

University of Minnesota-Twin Cities

From the Selected Works of Ronald Walter Greene

2011

Affirming Rhetorical Materialism: Enfolding the Virtual and the Actual

Matthew Bost, *University of Minnesota - Twin Cities*

Ronald Walter Greene, *University of Minnesota - Twin Cities*



Available at: <https://works.bepress.com/ronaldwaltergreene/12/>

Affirming Rhetorical Materialism: Enfolding the Virtual and the Actual

Matthew Bost & Ronald Walter Greene

To Be Governed Otherwise

The essay “Another Materialist Rhetoric” (Greene) attends to the institutional uptake of rhetoric as a technology of deliberation to assess the materiality of rhetoric. By focusing on rhetoric as a technology, a critic can isolate rhetorical form (debate, genre, sit-ins, arguments, tropes, monuments, movies) from rhetorical purpose (persuasion, deliberation, propaganda, bargaining, world disclosure, resistance, memory, value). Such a materialist rhetoric offered a means to assess how institutions put rhetorical form and purpose together to govern populations (in Foucault’s sense of governance). Moreover, Greene advocated a spatial method of articulation to map the proliferation and uptake of rhetoric rather than a hermeneutics of suspicion. Because a cartography of institutional articulations downplays the representational-semiotic priority required for ideology criticism, the editors fear ideology criticism has been displaced for an immanent criticism that risks the ground for resistance.

Whither Ideology? The answer may depend on what is entailed by ideology criticism. For example, “Another Materialist Rhetoric” argues that ideology criticism requires the adoption of a hermeneutics of suspicion for the purpose of (re)discovering structures of dominance. According to the introduction of this forum, ideology criticism entails a critical orientation to how the process of representation participates in epistemological distortions. If so, then from within the problematic of governance, the critical valence of ideology criticism appears as a rhetorical technique for cultivating suspicion as a political disposition. As such a rhetorical technique, ideology criticism is open to use by many and varied institutions, subjects, and

Matthew Bost is a doctoral student in the Department of Communication Studies, University of Minnesota. Ronald Walter Greene is an Associate Professor in the Department of Communication Studies, University of Minnesota. The authors would like to thank Gregory J. Seigworth for his affirmative criticism of past drafts of the essay. Correspondence to: Ronald Walter Greene, Communication Studies Associate Graduate Faculty, Rhetoric, Science and Technology Department of Communication Studies, University of Minnesota, 225 Ford Hall; 224 Church St SE, Minneapolis, MN 55455, USA. E-mail: green179@umn.edu

political projects. Conservatives (and capitalists) have uses for a hermeneutics of suspicion, too. In other words, as a rhetorical form (a hermeneutics of suspicion), ideology criticism cannot guarantee its rhetorical purpose (liberation).

It is not required that a cartography of governance abandon a rhetoric of liberation and/or emancipation. From Foucault's perspective, simultaneous to the process of governmentalization was a "critical attitude... of not being governed, or the art of not being governed like that at this price" (Foucault 384). Put, another way, while some relations of governance or power are as inevitable as social relations, the ability to question and/or challenge being governed in one way or another is immanent to any particular apparatus of governance. Thus, the editors' fear that immanentist perspectives create pragmatic problems for a project of resistance is misplaced. To specify the possibilities for resistance from within an immanentist perspective encourages a move from Foucault's problematic of governance toward Deleuze's problematic of difference. Such a shift in philosophical registers nominates the virtual as a useful concept for a materialist rhetoric.

The Virtual

The concept of the virtual provides an introduction to a "wilder realism" (Grossberg 48) than the epistemology provided by the introduction. This new empiricism will, according to Seigworth, emphasize "process, sensation and affect, movement and transition, rhythm, creativity, imagination... forces of life (vitalism), the lived or experience, bios, and non-human materiality" (109). An immanent world stands in excess of the capture of economic or social relations. This wild empiricism, more and less intensive, conveys a wider sense of the ontological as it resists absorption into representational epistemologies. In contrast to the introduction, it is not an epistemological space outside power that secures resistance, but the worldly excess that provides pathways for political alternatives. The problem of enclosure is the problem of a representational epistemology that attempts to legislate and limit resistance to the formatting of a proper human understanding.

