The Status of Theory and Method in Rhetorical Criticism

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In his contribution to the 1990 Western symposium on rhetorical criticism, Dilip Gaonkar attempts “a study of the fluctuating dialectic between object and method” in rhetorical criticism. His interest in method, he acknowledged, is based only on its status as the “dialectical counterpart” of the critical object whose “career” he sought to reexamine. In a masterful piece of metacriticism, Gaonkar outlines the major contours of that career, locating two trajectories of thought that have shaped in large measure critical scholarship in the field. But while he has clarified these competing conceptualizations of the object of rhetorical criticism, Gaonkar actually does very little, beyond frequent iterations of the dialectic of object and method, to help us understand the place and status of method, and its dialectical counterpart “theory,” in our critical practices. A reexamination of the interrelated careers of theory and method in rhetorical criticism may still be in order.

Of course, rhetorical critics have engaged in this manner of reflection with some regularity over the years. The second generation of twentieth-century rhetoricians understood method as a way of supporting a critic’s judgment or evaluation of an object. In 1947, A. Craig Baird and Lester Thonssen maintained: “[T]he purpose of rhetorical criticism is to express a judgment on a public speech... such judicial appraisal is a derivative of composite judgments formulated by reference to the methodologies of rhetoric, history, sociology and social psychology, logic and philosophy... The chief business of the rhetorical scholar,” they continued, “is the evaluation of a speech or speeches.” They reiterated this point in their magnum opus Speech Criticism the next year when they defined rhetorical criticism as “a process or method... by which unsupported individual preference moves toward rationally defined and systematically determined choice. This movement results from a composite of judgments, not only in rhetoric, but in related fields—particularly philosophy, history, and logic.” Method, for Thonssen and Baird, was an “at least partially systematic plan” for appraising or evaluating oratory.
Perhaps the first significant development in rhetorical criticism during the second half of the twentieth century was an interrelated process in which its judicial or evaluative dimension declined while its epistemological or analytic function dramatically increased. Consider some representative texts in our metacritical literature. In her collection of lectures *Rhetoric and Criticism*, Marie Hochmuth Nichols reiterated the traditional doctrine of Thonssen and Baird: the rhetorical critic "must serve his [sic] society and himself by revealing and evaluating the public speaker's interpretation of the world around him and the peculiar means of expressing that interpretation to his generation." While Nichols continued to place significant emphasis on evaluation, her metacritical reflections also provide evidence of a reconfigured function for method. Like many critics in the 1960s, Nichols lamented the sorry state of critical method: "We patch together bits from Aristotle, bits from Quintilian, bits from propaganda analysis, bits from modern textbooks in persuasion or logic and then approach rhetorical matters." But what "traditionally oriented rhetoricians often lack [is] an orderly—and one might say—demonstrably useful method for the analysis of speeches." "[R]hetoricians," Nichols maintained, "are notoriously weak [in] the area of methodology—methodology not merely for the analysis of persuasive discourse, but methodology for the ordering of all types of discourse." "[W]e should be looking," she continued, "for an orderly methodology." And Nichols, like many critics of the time, found inspiration in the work of such critic/theorists as I.A. Richards and Kenneth Burke. But unlike Thonssen and Baird, who linked methodology to critical appraisal and evaluation, Nichols articulates method and critical analysis. There is no hint of evaluation in the passage where Nichols assessed the state of method in rhetorical studies; the function of method is analysis: of exposition, of language, of argument, etc. So while Nichols' account of the function of criticism maintained a loose connection between "revealing" and "evaluating," her discussion of method reveals a rearticulation as method slides away from evaluation and bonds with analytic revelation.

This reconceptualization of the way method functioned in rhetorical criticism is also visible in perhaps the most notable piece of metacriticism in the field: Edwin Black's *Rhetorical Criticism: A Study in Method*. Black's study is widely credited with ushering in the final demise of neo-Aristotelian criticism but we also might profit from examining its discussion of the function of criticism and its relationship to method. Black opens his discussion by acknowledging the growing centrality of science and scientific thought in American culture. The result is that "[s]cholars in all branches of learning are called upon for increasing precision of thought, clarity of expression, and refinement of methodology. These demands are not invariably met, but their persistence is invariably felt, and by the critic no less than by others." Black continues: "There are, no doubt, certain disadvantages
to science's having become... the model for intellectual activity, but on the whole the influence of scientific method on criticism has probably been wholesome. If nothing else, this influence has tended to make modern critics especially conscious of their methods." And throughout the 1960s and 1970s, rhetorical critics would be especially conscious of their methods.

Black continues the disarticulation of method and evaluation found in Nichols. Like most critics, Black does acknowledge the "judicial" dimension of critical practice and he devotes a section of Rhetorical Criticism to the limitations of neo-Aristotelian evaluation. But criticism's most basic function is analytic: "it demands nothing but full disclosure." Criticism," Black writes, "has no relationship with its subject other than to account for how that subject works." "[U]nderstanding how" texts work "is the task of criticism." And Black's final comment on neo-Aristotelian criticism specifically subordinates critical evaluation to analytic disclosure. "It is the task of criticism," he writes, "not to measure... discourses dogmatically against some parochial standard of rationality but, allowing for the immeasurably wide range of human experience, to see them as they really are." Method as a mode of evaluative measurement is displaced by method as a means of perception. Black eventually came to have second thoughts about methodologically-driven perception, but method-based analytic criticism would become the norm for the field.7

The status of method in the field was acknowledged with regularity in the metacritical literature. In 1969, Walter Fisher noted how "the academic identity of rhetoric is dependent upon the method used in rhetorical criticism." Sophisticated methodology, Fisher suggested, was seen by many in the field as "a means of redemption" and a way to achieve "academic respectability."8 Other critics were less sanguine about the growing importance of critical method. Writing about the "discernible tendencies" in the field of rhetorical criticism, Barnet Baskerville identified "our tremendous preoccupation with and proliferation of critical methods." Rhetorical critics, Baskerville continued, "derive keen sensory pleasure from uttering that blessed word 'methodology'.... Our convention programs proclaim the need for 'new critical models and methodologies.' Each new issue of our journals heralds a fresh 'approach' to rhetorical criticism." But, in the end, Baskerville wondered if perhaps critics hadn't become "over-concerned with 'how to do it'" at the expense of critical practice.9

More recently, Sonja Foss observes: "Method has been of central concern to rhetorical critics from the beginnings of our discipline." The growth of approaches and methods, she continues, "has not led to a shift from the discipline's focus on method." "Our criticism tends to be analytic," Foss argues, "because our methods are ones that disassemble an artifact." The practice of rhetorical criticism remains, Foss insists, "constituted by agency," organized and driven by a preoccupa-
tion with method. In 1994, William Nothstine, Carole Blair, and Gary Copeland write: "Method has been and continues to be of prime concern to most critics." Their analysis of disciplinary practices reveals the "continued significance of method." Despite the fact "they [critical methods in rhetorical studies] do not have the procedural rigor or systematicity that typically characterizes a method . . . many critics treat them as if they were equivalent to the analytic methods and instruments of science . . . as if they provided a direct and universal-access bridge for the critic between 'data' and theoretical generalizations."

