes (or knots) and the relations among those nodes; its basic dynamics are determined by the strength of the connections or relations; it “learns” or evolves via the changing strengths of the relations that adapt to the nodes around it (154). Network logic operates through nodes that communicate with one another. These nodes or knots work like switches or routers that send, receive, and transmit information. As Taylor puts it, “The ways in which connections intersect create the distinctive traits and functions that differentiate nodes. While the connections of each node ramify throughout the network, the relations that are most decisive are relatively localized. [. . .] If there are too few connections the network freezes, and if there are too many it becomes chaotic. Since the interrelations of nodes are both reciprocal and many-to-many, feedback loops can be both positive and negative” (154). Networks, then, are decentered and do not have to operate on ordered, “logical” sequences but run in parallel and recursive sequences. Such a logic means that networks become complex adaptive systems because there are multiple networks co-adapting to one another (171). The seemingly simple, static logic of the enthymeme and
the abstract power of language over us need to give way to a more complex middle-ground. If we want to understand the way language functions in complex (media) economies, we need a logic, a new image of logos, based on the network not as a static system but as a system in motion.

Logos is a very complex term. G.B. Kerford notes that the term carries at least three levels of meaning which refer to three different applications or uses: language (speech, discourse, argument, description, statement; thought), mental processes (thinking, reasoning accounting for, explanation); and world (structural principles, formula, natural laws, which "are regarded as actually present in and exhibited in the world-process") (83). In other words, the term implies the larger complex in which bodies, texts, and thought are always connected. Kerford warns that whenever we see the term in the pre-Socratics, Aristotle, or the sophists, it always carries elements of all three meanings. Thinking in terms of this larger connotation, it is easy to see why someone like Victor Vitanza would place emphasis on the power of logos. In Negation, Subjectivity, and the History of Rhetoric, he sees logos both as a system whose power excludes as well as a force that continually resists systematization: logos as hememony and logos as dynamis (127). These two elements form a polarity that is never static. Following Heraclitus, Vitanza equates logos with strife, the ongoing movement of logos as law, discourse, custom against but alongside logos as world, force, movement. No one side wins this battle. It is the ongoing movement that produces complexity or heterogeneity, or what Vitanza calls dissoi-para-logoi (111).

The energy produced by the force of the tension in a such polarity breaks out into multiplicity. Multiplicity, I would argue, operates on the logic of the network. As Taylor notes, network is not a static, frozen logic. It is in motion, it adapts, it never stands still. In The Semiotic Challenge, Roland Barthes explores the territory of rhetoric both diachronically and synchronically. Conducting a journey through the history of rhetoric, he collects fragments of rhetorical discourse to produce a network that folds over to produce more discourse (15–16). Movement through networks creates new links and new networks to be traveled through and re-linked. Likewise, complexity theory attempts to combine a diachronic and synchronic perspective—rhetoric becomes a system that moves and evolves. As Lanham argues, the Greek word logos meant something more like information: "Life is information; life is logos. It is an evolutionary system, dynamic, perpetually emergent. It creates new meanings, [...] rather than simply communicating preexisting knowledge in a transpar-
ent capsule” (254). In this system, the driving force is noise—that which the (static) system cannot account for but which forces the system to move, rearticulate, and reconnect. If logos as word is becoming less relevant in contemporary media culture, it doesn’t mean logos is dying. It is simply adapting to new situations, highlighting other elements in the complex meaning of the term.

**Ethos: Screen (Node)**

Ethos is the classical concept of character, or the identity of a person as exhibited to an audience or social group. It is generally linked to the modern notion of the self or subject, but ethos implies no such inner morality. Rather, it signifies an ethics that is relative to the rhetorical situation. For Taylor, “In a network culture, subjects are screens and knowing is screening” (200). A screen is something that divides an individual from its environment; it protects or conceals or screens out material, while at the same time allowing certain outside elements through. It divides and links. Knowledge is gained by screening or filtering the noise of the world and developing schemata to negotiate the surrounding environment. This allows the particular body or node in question to link or connect to its local situation. In our contemporary situation, the excess of information creates an excess of noise and the increased demand for schemata or screens. A set of screens comprises a node, a point of connection in a network. As Taylor notes,