The virtual is "real without being actual, ideal without being abstract" (Deleuze and Guattari, *Philosophy* 156). This definition provides a link to materialist politics, as well as a way of describing the relationship between bodily habit and language. The virtual is real in the sense of an absolute space of ever-present but overdetermined "elements and relations, along with the singular points" (Deleuze 208-09) from which organized systems emerge and to which they owe their potential for novelty. Organization (political or otherwise) of these elements, relations, and singular points form the dynamic "structure" (209) of a given material body determining it in its singular capacities (those things which a body can do as well as the thresholds of its transformation into something completely different). At the level of the human, the mechanisms of memory, un- or non-conscious bodily habits, and symbolic or linguistic actions "including a trace of their contexts... conserved in the brain and in the flesh" produce incipient pathways of action (Massumi 30). These traces are the site of habits that, over time, sediment into biological and social systems as well

as subjectivities (both are bodies). However, bodies are not merely actual: they are “plunged” into those virtual forces, tendencies, and capacities not habitualized (Deleuze 209), elements that can suddenly be pulled into experience through the ingress of events (linguistic or otherwise), leaving us “breathless and with bloodshot eyes,” but irrevocably and unpredictably changed (Deleuze and Guattari, *Philosophy* 176). Put another way, bodily composition actualizes its virtual component as a state of affairs, but the virtual is not a state of affairs (an actual body): it persists as a chaotic remainder “subtracted from or added to its actualization” (Deleuze and Guattari, *Philosophy* 156). The virtual and actual dance a continual back-and-forth, impelled by events, but the virtual “always exceeds... the possible experience of... consciousness,” returning in the form of the other, the nonhuman, and the continual presence of eventual surprise (Seigworth 115).

The second half of the definition of the virtual—“ideal without being abstract”—links the virtual with the realm of language. The virtual is ideal because it functions at the level of ideas and because it is indeterminate. However, even at its most ideal, it is not abstract. The virtual is limited to the range of bodily interactions—effects—available in a given situation or state of affairs. In this model, language works primarily outside the mediation and meaning-effects scrutinized by ideology critique, carrying its main affective impetus as speech-act, command, and habit or, alternatively, revolutionary slogan, song of protest, and impetus to collective empowerment. Language does not communicate, but transmits power or potential for action. Meaning is a sedimented effect of this transmission that inflects further linguistic use (Deleuze and Guattari, *Plateaus* 83–85, 116–17). This point of view does not negate ideology critique, but argues that it is limited in its purview and critical usefulness because of its tendency to isolate itself in the plane of linguistic mediation. Moreover, by approaching language as a pragmatic subset of action, an immanent materialism allows for the description of “power effects” outside the range of language (Massumi 5). Put differently, the virtual’s relationship to language allows a description of the materiality of rhetoric that neither enforces a strict separation between linguistic and non-linguistic actions (actualizations) nor elides the distinct possibilities of action available as means of persuasion. The virtual thus directly answers the question “whither ideology?” From where do ideological effects emerge? Answer: from linguistic action that affects (and is affected by) bodily experience.

One might argue that this rendition of the virtual avoids collective action because it locates itself in bodily experience. One answer to this problem would be that from the space of the virtual, the subject is never individual, but rather folds in from the traces of collectivity that constitute its possibilities for action. Any critique at the individual level will thus necessarily scale to the collectivity. The space of the virtual is also a space of collective possibilities of difference. The virtual orients a politics of immanence toward the specific and affirmative. It will be specific in that within this framework, individuals (situations, nation-states, classes, people, even capital itself) are composites made up of co-functioning physical, biological, semiotic, economic, and other systems (Deleuze and Guattari, *Plateaus*). Each of these systems interacts to produce an organization of power, and each is susceptible to political intervention

in its own way. An immanent politics does not critique these organizations of power through a dialectical negation, nor attempt to find a position, however fleeting, outside of these systems. Rather, it asks which systemic components are most strategically susceptible to intervention and attempts to ask how those systems might be other than they are—a specific possibility for a difference in action with the potential to snowball and alter the current system. An immanent politics will be affirmative because it does not so much negate as it selects and subtracts. In each conjuncture, an immanent politics searches for the most politically useful actualization, and pursues it. This is not to say that negation has no place; rather it comes as a consequence of affirmative invention and production (Hardt and Negri 69–79).¹ Negation serves as a mechanism of defensive action and assessment of where the process of critique needs to go next, rather than being the foundation of a critical attitude.

