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Horizon Myths

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Horizon Myths

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It's one of the oldest and dirtiest tricks in Socrates's book: after he has spent hours wielding the dialectic to carefully demolish his interlocutor's reliance on traditional wisdom, after he has brought that man inexorably to *elenchus*, he turns over his hand and out flies some outrageous myth—a chariot at the mercy of two lascivious winged horses, a cave full of shadow puppets, you know . . . This move always seemed to me like such a cheat: after all, wasn't Socrates's mission in life to goad Athenians to leave behind the old *mythos* and come to know themselves through the rigor of the new *logos*? Why did he resort in the clinch, then, to just-so stories? Then it dawned on me that at the *elenchus*, at the horizon, when all our old paths draw together to a point and disappear, it's not logic that persuades and inspires us to push through into the unknown: it's myth.

So now I am going to play the mythic Socrates to the dialectic that Harris (this issue) and Ceccarelli (this issue) constructed in their respective calls to increased disciplinarity and increased engagement. Indeed, as I read their papers, I heard several of the old myths of our young field being quietly and effectively demolished—such as the myth that we are activists simply because we study activists; the myth that studying “emergent” fields and technologies somehow excuses us from applying a rigorous method to those cases; the myth that Classical concepts must be irrelevant to rhetoric of science because they shaped and were shaped by another *kairos*.

I, for one, do not mourn the death of these old myths. With Harris, I think the greatest challenge facing rhetoric of science in the next decade is method. And I am unabashedly enthusiastic about cognitive approaches to rhetoric. I've argued for the Classical *koinoi topoi* as cognitive constraints that can be used to model public reception of scientific discourse and that are amenable to “hardening” up via computational and neurological methods. I think cognitive methods have tremendous promise and are right in line with cutting-edge work in the digital humanities. But they also raise questions: would taking a cognitive tack in rhetoric of science mean losing our anchorage in social studies of science? Would it mean greater isolation from calls to engagement like Ceccarelli's? I'm all for an explanatory cognitive theory of rhetoric of science, but say such a thing were achievable—would it increase our traction on climate change or GMO debates?

On the engagement side, I wholeheartedly endorse Ceccarelli's exhortations. Isn't civic engagement the reason we do the rhetoric—instead of the history or philosophy—of science? I know it's why I do. Of course I want to know everything about how language glues science

together and keeps it rolling. But I also want to step in and help when it rolls over a group of mothers or ranchers without looking and without stopping. Ceccarelli is undoubtedly right that we need to come up with a system and a forum for marshaling our spadework into bulwarks from which we can see other publics, they can see us, and we can start to cooperate on projects. But visibility creates its own problems, as we can witness in the enormous political pressure placed on many of our colleagues in science communication. Let's say we did manage to put together that explanatory cognitive theory of rhetoric of science. Let's say we operationalized it so that we could predict the positions of stakeholder groups and the outcomes of public science policy debates with 95% accuracy. Without a doubt we'd hold seats on every government advisory committee from the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives (ATF) to the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA). But is that really what we want, to be integral to the national science-policy machine? In our quest to be useful to our polities, is it our ultimate goal to help scientists persuade the public?

This, then, is the synthetic problem posed by Harris's and Ceccarelli's papers: how do we achieve greater disciplinary rigor without losing our civic edge, and how do we make ourselves a public resource without becoming a tool of hegemony? It puts me in mind again of Socrates, who refused to serve in the government or retreat to a patron's estate to write books, who instead wandered around the polis scrounging free dinners and prodding his hosts' full bellies with the sharp stick of the dialectic. Like Socrates, I do not have a synthesis to offer to the dialect of disciplinarity and engagement in rhetoric of science, but I do have a myth:

A few years ago, NASA convened an invitation-only conference to discuss geo-engineering proposals to mitigate global warming. One proposal was to deploy giant space mirrors between the sun and the earth to reflect back some of the sun's rays; another was to spray tons of particulate matter into the ionosphere to simulate a volcanic eruption and scatter sunlight; a third was to spray hundreds of thousands of gallons of sea water into the sky to make a sort of cloud umbrella for the earth. NASA representatives nodded and ruminated: some of these proposals were intriguing and not too expensive. Then, Jim Fleming stood up to present. Jim, an atmospheric physicist turned historian of science, presented archival evidence on mid-century weather control efforts that revealed that most of the solutions being proposed at the conference had already been tried—and had failed miserably at massive public expense and environmental cost (Fleming, 2006). Jim's impression was that his testimony convinced NASA to table some of the more radical proposals.

I found this story compelling when Jim told it to me in a bar in Potsdam, and I believe it contains a fragment of a workable synthesis to the dialectic of engagement and disciplinarity. But as with all myths, I can't clearly state its moral for rhetoricians of science in the twenty-first century. Meanwhile, Herndl & Cutlip's paper (this issue) issues a sobering reminder that cuts through the myth's rosy haze: rhetoricians of science only have so much agency to choose their political positions. There are so many constraints. No matter where we try to position ourselves—as

cognitive scientists, advocates, consultants, or deans—those performances have to be recognized to stick, and institutionally speaking, rhetoric has been slippery. Nevertheless, in both Herndl & Cutlip’s story about the new sustainability college and in Jim’s story about his NASA consultation, I sense a hopeful resonance: institutions are turning to rhetoricians to help them “bring things together in matters of concern” (Herndl & Cutlip, this issue). The very features that were our Achilles heel in the old Germanic university—our insistence on *kairos* over categories, on people over ideas, our insouciant interdisciplinarity, our myriad methods both humanistic and non-humanistic—these now appear to be positioning rhetoric as a touchstone as the old university structure slowly (slowly) breaks up and as problems, not disciplines, promise to drive its reformation. In other words, to increase our traction on debates about science, rhetoricians may not have to move at all—toward disciplinarity, toward engagement, or in any other direction. Because unless my eye deceives me, the horizon is moving toward us.

References

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