> The self—if, indeed, this term any long[er] makes sense—is a node in a complex network of relations. In emerging network culture, subjectivity is nodular. Nodes, [. . .] are knots formed when different strands, fibers, or threads are woven together. As with the shifting site of multiple interfaces, nodular subjectivity not only screens the sea of information in which it is immersed, but is itself a screen displaying what one is and what one is not. (231; emphasis added)

Taylor’s pun on the term *screen*, from partition to sieve to computer monitor, elaborates on the social aspects of ethos. No longer linked to an inner subjectivity (and abstract morality), who we are is how we are linked and presented to the surrounding ecological situation. This “self” as node emerges from the screening process “without any centralized agency or directing agent” (205). Therefore, any account of the subject in a contemporary rhetorical theory for media culture cannot presuppose an interiority (at the very least one that preexists its situatedness), linking
the concept of ethos to an ethics that is based on a relational, network logic and complex adaptive systems.

James Baumlin, in his introduction to *Ethos: New Essays in Rhetorical and Critical Theory*, notes that "the etymology of the term *ethos* invites such an opposition [between a central self and a social self]. Translated as ‘character,’ ethos would seem to describe a singular stable, ‘central’ self. Translated as ‘custom’ or ‘habit,’ ethos would describe a ‘social’ self, a set of verbal habits or behaviors, a playing out of customary roles" (xviii). He links these two positions to Plato and Aristotle respectively. Plato’s emphasis on truth and the individual predisposes this position toward a concept of morality. Aristotle, on the other hand, is interested in “an active construction of character” (xv) based on ethics. For Aristotle, the rhetorical situation makes the speaker an element of discourse, not its origin—ethos becomes the product of delivery within a specific situation (xvi). In *The Use of Pleasure*, Michel Foucault takes up this distinction between a central self and a social self, arguing that the Greeks generally followed Aristotle’s social self. For the Greeks, a man’s (and, of course, it is man’s) specific acts aren’t at issue. If a man wants to have credibility within the community, he is expected to act with moderation, no matter what type of relation he establishes. The Greeks are not interested in acts, as the Christians are with their pastoral notion of the flesh, nor in an inherent sexuality per modernity, but in the dynamics of the act-pleasure-desire set of relations. This ensemble is fueled by the force of desire. Nature provides pleasure in an act/relation; pleasure gives rise to desire; and the desire for pleasure leads to a repetition of the act (42–43). The ethical question becomes one of the man’s use of pleasure. Rather than follow an abstract morality based on a central self, men are expected to operate under self-mastery with regard to their desires and the relationships they establish based on their desires.

Though this situation sets up the further historical development of the subject, our contemporary period signals the subject’s absence. The image of a single, central, stable subject gives way to a multiplicity of selves. This goes beyond Aristotle’s custom, or dramatis personae, to the multiplicity of relations we establish. In a media culture this distinction is vital. It is not simply the identity we might try out online but the relationships established through those identities and the affects of those relationships on bodies. Gilles Deleuze turns to Spinoza to find an ethics for this ethos. Such an ethics doesn’t look to a subject but to a body and how that body sets itself into relations or compositions with other bodies. The body’s ethical goal is not only “to actualize its potential to increas-
ingly higher degrees” (Massumi, Users 82), but also to actualize and increase the potential of the other bodies within that relation. Such an ethics/ethos of networked relations will be a key to future understandings of rhetoric in networked, media cultures.

Pathos: Affect
Pathos is one of the key concepts in classical rhetoric that distinguishes rhetoric from logic. Human minds don’t just screen information logically, they respond to information emotionally. Traditional rhetorical theories put most of the emphasis on psychological theories of emotion or character types or on ideological assumptions. But as many contemporary cultural theorists have recognized, especially Gilles Deleuze and Brian Massumi, bodies also respond “emotionally” not just minds. Taylor doesn’t talk explicitly about affect (or Deleuze) in The Moment of Complexity, which is one of the book’s shortcomings. Without this concept, his system makes an incomplete (rhetorical) theory. Charles Taylor, recognizing affect’s importance to theories of language, notes that Herder is one of the first to see that the acquisition of language created a new reality, not language as representation of objects but language as the production of affect/consciousness. Language produces “not just anger but indignation; not just desire but love and admiration” (105). This new affective dimension to life makes possible new sets of relations—“intimacy and distance, hierarchy and equality” (106). This concept of affect is based on using language to create affective relations among singularities or nodes. The body is essentially a node with multiple screens: language produces new screens and schemata that affect the body’s links with the environment and other bodies, allowing us to adapt, to form new relations, connections, and networks. Pathos is about using ideas/feelings in an audience to ground persuasion or about creating those emotions in an audience. But affect moves us toward relations among bodies, which is critical to understanding (discourse in) network culture. Like language, new media make new affections and new relations possible.