Nothstine, Blair, and Copeland's observations draw our attention to the relationship among theory, method, and critical practice. The two most common patterns in the literature are (a) theory provides a method that is utilized in critical practice (theory serves criticism) or (b) criticism contributes to theorization through its heuristic capacity, through illustration and hypothesis testing, and through the reflexive implementation of theoretically-derived methods (criticism serves theory). Ivie's 1974 study of presidential war addresses illustrates the first pattern. Ivie begins by introducing the theoretical concept of "vocabularies of motive" derived from the work of Kenneth Burke as extended by C. Wright Mills. After a brief explication of the concept, he identifies the methodological directives which follow from it in very specific terms:

Each of the selected Presidential war speeches was subjected separately to a four-step analysis. . . . The first step was to locate recurring patterns in the definition of war situations by considering the question of whether a President was defining an ideal, a crisis, a cause of the crisis, and/or a solution for a crisis. Second, important terms of dramatistic pentad . . . and important pentadic rationales were located in the hierarchy of motives for each recurring pattern. Third, the principal forms of substantiation were noted, including identification by placement and individuation. Fourth, significant clusters of god-terms and devil-terms were identified. The findings for each speech were then compared with the findings for all other speeches in the sample to discover any patterns in the war vocabulary of Presidents.

Not every critical study in this tradition breaks down its analytic strategy in this much detail. After outlining the cluster of concepts constituting the fantasy theme method of criticism, Sonja Foss introduces her analysis of the ERA controversy by stipulating: "If the rhetorical worlds or visions of the proponents ERA are to provide a clue to the essence or motivation inherent in the debate, the rhetoric produced by the two sides must be examined to determine the nature of their rhetorical worlds . . . A dramatistic approach will be used to examine these worlds . . . Burke's suggestion that a rounded statement about motives consists of an investigation of act, scene, agent, agency, and purpose confirms the usefulness of the theatrical metaphor here since the attempt is to determine the nature and motivations of a rhetorical world."
We find this pattern not just in Burkeian-inspired criticism but in studies derived from a variety of theoretical perspectives. Michael McGuire's study of myth in Hitler's *Mein Kampf* illustrates the pattern. In this instance, McGuire borrows his method from the structuralist anthropology of Claude Levi-Strauss. After summarizing the way Levi-Strauss reconstructs the deep structure of myth, McGuire moves on to apply this method in order to uncover Hitler's "rhetorically elaborate myth."\(^{14}\) We can find this pattern persisting well into the 1980s. Barbara Warnick derives a "hermeneutical exegetical approach" to rhetorical criticism from Paul Ricouer's philosophical hermeneutics. The specific steps entailed by this approach—distanciation and appropriation—are described and then applied in a reading of Lincoln's "Gettysburg Address." Rhetorical criticism-as-hermeneutical exegesis should, Warnick maintains, "reveal the work's implicit structure, examine how that structure reinforces and supports its narrative elements, and identify the cultural values and myth systems which are embedded in the text."\(^{15}\) The 1995 edition of Matlon's *Index to Journals in Communication Studies* identifies over sixty critical methods under the heading for methodology in rhetorical criticism; among the methods listed are archetype, axiological, Burkeian, dialectical, dramatic, ethical, existential, factor analysis, fantasy theme, genre studies, historical, inferential, intersubjective, language-action, Marxist, myth or mythological, organismic, phenomenological, philosophical, sociolinguistic, structuralist, and symbolic analysis as well as such idiosyncratic approaches as potlatch, fugue analogy, game theory, and the panel technique. And the basic structure of the critical essays exhibiting this pattern remains fairly consistent: a discussion of theoretical sources that eventuated in the explication of a critical perspective or method (the specific procedures that would be employed) followed by an effort to apply the perspective or method to some object in order to illustrate its analytic, interpretive, and in a few cases evaluative potential.

As numerous scholars have noted in their metacritical commentaries, critics do not merely employ theoretically-derived methodologies, they have the potential to reverse the relationship so that criticism makes productive contributions to the discipline's theoretical agenda. In a widely-quoted passage, the members of the 1970 Wingspread conference's committee on rhetorical criticism confidently wrote: "Whether rhetorical criticism *ought* to contribute to theory seems to us beyond question." This position would be reiterated repeatedly over the following decades. Summarizing an extensive body of metacritical writing, Nothstine, Blair, and Copeland contend: "'Theoret' has become virtually the singular objective of criticism.... Contributing to theory *is* regarded as the fundamental goal of [rhetorical] criticism."\(^{16}\)

This contribution, the metacritical literature suggests, can assume a number of forms. The first observation Karlyn Campbell makes about
the "evaluative dimension" of criticism is that "[a]t a minimum, the critical act unearths theoretical presuppositions, assumptions about the treatment of research data and underlying choice of procedures, and conceptions of how rhetorical acts work. In all cases, critical analysis must assess the capacities and limitations of the perspective assumed by the rhetorical critic." Criticism must, in short, be methodology reflexive in order to modify problematic theoretical presuppositions and assumptions. The rhetorical critic not only, in Richard Gregg's words, "calls upon theory or aspects of theory to provide the substance from which questions or analytic topoi may be drawn to illuminate rhetorical transactions" (theory serving criticism), "But the relationship can be the other way around. Through analysis, critical insight can lead to new or modified conclusions pertaining to human rhetorical behavior." Criticism can generate theoretical hypotheses that might then be further tested, criticism can serve as a mechanism for hypothesis testing, or criticism might more simply "illustrate" and thereby help develop our understanding of a theoretical proposition.

