

The Available Means of Persuasion: Mapping a Theory and Pedagogy of Multimodal Public Rhetoric by David M. Sheridan, Jim Ridolfo, and Anthony J. Michel

Introduction

The Available Means of Persuasion: Mapping a Theory and Pedagogy of Multimodal Public Rhetoric by David M. Sheridan, Jim Ridolfo, and Anthony J. Michel is a book that capitalizes on the kairotic moment in which it was written and published. This is a moment rife with people, all with various skill levels, composing multimedia pieces across a wide range of platforms. Echoing Michel de Certeau’s (1984) observation of individuals’ interventions in mass cultural production, Sheridan, Ridolfo, and Michel argue that cultural production should not be surrendered to so-called “creative specialists” (xii), but rather it should be considered the work of ordinary citizens. Coupled with this democratic notion, the authors of *The Available Means of Persuasion* argue for an increase of multimodal rhetoric in public discourses and habits. The authors also insist that rhetoric and composition must continue to evolve as a field by teaching dynamic multimodal rhetorics to meet the demands of a changing public sphere. Situating their arguments within a kairotic context, the authors move their readers through topical, yet also ancient, concepts such as kairos and the “public sphere” as they explore a broader understanding of rhetoric as pertaining to production, reproduction, distribution, human and nonhuman networks, agency, ethics, and materiality.

Discussion

Sheridan, Ridolfo, and Michel begin their book by teasing out connotations of kairos. The working definition they use demonstrates a relationship between rhetor and multifaceted contexts, thus emphasizing the need for each rhetor to exercise a practice of theory by being inventive as kairotic moments emerge. Though the authors believe there is a sense of agency that each rhetor has, they write they are “skeptical” of the ability of rhetors to fully manipulate kairotic moments due to the complex socio-politico-historical contexts that shape the eras and places rhetors inhabit (p. 11).

In addition to *kairos*, Sheridan, Ridolfo, and Michel look at the significance of the public sphere, and begin with a critique of its popular, liberal understanding as developed by Habermas (1989). These critiques include concerns with ontology, accessibility, production, the nature of discourse, and the nature of agency. While the public sphere for Habermas was a place for elite men to come to rational conclusions based on discussion, the authors of this book maintain that opportunities for the public sphere are much richer in that a multitude of people can express their identities and desires in complex spaces. Thus, Sheridan, Ridolfo, and Michel move to a “kairotic approach to public *rhetoric*” (p. 20, emphasis added) to frame their arguments, meaning a rhetor from this diverse public sphere should, ideally, be able to assess a situation and determine what rhetorical action should be taken.

By orienting readers to these terms, the authors then explore abstract and concrete examples of multimodal public rhetorics by rhetors engaged with invention practices in

order to address “public exigencies” (p. 50). One example is when the authors present a case study of a documentary project Ridolfo made about the 2003 Free Trade Areas of the Americas protest in Miami. Many rhetorical decisions related to kairos and public exigencies were executed in the making of this multimodal composition, including decisions regarding the mode and genre of production, the consideration of reproduction—Ridolfo expected and even hoped audience members would use excerpts from the documentary for their own purposes—and considerations of circulation: what media format would allow for the documentary to circulate widely? Related to the ideas of circulation and reproduction, Sheridan, Ridolfo, and Michel present rhetorical velocity and recomposition as considerations for rhetors practicing multimodal public rhetorics. The authors want their readers to consider not only the act of invention before a composition is made, but what comes after a composition is produced and is circulated through human and nonhuman networks. In other words, as in the case of Ridolfo’s documentary and in the case of stock news footage, how can a rhetor anticipate how and where their compositions may be remixed and recirculated? If operating within a public framework, the authors claim that issues of ethics, access, and even an understanding of rhetoric itself are expanded if a rhetor keeps these considerations in mind while composing. For example, ethics of authorial intent should be considered when repurposing a photojournalist’s image (pp. 94-96); issues of access are at stake if considering what media a composition is circulated in, as in Ridolfo’s case; and rhetoric as being comprised of previously marginalized concepts like circulation expands notions of rhetorical practices.