The typical misstep is to equate affect with emotions. For Massumi, “An emotion is a subjective content, the socio-linguistic fixing of the quality of an experience which is from that point onward defined as personal” (Parables 28). Affect, on the other hand, operates at an a-subjective, pre-linguistic level. Charles Taylor’s notion of affect is still operating through language, though he recognizes the key element of opening new potential relations. But Massumi’s affect is a bodily expe-
The writing process (prewriting, writing, rewriting) is credited with bringing rhetoric and especially invention back to the forefront of composition. In many ways it has performed this function well, linking the frozen product of writing to the larger context that produces it. However, process theorists have never fully considered the connections between evolutionary processes and thinking/writing. Taylor explicitly makes these connections, arguing that the writer as screen operates in a polarity with the situation and in an economy of personal experience, texts that are read, and words that are written. In this context, the writer reaches evolutionary roadblocks (schemata no longer fit the circumstances, forms are no longer relevant). These evolutionary dead ends change schemata, which changes possible relationships, and thereby affects the larger evolutionary development. The writer becomes a circuit
relay in this larger economy: “Words, thoughts, ideas are never precisely [our] own; they are always borrowed rather than possessed” (196). Just as bodies are the vehicles for genes that live on after bodies pass away, writers perform a host function for ideas in our cultural ecologies. Writing, though, has another layer of complexity: “Rewriting does not merely repeat but also transforms in a way that complicates the host/parasite relationship” (196). The text is at one point in the process a parasite on other texts, but during the process it reaches a “tipping point” and transforms into a host that others will enter into a parasitic relationship with and ultimately transform. This parasitic complexity problematizes any simple relationship to time. Thinking/writing not only has “rhythms of its own” but it is also “impossible to know just how much time is required for thought to gel because [the writer is] not in control of this process” (197). Though evolutionary time appears linear, “[t]he time of writing does not follow the popular figure of the line because present, past, and future are caught in strange loops governed by nonlinear dynamics” (198). Like ants, writers are a “colony of writers” caught up in the larger evolutionary flows of other networks. In short, “[t]he moment of writing is a moment of complexity” (198). And for Taylor, we write to produce and embody these moments in order to contribute to the evolution of thought/schemata and thus the whole (cultural) ecology. Our writing should disturb, create more noise, push equilibrium into new relations and assemblages (198).

The writing process, while starting out as an attempt to bring movement and recursivity to writing studies, has reified into a rigid, linear pedagogical practice. This notion of process has been regularly questioned. In the 1980s, for example, Paul Kameen argued against notions of process based on cognitive, problem-solution models, arguing that once the problem is articulated, the solution is already contained in it. Invention, then, is only finding the solution that is already predetermined often by the teacher or the structure established via heuristics. He uses Coleridge’s method as an alternative:

Methodical thinking is dialectical in its operations—i.e., the specific route that inquiry will follow cannot be mapped a priori; it reveals its pattern as exploration proceeds, each step preparing the ground for its (often unanticipated) successor; and because methodical thinking is spontaneously self-questioning, it is more nearly subversive than recursive in its capacity to adjust to the unexpected. (“Coleridge”).
More recently, Thomas Kent’s edited collection *Post-Process Theory: Beyond the Writing-Process Paradigm* takes a social-constructivist view against what has become a fairly simple, generalizable notion of process. In the introduction Kent counters, “writing constitutes a specific communicative interaction occurring among individuals at specific historical moments and in specific relations with others and with the world and that because these moments and relations change, no process can capture what writers do during these changing moments and within these changing relations” (1–2). While recognizing the importance of change and relations, most of the work in the collection seems to focus (explicitly or implicitly) on communication and the communications triangle, missing much of the complexity in an evolutionary model. Margaret Syverson is one of the few who have taken up complexity theory to counter a cognitive approach to the writing process and the simplicity of the communications triangle, substituting the static poles of writer, text, audience, and world with distribution, embodiment, emergence, and enaction (23). Such a remodeled theory of composing attempts to find detailed language and concepts that situate cognition in social and material development. Sounding somewhat like Taylor above, she notes that “a theory of composing as an ecological system is particularly vexing because it challenges our present investment in and assumptions about ownership of intellectual work, such as creative ideas and textual productions” (202). If everything co-evolves, drawing such distinctions as ownership becomes moot, an abstract game unrelated to an idea/text’s emergence.10