Rhetorical critics have responded differently to the growing trend in theoretically-informed criticism. Some critics have expressed anxiety with respect to criticism's theoretical orientation. One sentence after recognizing criticism's obligation to contribute to theory, the Sloan committee acknowledged: "Whether rhetorical criticism can contribute to theory seems much more in doubt" (222). Other critics have raised questions and concerns about criticism's purported theoretical mission. James Darsey suggests that whether criticism serves the needs of "old theory" (social scientific) or "new theory" (postmodernism), the result is the same: the traditional humanistic motive to reveal and celebrate human excellence and distinctiveness is replaced by a fixation with what is common and can be regularized. And Martin Medhurst fears that the critic's concern for the "historical record" will be abandoned due to the increased stature of theory-based criticism.

While the function of method has shifted over time, there appears to be little doubt regarding its status in rhetorical criticism in the latter half of the twentieth century. To put the issue colloquially: method rules. But there is growing evidence that the hegemony of method-based criticism is coming to an end. And while the apparent shift away from method-based criticism is as important in its own right as the previous shift in the function of method, it also has important implications for the relationship between criticism and theory. This emerging pattern of interconnected trends—decline of method and development of conceptually-oriented criticism—may be one of the most significant recent developments in rhetorical studies.

A few scholars have noticed the trend away from method and remarked on it in print. Agreeing with some observations by David Zarefsky, James Aune noted in 1989 "that one major source of the recent revival of scholarly interest in public address is a shift from
method-driven studies to theory-driven studies.” But what exactly does this shift entail? A comparison of two specific studies can illustrate what is involved in the move from method to theory. Carl Burgchardt’s study of the progressive era Wisconsin politician Robert La Follette builds off Osborn’s work on archetypal metaphor in order to develop a new concept for rhetorical criticism: the “rhetorical imprint.” According to Burgchardt, a rhetorical imprint is “a constant, underlying pattern of distinctive verbal characteristics that supports the content of numerous speeches and articles in different contexts. . . . [It] is not simply an isolated, recurring element . . . [but] an integrated set of rhetorical features . . . [or a] deep structure that governs a range of consonant verbal manifestations on the surfaces of divergent speeches and writings.” Burgchardt explains that his “method for discovering La Follette’s rhetorical imprint was to analyze 111 speeches and documents from the period 1879 to 1925.” Based on an examination of various “rhetorical aspects” of the texts (defined as “arguments, ideas, themes, techniques, metaphors,” etc.), Burgchardt “was able to identify 76 relatively distinct motifs in La Follette’s discourse” with “[o]ne motif, a distinctive narrative pattern . . . predominant and constituting the rhetorical imprint in La Follette’s rhetoric.” He labels this imprint the “melodramatic scenario” and the bulk of the essay is devoted to explicating its features and demonstrating its persistence across a range of La Follette’s texts. The essay concludes with a discussion of “critical applications” or specific ways that the critic might further analyze rhetorical imprints.

A shift in critical orientation in rhetorical studies is visible when we compare Burgchardt’s study of La Follette with Robert Hariman’s reading of Ryszard Kapuscinski’s book The Emperor: Downfall of an Autocrat, an account of the demise of the Ethiopian ruler Haile Selassie. At one level, Hariman’s and Burgchardt’s studies are similar; each identifies a specific concept or set of concepts that will organize their projects. But analysis of the way such concepts are deployed reveal some differences in orientation that, while often subtle, are nevertheless important. Burgchardt is interested in introducing and exploring a new concept that, if proven useful, will expand the repertoire of methods and approaches from which a rhetorical critic might choose. Hariman is not interested in developing new concepts or expanding the critic’s arsenal of methods. Conceptually, his project is organized around two very traditional concepts in rhetorical studies: style and decorum. Hariman is interested in the way style and decorum “can be recast as [a] concept for the analysis of political experience” but such an interest does not translate into the development of another new method for critical analysis. Burgchardt’s study is primarily an effort at illustrating a new method or reading strategy and establishing its value for rhetorical criticism. Hariman’s study is an effort to unpack central terms within the rhetorical tradition in a way
that allows them to speak to issues in contemporary social thought. Hariman does not illustrate a method; in fact, the essay lacks one of the standard elements of method-driven criticism: an articulation of the specific critical procedures that are employed. Rather, his study of the court of Haile Selassie advances a conceptual argument about the relationship between style, decorum, and power or, more specifically, the way power is “activate[d],” “represented and generated,” by various manifestations of style and decorum. Hariman does not try to articulate a method that subsequent critics can try to replicate. His study, instead, outlines the contours of a “theory of power,” a way of thinking about the relationship between power and discursive performance, that can serve as the conceptual ground for further critical inquiry. Hariman’s essay, in short, does not advance a method to be imitated but a conceptual equation in need of additional exploration.25

Methodologically driven criticism generally proceeds through a process of deduction: a general method is applied to a specific case or object. What I want to refer to as conceptually oriented criticism, however, proceeds more through a process of abduction which might be thought of as a back and forth tacking movement between text and the concept or concepts that are being investigated simultaneously. A critic like Hariman will start with an interest in the phenomenon of power and try to understand how it is manifest discursively. This leads to an encounter with a text or a series of texts. Intermediary concepts like style and decorum emerge as a way for the critic to organize her or his thinking about the relationship between power and discursive practice. But the concept(s) remain essentially works in progress; our understanding of the concept(s) evolves through the back and forth movement between concept and object. Similarly, the critic’s understanding of the object grows or develops as conceptual thickening helps illuminate its diverse qualities. Various specific reading strategies might be employed (emphasizing issues of argument, structure, style, etc.) but, in conceptually oriented criticism, these strategies cannot be organized in any a priori fashion nor is their validation an important issue for the critic. Conceptually oriented criticism proceeds through the constant interaction of careful reading and rigorous conceptual reflection.

Conceptually oriented criticism, as I’ve tried to describe it, should not be confused with the social scientific model of theory which Nothstine, Blair, and Copeland find rampant in rhetorical criticism. As Gaonkar notes, the process of “thickening . . . concepts through grounded critical readings has serious implications for ‘concept formation’ ” in rhetorical studies. This approach to criticism is “likely to reconfigure the relationship between rhetorical theory and critical practice.”26 Gaonkar’s point echoes as it extends an observation made by Michael Leff nine years earlier. In “Interpretation and the Art of the Rhetorical Critic,” Leff himself extended on Black’s provocative effort
to employ Kenneth Pike’s emic/etic distinction as a way of assessing the state of rhetorical criticism and, in the process, laid the foundation for the development of conceptually driven criticism. Implicit in Black’s call for emic criticism that would eschew abstract theory and concentrate on particulars, Leff finds the seeds of a “shift... [with] important consequences for the field as a whole.” This shift “reverses” the relationship “between theory and practice... that has dominated rhetorical criticism for the past few decades.” “Theory,” Leff concluded, “is the outcome of critical practice, not its starting point.”

