RHETORIC AS A SOCIOLOGICAL PROBLEM

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This article revisits James Aune's sociological framework for rhetoric in his important but overlooked "Modernity as a Rhetorical Problem." I situate Aune's essay within the history of sociological and cultural turns in twentieth-century rhetorical theory then unpack his model and its implications for rhetorical study. I argue that Aune's essay provides sociological texture to materialist views of rhetoric and offers a generative framework for addressing institutional, media, and normative structures within which rhetoric emerges. I then go on to address shortcomings in his view of culture, which I supplement with anthropological views consistent with his larger project and its comparative aspirations.

Key Words: sociology of rhetoric, materialist rhetoric, cultural studies, twentieth-century rhetorical theory, James Aune

Before he left us too soon, Jim Aune did a lot of important work. Some materialized as scholarly publications. Some of those publications attracted significant attention. Some apparently didn't. That imperfect gauge, Google Scholar, tells us that his two books were fairly widely cited—in late July 2013, 124 citations for Selling the Free Market (2001), 97 for Rhetoric and Marxism (1994). His articles are a different story. His most cited essay, “How to Read Milton Friedman,” which, interestingly, appeared in an edited collection on corporate social responsibility and organizational communication, had 15 hits. All his other articles had 14 or fewer. Included among them were first-rate pieces like “An Historical Materialist Theory of Rhetoric” (7), “Rhetoric after Deconstruction” (4), “Modernity as a Rhetorical Problem” (1), and “Coping with Modernity: Strategies of 20th-Century Rhetorical Theory” (0). I was shocked when I first saw these numbers. They struck me as fodder for an illuminating study in the sociology of knowledge in contemporary rhetorical studies.

Aune would have been interested in such a study, even if he was too modest to want his own work to be featured in it. He had what C. Wright Mills (1959) would have recognized as a well-developed sociological imagination. It became more explicitly developed in his later years, but it was there in some form since the 1970s, a function I suspect of long affinity for critical theory, graduate study with Tom Farrell, and a communitarian disposition culturally forged within the Lutheran branch of upper-Midwestern progressivism. In this paper, I want to focus on one of its more concentrated and potentially productive expressions, in his provocative but apparently overlooked late essay, “Modernity as a Rhetorical Problem” (2008).

In that essay, Aune offered “a framework for normative and empirical investigation” and “critical and comparative analysis of different rhetorical cultures” (pp. 404, 410). He situated it within a longer intellectual history of rhetoric as a subject of scholarly discourse in modernity. It cast rhetoric as a discipline articulated with historical and contemporary sociology, political economy, media studies, and anthropology. As he conceived it, rhetoric emerged in a space structured by institutions, social practices, communication media, and cultural rhetorics—the particular shape of which varied across societies and history. He laid groundwork for situating rhetorical practice within the complex of factors involved in “modern social systems as a whole, which include the economy, the polity, and social...
institutions such as the family, schools, religious and ethnic organizations, and, most crucially for contemporary social systems, the entire apparatus of the culture industry, including the news and entertainment ‘media’” (p. 403). Like Aune’s other work, it’s an essay that holds up to multiple readings.

Since I first encountered it, I’ve been struck by the potential of Aune’s model and the ways it gives sociological texture to materialist views of rhetoric. If we took it seriously, it could significantly enrich rhetorical theory, research, pedagogy, and reflective practice. To help start that process, I want to do three things: historicize, explicate, and critically engage his project. Each is an intellectual move Aune himself excelled at. I have no pretense of living up to the standards he set for us, showing in the process how “the pursuit of excellence in a way that extends human powers is at the heart of human life,” as the philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre put it in After Virtue, one of Aune’s intellectual touchstones (1981, p. 199). I’ll start by situating Aune’s project against the historical backdrop of one of the distinctive aspects of twentieth-century rhetorical theory—its turn toward the categories of the social and the cultural. Next, I’ll unpack his sociological model and draw out its key elements. Finally, I’ll address its thin understanding of culture, whose shortcomings I’ll supplement with contemporary anthropological views as a kind of dialectical contribution to the continued growth of Aune’s thinking.