Revolutionary Composition

An immanent materialism grounds struggle in the enfolding of the virtual and the actual: “two vectors that intersect, one according to which states of affairs actualize events and the other according to which events absorb (or rather adsorb) states of affairs” (Deleuze and Guattari, *Philosophy* 153). Immanent materialism is affirmative because it adsorbs or assembles affects, tendencies and forces of change as its critical tools. For an immanent materialism, affect precedes consciousness. What must be composed from this affective movement or gathering is an organization of power. From an immanent standpoint, we might call the means of persuasion the ways the virtual and the actual affect and are affected through the assembly of a body. While rhetorical studies has long since abandoned the idea that the rhetorical is only linguistic, ideology criticism, because of its tendency to register rhetorical effects on the plane of representation and signification, has the tendency to read all rhetorical actions (linguistic and otherwise) as modes of mediation suspended between different sides of a structure of dominance. Such an ideological approach constricts the materiality of rhetoric to consciousness-raising and risks “a simplistic equation between critique and negativity and in the reduction of the latter to negation” (Braidotti 45). A material rhetoric “adsorbed” by the virtual and actual affirms the joy of gathering together political strength.

From the perspective of an immanent materialism, rhetoric does not mediate between the virtual and the actual because it finds its materiality in both dimensions of reality. From within the problematic of governance the virtual suggests an excess or surplus that prevents any actualized rhetorical technique or technology from merely serving (or suturing) an organization of power. On the plane of the actual, any rhetorical technique useful to an organization of power may affect the potential pathways capable of providing movement toward the constitution of a critical disposition. Moreover, on the plane of the virtual, a potential storehouse of rhetorical techniques and technologies jostle to be invented, actualizing (quantitatively and qualitatively) political events as organizations of power. An affirmative materialism encourages rhetorical criticism to be less animated by a desire to re-constitute a lost

critical space outside relationships of power and more committed to mapping the ways bodies affect and are affected by rhetorical techniques and technologies to compose organizations of power. To orient criticism toward the gathering of and struggle for the rhetorical excess or surplus offers a common antagonism for a "revolutionary composition" (May 207).

Note

- [1] Hardt and Negri use defensive violence as an example of such a negation.

Works Cited

- Braidotti, Rosi. "On Putting the Active Back into Activism." *New Formations* 68.3 (2009): 42–57. Print.
- Deleuze, Gilles. *Difference and Repetition*. Trans. Paul Patton. New York: Columbia University Press, 1994. Print.
- Deleuze, Gilles, and Felix Guattari. *Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*. Trans. Brian Massumi. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987. Print.
- . *What is Philosophy?* Trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Graham Burchell. New York: Columbia University Press, 1996. Print.
- Foucault, Michel. "What is Critique?" Trans. Kevin Paul Geiman. *What is Enlightenment? Eighteenth-Century Answers and Twentieth Century Questions*. Ed. James Schmidt. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996. 382–98. Print.
- Greene, Ronald Walter. "Another Materialist Rhetoric." *Critical Studies in Mass Communication* 15.1 (1998): 21–40. Print.
- Grossberg, Lawrence. *We Gotta Get Out of this Place: Popular Conservatism and Postmodern Culture*. New York: Routledge, 1992. Print.
- Hardt, Michael, and Antonio Negri. *Multitude: War and Democracy in the Age of Empire*. New York: Penguin, 2005. Print.
- Massumi, Brian. *Parables of the Virtual: Movement, Affect, Sensation*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2002. Print.
- May, Matthew S. "Spinoza and Class Struggle." *Communication and Critical/Cultural Studies* 6.2 (2009): 204–08. Print.
- Seigworth, Gregory, J. "Cultural Studies and Gilles Deleuze." *New Cultural Studies: Adventures in Theory*. Eds. Gary Hall and Clare Birchall. Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2007. 107–26. Print.