The social scientific model of theory creates explanatory models that are tested in order to produce generalizations and predictions. While this sense of theory may, as Nothstine, Blair, and Copeland argue, influence the epistemic imagination of some rhetorical scholars, it does not adequately describe much of the interesting critical work that has been produced over the last two decades. Leff appropriates Clifford Geertz’s discussion of the role of theory in ethnographic anthropology to help clarify an alternative way of understanding theory in rhetorical studies. “In ethnography,” Geertz maintains, “the office of theory is to provide a vocabulary in which what symbolic action has to say about itself—that is, about the role of culture in human life—can be expressed.” Ethnographic interpretation does not “begin... with a set of observations and attempt... to subsume them under a governing law, [it]... begins with a set of (presumptive) signifiers and attempts to place them within an intelligible frame. Leff adapts Geertz’s formulation to rhetorical criticism in a well-known passage from this essay; “theoretical precepts,” he writes, “attain meaning only as they are vibrated against the particular case and are instantiated in an explanation of it.” But this form of theory, Leff insists, “eventuates in diagnosis, not in a hierarchical arrangement of principles nor in observations of regularities that lead to prediction.”

“The progress of theory in an interpretive discipline,” Leff continues still echoing Geertz, “does not take the form of a ladder leading up to and down from high order abstractions. Instead, such theory moves along the broken ground covered by the specific material of the discipline.” Conceptually-informed interpretive studies “do build on other studies,” Geertz writes, “not in the sense that they take up where the others leave off, but in the sense that, better informed and better conceptualized, they plunge more deeply into the same things.” In Geertz’s model, critical studies are not related methodologically, they do not share a specific method; they are related conceptually. Different studies extend previous conceptual reflection into new discursive territory, thickening the concept and illuminating the practice along the way. “Theoretical ideas,” Geertz insists, “are not created wholly anew in each study... they are adopted from other, related studies, and, refined in the process, applied to new interpretive problems. If they cease being useful with respect to such problems, they tend to stop
being used and are more or less abandoned. If they continue being useful, throwing up new understanding, they are further elaborated and go on being used. 29

Directly and, more often the case, indirectly, Leff’s Geertzian-inspired account of the nature of theory and conceptual labor in critical practice has helped reshape the practice of rhetorical criticism within the speech and/or communication discipline over the last twenty years. Like many of the “second-nature” concepts that shape the field’s imagination (e.g. Bitzer’s “rhetorical situation”), this account structures and inspires critical practice even when it is not directly invoked by critics. Hariman does not draw our attention to this emerging logic, yet as I suggested above, his essay is an exemplary instance of this growing trend. Steve Browne and Kent Ono/John Sloop are considered by some to represent the opposed “close reading” and “critical rhetoric” tribes in contemporary rhetorical studies, yet Browne’s 1994 reading of Slavery As It Is and Ono and Sloop’s 1995 analysis of the Japanese American periodical Pacific Citizen exhibit similar logics as they each strive to “thicken” a central concept (Browne’s focus is on “representation”; One and Sloop explore the idea of “vernacular”) through discursive analysis. Finally, consider a recent, almost “textbook,” example of the Leff-Geertz model. J. Michael Hogan and Glen Williams have re-engaged a classic text in American political literature: Paine’s Common Sense. Their basic challenge is that faced by all critics: how can we render this practice intelligible; how can we make sense of Common Sense. Common Sense is not a “new” interpretive problem; generations of scholars in various disciplines have helped shape our understanding of the text. But in some ways that makes the challenge even more formidable. Hogan and Williams proceed by developing what Leff refers to as “a theory of the case”: a conceptually-driven account of a discursive performance. In order to make sense out of Paine’s text, Hogan and Williams practice a form of Geertzian thick description; they adopt, apply, and refine a central concept in social theory “charisma” and perform similar conceptual labor on related concepts like “persona.” Common Sense, we learn from Hogan and Williams, illuminates and is in turn illuminated by the interrelated concepts of “textual charisma”—charisma as “a textual creation . . . a phenomenon manifested in rhetorical artifacts”—and “republican charisma” (“a[n] unprecedented mode of leadership that, while revolutionary in spirit, actually repudiated charismatic leadership as conventionally understood”). These dual refinements of the concept of charisma provide an account of Paine’s discursive appeal and are now available for further interpretive work and conceptual refinement. 30

While Nothstine, Blair, and Copeland’s reduction of conceptual reflection in critical practice to a form of social science is, I have tried to argue, problematic, their reiteration of a question posed by Richard Gregg remains highly appropriate. Rhetorical critics have engaged,
they write, in a "studied silence" on their "own ultimate theoretical productivity." Put in the form of an explicit question, they ask: "Have the explorations of rhetorical critics contributed to our theoretical understanding of human rhetorical behavior?""31 Over the last two decades, we can find numerous examples of rhetorical scholars engaging in conceptual reflection and refinement as part of the practice of criticism. A variety of concepts have served as the object of reflective inquiry: prudence, power, decorum, public memory, agency and/or subjectivity are some of the issues being explored in our critical literature. One concept, with roots deep in the rhetorical tradition, has been the focus of a small body of critical studies: political judgment. The question I want to engage, to paraphrase both Gregg and Nothstine, Blair, and Copeland, is: how have critics contributed to our understanding of the process of political judgment and the relationship between judgment and discursive practice?