Throughout the book the authors turn their attention to the composition classroom and outline what a classroom focused on public rhetorics might look like (pp. 116-117). Such pedagogies include having students critically reflect on how different modalities affect different purposes and audiences, and how production and recomposition practices function rhetorically. Students can also reflect on, and perhaps confront, material realities of access to different multimodal technologies and spaces while composing—or not—in particular multimodal formats and spaces. Issues of agency surface in these classrooms as material, cultural, and historical networks are navigated by students who must negotiate which technologies, relationships, and spaces they can shape, to what degree, and which they cannot. Furthermore, the authors are quick to acknowledge that while this type of classroom teaches students rhetorical strategies, there is also a process of normalizing and marginalizing in such classrooms as instructors choose what they can and do teach. Finally, though, Sheridan, Ridolfo, and Michel emphasize that the classroom engaged with multimodal public rhetorics highlights students as producers of cultural knowledge, thus their potential for agency rises.

Conclusion

Graduate students and instructors interested in teaching new media and multimodal formats would benefit from reading *The Available Means of Persuasion* because of the sections dedicated to pedagogical practices, including an appendix that outlines a sequence of multimodal public rhetoric assignments. New media instructors will also

appreciate the sustained argument that multimodal/new media rhetorics are here to stay, even as they continue to change. Furthermore, those scholars wishing to bridge or who already link their pedagogies to public rhetorics will appreciate the heuristics for critical reflectiveness provided, heuristics meant to be used in rhetoric and composition classrooms, and in broader cultural applications (p. 38). Additionally, the authors offer explicit comparisons of rhetorical practices between the classroom and the public sphere in lists and tables (p. 111), and in case studies using a variety of texts and materials, such as the 360 degrees website that can be used to teach such issues as perspectives and design as related to public rhetorics.

Interesting to me was that though *The Available Means of Persuasion* is in print (though there is an Adobe e-book version of the text), the authors prepared their manuscript in a multimodal fashion. Thus, there are images of documents, screenshots, comics made of photographs, and stills from a documentary to complement the alphabetic text that predominates the layout. Sheridan, Ridolfo, and Michel are thus illustrating a practice of multimodal composition that, while not new, complements their arguments of multimodal practices while also demonstrating the current variability of multimodal possibilities, in addition to the rhetorical depths these practices lend. I am curious, though, to see what similar or different multimodalities are in the digital version of this book and, moving beyond this individual text, what multimodal changes may be adopted by Parlor Press and its New Media Theory series—the series this book is a part of—especially as kairotic contexts and multimodal possibilities change over time.

The fact that *The Available Means of Persuasion* is published in print and as an e-book—modes that don't naturally lend themselves to practices of recomposition and velocity—demonstrates one limitation of the book. Similarly, the hope of a dynamic and diverse public sphere the authors describe throughout the pages is somewhat diminished by the fact that the book is published by a scholarly press, so automatically the audience of this book narrows rather than expands. It would be interesting to see how the authors, as well as Parlor Press and any readers, reach beyond these limitations to test the practices of the book in the types ways and in the types of spaces Sheridan, Ridolfo, and Michel argue for.

Underscoring the entire book is the concept of “poetic world making,” a term borrowed from Michael Warner which suggests “a model in which all public rhetors... play a role in the production of culture through imaginative and ethical use of words, images, and sounds” (xvii). Not only does poetic world making highlight the possibilities and means of multimodal public rhetorics, but it seeks to complicate the binary perception of rhetoric (the rational and the political) and poetics (the imaginative and the personal) (pp. 149-151). Rather, multimodal public rhetorics operate at an intersection of these points. And though the authors feel it necessary to substantiate the argument that multimodal forms are productive aspects of rhetoric (a claim a broad swath of “ordinary citizens,” and certainly a majority of rhetoric and composition scholars, already believe), their forwarding of poetic world making is spot on.

Because they are host to discourses and material realities that every citizen has an individual and a collective stake in, public spaces are emotionally charged. Operating along an intersectional spectrum of rational/imaginative/public/personal, the authors of *The Available Means of Persuasion* demonstrate how multimodal public rhetorics offer possibilities to meet the challenges of such spaces.

References

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