Though Syverson is perhaps the best example in rhetoric and composition of trying to create an encounter with complexity theory, I’m worried that Syverson doesn’t go far enough.11 As she notes in her conclusion, there are many questions to be answered. If rhetoric and composition is to move forward and adapt to the coming networked cultures, it can no longer settle, much less strive for, the production of overly simple systems to account for the complexity of writing. The investigation of works like Taylor’s, as I have tried to show, could push re-theorizations of writing and rhetoric forward toward the coming global media culture.
Notes

1. This article encapsulates the trajectory of my work over the past five years with rhetoric and vitalism, which argues for reassessing the concept of vitalism within a genealogy from Coleridge through Nietzsche, Bergson, Heidegger, Foucault, and Deleuze to complexity theory. As essentially an abstract of this much larger project, it is merely suggestive of the potential for this line of inquiry. Such a project could never be fully articulated in an article, perhaps not even in a book. Rather, it sets up nodes, fragments, sites to set the stage for future development. My current manuscript title for this project is “A Counter-History of Composition: Toward Methodologies of Complexity.”

2. Berlin acknowledges an open-ended dialectic in much of his theory but in his practice he still over-values one element of the polarity and asks his students to do the same. For the sake of pedagogy, for the sake of action, he is willing to freeze the movement and make a valuation.

3. Biesecker writes, “If the subject is shifting and unstable, [...] then the rhetorical event may be seen as an incident that produces and reproduces the identities of subjects and constructs and reconstructs linkages between them. [...] It marks their articulation of provisional identities and the construction of contingent relations that obtain between them” (126). In addition to writer and world, Biesecker goes on in her article to extend this argument to audience.

4. It should be noted that many of these key terms in complexity theory, as I am framing them here, are attempting to get beyond the basic, dialectical notion of the communications triangle that has grounded rhetoric and composition from Kinneavy to Berlin. It is not that the communications triangle is wrong, but that its simplicity can only take us so far.

5. The two concepts of enkrateia, or mastery, and sophrosyne, or moderation, form the beginnings of self-reflection. Foucault’s insight is that these concerns over sexual activity “create the possibility of forming oneself as a subject” (138). It is this element in Greek thought that Christian thought follows and connects with Plato, setting the stage for an internal and eventually modern subject to emerge.

6. I am currently working on an article that examines the ethos/ethics of Foucault and Deleuze in further detail tentatively titled “On the Inv/Possibility of Ethics: or, Toward an Ethico-Politics of De/composition.”

7. See Rorty for a number of essays on Aristotle’s theory of the emotions.

8. In Spinoza: Practical Philosophy Deleuze recognizes the problematic distinction of mind and body:

   It has been remarked that as a general rule the affection (affectio) is said directly of the body, while the affect (affectus) refers to the mind. But the real difference does not reside there. It is between the body’s affection and idea, which involves the nature of the external body, and the affect, which involves an increase or decrease of the power of acting, for the body and the mind alike. (49)
9. See Kameen's "Rewording" in which he situates this argument within a Heideggerian framework in order to place it in the context of a more ecological development.

10. I stick to Taylor's use of the term *evolution* here, even though Deleuze and Massumi have gone beyond *evolution* to *movement*. In *Bergsonism*, Deleuze warns against two misconceptions in the use of the term *evolution*: seeing evolution as predetermined and seeing evolution as only occurring at the level of the actual, missing the level of the virtual, or affect (98–101). Massumi generally speaks of evolution positively—though he notes its connotation of progress, order, and predictability (218). The primary distinction for him is that evolution operates at the most global level (112); movement is what happens at particular nodes, its immediate relations that lead to larger scale change (evolutionary change at the level of the whole). Movement happens within particular bodies at the level of affective relations. Massumi chooses to emphasize the term *movement* because the terms *process* and *evolution* are so over-coded that movement has been largely excluded in cultural theory (3).

11. For example, Syverson uses fairly standard research practices such as protocol analysis and ethnography. While I agree that some kind of research needs to be done on ecologies surrounding composition, my sense is that at some point we will need new research strategies more in line with the nature of complexity.

**Works Cited**