In the last paragraph of his Rhetoric, Aristotle quoted a speech from Lysias and the final word is judgment: "I have done. You have heard me. The facts are before you. I ask for your judgment."32 Commenting on Aristotle's account of the relationship between rhetoric and judgment, Edwin Black raised a provocative question: "What can it mean to say that 'the object of Rhetoric is judgment'?" In posing this question, Black was one of the first contemporary rhetorical scholars to make the concept of judgment an explicit object of theoretical and critical reflection. He developed his response by positing a distinction between coming to a judgment and coming to a belief. He wrote: "Our standards for evaluating judgments differ patently from our standards for evaluating convictions or beliefs, so that judgment and belief are not synonymous terms. . . . The most crucial difference between judgment and belief is that a judgment is supposed to follow from a definitively systematized procedure of adjudication, but the procedures for acquiring or coming to hold beliefs vary so considerably, according to the subject of the belief, that the same procedural standards are not applicable." Black was insistent on this difference: "While there is a certain procedure that one is supposed to follow in coming to a judgment, there is no particular procedure that one is supposed to follow in coming to hold a conviction. Unlike belief or conviction, the term judgment entails a procedural norm in its very usage." These reflections on the difference between belief and judgment allowed Black to formulate this response to his initial question: "A rhetorical theory worked out on the assumption that the end of rhetoric is judgment would differ from one that assumed that the end of rhetoric was belief." Positing judgment as the end of rhetoric leads, Black argued, to a narrow, overly prescriptive, overly rationalistic theory of rhetoric and this analysis of judgment as the end or object of rhetoric served as one of his arguments for rejecting Aristotelian theory."33
A very different answer to Black's question, and a different reading of Aristotle's *Rhetoric*, can be found in Ronald Beiner's book *Political Judgment*. Somewhat like Black, Beiner finds contrast a useful way of proceeding. But whereas Black contrasts belief and judgment, Beiner focuses on contrasting Aristotle's discussion of rhetoric and judgment with the account of this relationship found in the work Immanuel Kant. What Black maintains is an intrinsic feature of the concept of judgment—that it entails a formal systematized procedure—Beiner understands as a legacy of Kantianism. The tradition of rhetoric, and Aristotle's writing on the subject, provide, Beiner argues, a different understanding or conceptualization of judgment. According to Beiner: "Rhetoric expresses this sense of community by accommodating itself to the particular, substantive beliefs and desires of the listeners it addresses, rather than holding to abstract or formal principles of judgment." In effect, Beiner's reflections on judgment dissolve the opposition between judgment and belief that is central to Black's position. Without that opposition, Black's skepticism about judgment being the end or object of rhetoric is unfounded. Rhetoric, Beiner insists, constitutes one of the "substantive conditions of political life and of political judgment."^34^ 

Black and Beiner's examination of the relationship between rhetoric and judgment proceeds largely on the plane of abstract theory. But Beiner appears to recognize that such an approach will be unable to provide an exhaustive or definitive account of the phenomenon of judgment and its relationship to rhetoric. He writes in the final chapter: "We have argued that there are two modes of reflective judgment, the prudential judgment of the actor and the historical judgment of the spectator. But to do no more than offer this distinction is in itself misleading, for of course the concepts of spectator and actor are far more intricate and logically complex than the distinction alone suggests; there is a dialectical relationship here that we have not even begun to capture in theory." And, a page later, Beiner appears to admit that abstract theory is incapable of such a task. "Judgment," he concludes, "cannot be fully rendered by abstract definition or analysis: we know it when we see it, and when we see it, we see it embodied in some exemplary subject."^35^ Judgment, Beiner's account suggests, is conceptually inchoate; it can only be comprehended in its material embodiments. ^36^ Judgment is part of class of theoretical precepts which attains conceptual solidity or substance as it is vibrated against a particular case—a materially embodied episode of discursive action and choice—and becomes refined and instantiated in an interpretation of that case.

Fittingly, if somewhat indirectly, Leff welds his understanding of the role of theory in critical practice to the concept of judgment in a 1985 *Alta* essay he co-authored with Stephen Browne. As Leff did in 1980, Browne and Leff describe the function of theory and its role in criticism in decidedly nonsocial scientific terms. They write: "Since
judgment does not submit to but rather embodies theory, some of our traditional assumptions about constructing and testing theory lose their force. Such concerns as the statistical representativeness of the data surveyed and the logical coherence of theoretical precepts become, at best second order issues. Instead, theory is forced to the ground . . . Theorists become critics who center their attention on concrete events . . . This is not to say, however, that the principles operating in each text are entirely unique. It is possible to generate a body of principles, to place them in some sort of relationship to one another, and to transfer principles from paradigm case to other cases . . . Nevertheless, these theoretical principles do not form a self-contained, disembodied unity . . . Theory ends not in comprehension of abstract coherence, but in the development of the faculty of judging how particular arguments do their work.37 To put the final point a bit differently, theory and criticism in rhetorical studies intersect in the development of conceptually grounded, interpretive accounts of particular discursive performances.

The discursive performance that occupies Browne and Leff’s attention in the Alta essay is Edmund Burke’s 1780 speech to the electors at Bristol. “The essence of Burke’s position” in the Bristol address, they argue, “is that the fluctuating and ambiguous subjects of political deliberation demand judgment disciplined by critical distance.” “Almost all its arguments,” they continue, “bear upon the key problem in dealing with judgment—the coordination of spatial and temporal conceptions relevant to making political decisions.” Burke’s practical performance embodies a “theory” of political judgment, a theory that foregrounds the enabling capacity of critical distance or an enlarged perspective in the practice of judgment. “In assuming this ground” or in being interpellated into this position, Browne and Leff argue, “the judging subject is not alienated from the particular, since distance in space creates a perspective from which an enlarged view of things can emerge. . . . [J]udgment can engage particulars successfully only when it comprehends them in terms of the general sweep of history.” And Burke tries to create for his audience an enlarged perspective, one that mirrors his principle of judgment, from which they can engage and judge the “particulars” of Burke’s tenure in office. Perhaps most importantly for Browne and Leff, Burke’s “theory” of judgment does not exist as a set of abstract, disembodied principles; it is, instead, woven into the fabric or texture of the oration and only becomes visible when that texture, the oration’s “repetitive form,” is engaged by the critic.38

Browne and Leff conclude that Burke’s oration “establishes and enacts a paradigm for political judgment.” This claim is a bit ambiguous. It might mean that Burke’s manner of judgment has normative force as a model or logic by which contemporary political deliberation could or should be conducted. But Browne and Leff acknowledge that “Burke’s conception of political judgment implies a rhetoric of consent
hardly consistent with the contemporary stress on the rhetoric of participation. For many, Burke's key premises seem narrowly aristocratic or hopelessly unrealistic." If the politics of deference inscribed in Burke's oration does not contain practical normative force, the oration nevertheless has value as an object for theoretically-informed critical reflection. "Burke ably demonstrates," Browne and Leff conclude, "the possibilities before us if we choose to locate our theory within the subject we study." And Browne and Leff do the same. Their critical practice has achieved a modest degree of paradigmatic force by embodying a novel way of construing the theory/critical practice relationship. 39

Browne continues this line of analysis in a 1989 essay analyzing Burke's 1775 speech on conciliation. As was the case in the earlier essay with Leff, Browne reads Burke as offering "an act of exemplary judgment" or "an exemplary exercise in rhetorical judgment." Browne seems to move beyond the earlier essay by also claiming that Burke constructs "an exemplary standard of judgment," a standard which, by encouraging emulation, would appear to possess at least some degree of practical normative force. 40 In the address, Burke "demonstrated exemplary judgment, creating a perspective capable of taking in historical truth as well as current expedients. It is within this perspective that Burke fashions his advisory appeal." Browne notes "the ocular imagery" in Burke's narrative in order to reveal that his exemplary instantiation of political judgment is an effect of "perspective." The "perspective which Burke would have his audience assume" is a form of "expansive vision" capable of taking in "the historical sweep of circumstance." 41

As he did in the essay with Leff, Browne valorizes Burke's purported capacity to adopt the stance of disinterested spectator, to assume the posture of critical distance, as well as his ability to craft discursive forms that invite such a perspective in others. Scholars of the postmodern persuasion will, rightly I believe, warn us that claims to critical distance and detachment often mask partisan motives. Browne may be insufficiently attentive to the way power and partisanship saturate the space of judgment. But the apparent valorization of Burke's detached perspective should not lead us to neglect a central conceptual point that Browne, and Leff, have been advancing. The nexus of rhetoric and judgment is perspective; advocates craft arguments and appeals that shape the way audiences perceive and, in turn, act in the world. Criticism contributes to or thickens our grasp of political and rhetorical judgment as it reveals the way perspectives are crafted, circulated, and subverted.

We may not care to adopt Burke's sense of an enlarged perspective, but Browne's reading of its construction speaks to a central facet of what Sloop and McDaniel refer to as the postmodern "aporia of judgment." We have reached this aporetic condition, they suggest, because
the realm of the contingent, initially domesticated in Aristotle's founding text, has been radicalized in late twentieth-century critical theory. Judgment is rendered problematic once the veil concealing the randomness and indeterminacy of human existence is lifted. The aporia of judgment emerges from our encounter with radical contingency. Cooper illustrates this postmodern perspective when she notes that in "classical and modern approaches to rhetoric . . . the grounds for judgment are taken for granted as audiences are assumed to know and accept the values and first principles that motivate their actions." "Postmodernity," she continues, "poses a challenge because the very ground for judgments seems to have split apart beneath those who would judge." The effort to "recuperat[e] judgment" in the face of indeterminacy and radical contingency is the search for possible grounds of judgment.

Browne's analysis of Burke suggests that Cooper's antithesis of "classical and modern" practices and postmodernity may be exaggerated. Even as he strives for an enlarged perspective, Burke does not, in Browne's reading, appeal to transcendent, timeless truths or "first principles" that his audience would automatically accept and take for granted. Rather, Burke—like any advocate—must construct contingent grounds that shape his audience's perspective and enable their judgment. Burke's method for recuperating judgment, Browne argues, is to posit "maxims rooted in experience . . . Properly grounded axioms," Browne suggests, "are to be distinguished above all for their social utility; they are expedient precisely because they recognize the needs of the community and provide the principles of action necessary to meet them." Burke's narrative, Browne continues, functions "as a means of grounding principles of judgment in human experience." Burke may be blind to his own positionality, to the fact that his enlarged perspective may not be the only way that events might be framed practically and historically, but that should not blind us to what his rhetorical performances might be able to reveal about the dynamics of judgment.

Other critics have refined and extended, directly and indirectly, the conceptual-critical project inaugurated by Browne and Leff. James Farrell examines Fisher Ames' famous 1795 congressional speech in support of the Jay treaty and detects "a specific attitude of judgment vastly different than that encouraged by Burke." In order to appreciate Ames' alternative grounding of judgment, Farrell reconstructs both the broader intellectual and immediate political contexts of the Jay treaty debate. Doing so allows him to assert that the dominant model of political judgment structuring public deliberation was excruciatingly rational: "reason," Farrell writes, "was the sacred ground of deliberative conduct and political judgment" in Ames' America. But Ames sought to displace this dominant mode and re-ground how his audience would perceive, and judge, pressing events. Ames sought to
construct "a passionate standard of judgment" or "judgment in the domain of feeling." 46

The contrast between Ames' desire for "a passionate immersion into the particular human realities which gave substance to the debate in the House" and Burke's ideal of distance-inducing maxims which provide an enlarged perspective that grounds judgment "raise some interesting theoretical and practical questions about the role of judgment in political rhetoric." One practical question Farrell notes concerns the impact of Ames' "sympathetic, passionate model of judgment" on subsequent rhetorical conduct within our political culture. 47 From the slavery controversy in the nineteenth century to late twentieth-century debates over abortion and nuclear weapons policy, the place of passion and emotion in public deliberation has been hotly contested. Theoretically, the Ames/Burke contrast indicates "the possibility of a continuing tension between passionate engagement and cool detachment, a constant rhetorical negotiation in the deliberative sphere over the proper attitude and 'distance' for rendering legitimate political judgment." But Farrell, following in the wake of Beiner, Browne, and Leff, contends that we can only engage this negotiation as it is embodied in practical cases. 48

The negotiation of rival standards or models of judgment cannot only be grasped within individual rhetorical performances, it might also be engaged in the context of polyvocal controversy. In fact, it may be the case that political controversies provide the most suitable material for studying what Greene and Hicks refer to as "rhetorical contests over judgment." 49 I attempt to advance this position through my reading of the 1787–88 Constitutional ratification debate. 50 This essay tries to accomplish three tasks. First, the debate reveals, I argued, a clash in perspectives or standards of judgment which, following Beiner's lead, I referred to as "substantive" and "formal." Federalists urged the nation to adopt a formal—disinterested and detached—perspective for judging the merits of the proposed Constitution while their anti-federalist opponents opted for, and sought to persuade others to adopt, a substantive perspective focused on shared empathic understanding and common sense. But the essay not only reconstrains the embedded, and in some cases very explicitly articulated, principles; it also reveals how these principles were inscribed or textualized in the way each side both imagined and addressed the American people, in the textual personae created through their discourse, and in their specific modes of appeal. Second, the essay unpacks the controversy by examining how anti-federalists sought to discredit the federalist standard of judgment and the discursive forms through which it was manifest and how federalists tried to label the anti-federalists as narrow-minded localists while also defending their formal principles. Finally, the essay tries to move from textual analysis to more overt theoretical reflection on the virtues and limitations of the
formal and substantive standards or perspectives. But I conclude the essay by reiterating Beiner's insight that scholars must continue to strive for a deeper understanding of the play between perspectives within individual texts and political controversies.

At least one additional essay merits attention for its effort to theorize judgment through criticism. In their critical study of Texas Governor Ann Richards, Bonnie Dow and Mari Tonn discover a contemporary version of the nineteenth-century phenomenon Karlyn Campbell described as the "feminine style." But Dow and Tonn's analysis does much more than chart the presence of specific stylistic tokens in Richards' discourse. They argue that in Richards' "rhetoric [the] feminine style functions not only as a strategy for audience empowerment but as a critique of traditional grounds for political judgment" or "political reasoning." This antithesis between Richards' feminine style and so-called traditional grounds of political judgment may be, like Cooper's opposition between the classical and postmodern, overstated. Dow and Tonn invest traditional grounds of judgment—for example, abstract, hierarchical, and deductive modes of reasoning—with a considerable degree of hegemonic force but the hegemony of these dominant standards is called into question, at least historically, by my reading of the ratification debate and Farrell's analysis of Ames' oration. But Dow and Tonn fail to consider Richards' relationship to broader discursive and/or intellectual traditions, making it difficult to understand or appreciate fully her "alternative grounds for political judgment."

Dow and Tonn do, however, raise an issue that is absent from all the prior critical studies exploring the concept of judgment. In a section of their essay that develops around the feminist aphorism "the personal is political," Dow and Tonn write: "Richards' self-disclosure, and the wisdom she draws from her experience, reflects a quality associated with female culture, where private experiences are shared both to enhance relationships and to create a perspective on the world." Dow and Tonn here reaffirm a central point in the critical literature on judgment: discourse is able to shape judgment to the degree that it creates or generates a perspective for viewing objects, people, and events in the world. But perspective does not emerge solely from a clash in role orientations (Beiner's actor versus spectator), community orientations (the local/national tension present in the ratification debate), political orientations (detached impartial citizens versus committed partisan advocates), or temporal orientations (the struggle between a focus on the present and a concern for the future). Dow and Tonn's reading of Richards' rhetoric illustrates how perspective, and the judgments it might enable or constrain, is always gendered; people perceive and engage the world, at least in part, on the basis of gender socialization. In order to extend Dow and Tonn's insight, critics need
to examine the way advocates draw upon gendered experience as a way of shaping perspective and soliciting judgment.\textsuperscript{56}

The discussion over the last few pages does not constitute an exhaustive examination of the critical literature that explores the concept of judgment.\textsuperscript{57} But the discussion tries to disrupt the "silence" with respect to "theoretical productivity" that some scholars believe marks the field. Conceptually-oriented criticism provides a rather clear alternative to methodologically-driven criticism and the social science model of theoretical development that it tends to entail. But a cluster of key questions remain. What do we mean by theoretical progress or development in an interpretive discipline? Can we move beyond the provocative metaphor of "thickening" concepts in order to provide our students with a framework for their critical labor? Does the literature on judgment, as I've tried to suggest, provide a thick account? Can additional studies further thicken it? How can and how should conceptually-oriented critical projects build off of each other? In order to facilitate what I have described as conceptually-oriented criticism, these, and other, questions need our continued attention.

\textbf{NOTES}

\begin{enumerate}
\item As Karlyn Campbell notes: "The critical act is a cognitive act; it is designed to make overt what has been hidden." See "The Nature of Criticism in Rhetorical and Communication Studies" \textit{Central States Speech Journal}, 30 (1979), 7. William L. Nothstine, Carole Blair, and Gary A. Copeland link the epistemological shift of criticism to the larger growth of science and they describe the rise of "scientism" in rhetorical criticism in rich detail. While I concur with much of their account, I will quibble later in the essay with their discussion of the role of theory in this trend. See \textit{Critical Questions; Invention, Creativity, and the Criticism of Discourse and Media} (NY: St. Martin's Press, 1994), esp. 15–63.
\item Edwin Black, \textit{Rhetorical Criticism: A Study in Method} (New York: Macmillan, 1965), 2. In the "Author's Foreword" to the 1978 edition, Black downplays the role of method and focuses much more attention on the critic's sensibility as the essential component of the critical process.
\item Black, 18, 131. Nothstine, Blair, and Copeland maintain that "Black's modification...almost certainly came too late to change the scientific course that had been set" for the field (61). But, as I suggested above, Nothstine, Blair, and Copeland may overstate the continuing importance of method in critical practice.
\end{enumerate}

10Sonja K. Foss, "Constituted by Agency: The Discourse and Practice of Rhetorical Criticism" in Speech Communication: Essays to Commemorate the 75th Anniversary of the SCA, eds. Gerald M. Phillips and Julia T. Wood (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1990), 36–7. There is a certain degree of irony in Foss’s argument. On the one hand, she suggests that the field’s "preoccupation" with method is problematic but, on the other hand, her project nevertheless embodies this methodological obsession (her reading of the literature is, after all, organized as a pentadic analysis).


17Campbell, 10.


21Martin J. Medhurst, "Public Address and Significant Scholarship: Four Challenges to the Rhetorical Renaissance" in Texts in Context: Critical Dialogues on Significant Episodes in American Political Rhetoric, eds. Michael C. Leff and Fred J. Kaufleld (Davis, CA: Hermagoras Press, 1989). There is some irony in the fact that Medhurst points to Craig Smith’s 1985 essay on Daniel Webster as a study "that contribute[s] to historical accuracy" (33) when Smith maintains that Webster wanted
to "[a]dmit Texas as a slave state and balance that by admitting California as a free state" or claims that "[i]f Texas were not admitted, then there would be no trade off for California's entry." Smith's contribution to historical accuracy is problematic since Texas was admitted to the Union on December 29, 1845, roughly five years prior to the Webster speech. See Craig R. Smith, "Daniel Webster's July 17th Address: A Mediating Influence in the 1850 Compromise" *Quarterly Journal of Speech*, 71 (1985): 355–56.

22I do not agree with Foss's or Nothstine, Blair, and Copeland's claim regarding the continued significance of method in rhetorical criticism. I would agree that method still dominates critical pedagogy, especially at the undergraduate level.

23James Arnt Aune, "Public Address and Rhetorical Theory" in *Texts in Context*, 44. Aune claims that David Zarefsky distinguished between theory and method in his contribution to the *Texts in Context* volume "The State of the Art in Public Address Scholarship." I have been unable to locate this distinction in the Zarefsky essay. It may be the case that Aune has generated a productive misreading of Zarefsky.


29Leff, 347; Geertz, 25, 27. Leff is not as emphatic as Geertz on the question of "pure" emic analysis and appears to be two of minds on the issue. In a footnote on p. 342, Leff takes issue with an argument advanced by Wayne Brockreide and writes: "For reasons that become clear later in the essay, however, I disagree with Brockreide's claim that explanation always depends on a concept or category system more general than the object under scrutiny." Reflecting on the nature of interpretive practice two pages later, he seems to shift his position on the issue. "Meaning cannot be assigned to expression except by reference to something outside the original expression," Leff maintains, "and thus, to cite Hirsch again, 'all interpretations at some point have recourse to categories and conceptions that are not native to the original.' Directly or indirectly, consciously or unconsciously, extrinsic threads weave their way into the fabric of guess-work that forms the basis of interpretation" (344).


31Nothstine, Blair, and Copeland, 42, 48. See also Gregg, 42.


33Black, 103, 110–111.


36Working out of a different theoretical tradition, John Sloop and Kent Ono also emphasize the need for a "materialist's conception of judgment." See John M. Sloop


38Browne and Leff. 207–08.

39Browne and Leff. 207–08.


41Browne, 68.


44Browne, 69, 79.


46Farrell, 422, 424, 430. There is some ambiguity in Farrell’s account of Ames’ alternative standard. While he writes frequently of Ames’ “passionate standard,” he also describes Ames’ position as “passion” or “feeling” being “guided by reason.” (424).

47Farrell suggests that the passionate model was adopted by many abolitionists in the nineteenth century. To further support this claim, Farrell might have noted William Lloyd Garrison’s 1829 Fourth of July speech “The Dangers to the Nation.” In this speech, Garrison responds to an anticipated objection—“Will any man coldly accuse me of intemperate zeal?”—by “borrowing] a ray of humanity from one of the brightest stars in our American galaxy.” He then quotes a passage from Ames’ 1795 oration: “On a question of shame and honor—liberty and oppression—reasoning is sometimes useless and worse. I feel the decision in my pulse; if it throws no light upon the brain, it kindles a fire at the heart.” In Selections from the Writings and Speeches of William Lloyd Garrison (Boston: R. F. Walleut, 1852), 54.


49Ronald Walter Greene and Darrin Hicks, “Judging Parents” in Judgment Calls, 197. Greene and Hicks’ emphasis on studying the “rhetorical struggles” that, collectively, constitute judgment is consistent, I maintain, with the position espoused by Farrell as well as with my analysis of Constitutional ratification debate discussed below despite their incompletely explicated claims that rhetorical scholars have tended “to advocate the act of judgment as an apriori good rather than as the stakes of political controversy” and “deploy judgment as a solution to the crisis of democracy” (197). See also Leff's discussion of reading controversies in “Things Made by Words: Reflections on Textual Criticism” Quarterly Journal of Speech, 78 (1992): 228–29.


51I tried to develop the theoretical discussion of the “space” of judgment in “Argument, Judgment, and the Problem of Alienation” in Proceedings of the Second


53 Dow and Tonn’s lack of attention to the prior critical literature on judgment is indicative, I believe, of a central issue with which conceptually-oriented critics must grapple. As I noted earlier, in Leff’s seminal 1980 essay, he follows Geertz’s lead in trying to articulate the nature of theory in an interpretive discipline. Leff is clear in his effort to distinguish his vision of theory from the more common social scientific model: “Theory functions not to generalize to or from cases, but within them” (347). But this does not mean that different “cases,” different critical projects, are wholly unrelated or disconnected from each other. Leff maintains that a theoretically-inspired interpretive “hypothesis moves across a discipline as a fire burns through a forest, growing, shifting, and receding in irregular patterns, gathering intensity from the matter it consumes, but having no existence apart from that matter.” He continues: “Hypotheses move laterally as they are drawn by intuition and analogy from one case to another, and since the objective is diagnosis rather than prediction, an hypothesis assumes a different form each time it is instantiated in a given case” (347–49). I’ll use Leff’s metaphor to try and articulate the issue I want to raise. It is relatively easy to locate and examine an interpretive hypothesis/theoretical concept (I take these expressions to be virtually synonymous) after the fire has burned itself out. But, given our rejection of a social scientific model of progress, is there any way for critics to assess the quality of their critical/interpretive labor while the fire is still burning? Putting the issue less figuratively, given that the interpretive “hypothesis assumes a different form” each time it is instantiated in a given case,” is there any reason for Dow and Tonn to engage the extant critical literature on judgment? Will such an engagement enrich their effort to deploy “judgment” as in interpretive concept?

54 Dow and Tonn, 293.

55 In addition to recognizing the role of gender, it also seems warranted to analyze the role of racial “perspectives” in the process of judgment. For a provocative discussion of the nature of racial perspective, see David Ingram, Group Rights: Reconciling Equality and Difference (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2000), esp. 56–60.

56 As Dow notes in a different essay, efforts to deploy gender in this manner must avoid the problem of essentialization. See Bonnie J. Dow, “Feminism, Difference(s), and Rhetorical Studies” Communication Studies, 46 (1995): 106–117.

57 I tried to indicate a few ways in which a postmodern approach to the topic of judgment, represented in the Sloop and Ono “Out-law Discourse” essay and in the essays in the Sloop and McDaniel collection, intersects with a more Aristotelian and textualist approach. But these limited observations do not constitute a thorough examination of the emerging postmodern literature. Explicit engagement of both the connections and the divergences between these scholarly projects might be extremely useful. In fact, Dow and Tonn’s project, while it doesn’t raise this question explicitly, does draw upon the work within these two approaches (e.g. Leff’s work on iconicity and McKerrow’s on critical rhetoric).