**Rhetoric’s Social and Cultural Turns**

Twentieth-century rhetorical theory was historically distinct in casting rhetoric not simply as an art practiced by individuals but as a broader and fundamental force within society and culture. To be sure, there were precursors (see Meyer, 2009). But when Dilip Gaonkar (1993) observed that rhetoric had become “a hermeneutic metadiscourse,” he was merely giving voice to developments that were more than a century old, signaled in different ways in the nineteenth-century philosophical turns to rhetoric by Charles Sanders Peirce and Friedrich Nietzsche. They were intellectual outliers, though, early adopters of ways of thinking that wouldn’t begin to organize themselves in earnest until the 1920s and ‘30s—and that wouldn’t be fully recognized within rhetorical studies until the late 1960s, just before Aune came into the field as an undergraduate.

Rhetoric’s sociological consciousness crystallized between about 1967 and 1971. Douglas Ehninger’s “On Systems of Rhetoric” (1968) offered a sweeping historical taxonomy of rhetorical theory—the ancient as “grammatical” (focused on the speech act), eighteenth-century as “psychological” (focused on the speaker-audience relation), and twentieth-century as “social” or “sociological,” (seeing rhetoric “as an instrument for understanding and improving human relations” [p. 137]). Ehninger found these impulses in Kenneth Burke and I.A. Richards and advanced them himself in a functionalist vocabulary that cast rhetoric as an instrument of social cohesion and control. Lloyd Bitzer (1968) meanwhile brought them into middle-range rhetorical theory, arguing that social situations and their exigencies are the sources of rhetorical action. Sociological views were prominent at the Wingspread Conference and Bitzer and Edwin Black’s edited Prospect of Rhetoric (1971), most notably in Hugh Dalziell Duncan’s “On the Need to Clarify Social Models of Rhetoric,” but elsewhere as well (see Enos & McNabb, 1997; Porrovecchio, 2010). As rhetoric’s social dimensions were made publicly obvious in the politics of the street and other reform efforts of the era, published work like this opened new space for conceptualizing rhetoric’s sociological contexts, consequences, and functions. Among those leading the way theoretically were Bitzer’s student and
Aune’s advisor Thomas Farrell (e.g. 1976), and Aune’s later colleague and long-time interlocutor, Michael McGee (e.g. 1975).

Outside the field of speech communication, sociologists and literary scholars had been developing more sociological accounts of rhetoric since at least the 1930s. Burke is obviously a key figure here, with *Permanence and Change* (1935) laying the groundwork for *Rhetoric of Motives* (1950) and later work that expanded the realm of rhetoric and cast it as a fundamental force in maintaining and altering social life. Burke both influenced and was influenced by the symbolic-interactionist sociology developed at the University of Chicago, some of which would turn to rhetoric explicitly (Kenny, 2008). This was particularly true of Duncan, whose Introduction to the 1965 republication of *Permanence and Change* helped make a sociological (as opposed to literary) Burke available to rhetorical scholars (Simonson, 2010a). Sociologists outside the Chicago lineage also developed ways of thinking about rhetoric as a social force, most notably Columbia’s Robert K. Merton, whose *Mass Persuasion* (1946/2003) used classic and early-modern rhetorical theory to probe the popular entertainer Kate Smith’s all-day radio war bond drive, extending it with analyses of social structure, collective images, and mass mediated audiences (Simonson, 2010b; 2010c).

Overlapping but analytically distinct from these social turns in rhetorical theory, we can parse out streams of thinking about rhetoric and culture. These too help contextualize Aune’s sociological project. One stream ran through symbolic interactionism, with culture indexed by the first term (symbols) and society by the second (interactions), a point I return to below. The idea of “symbols” was prominent at Wingspread and after (Blair, 1997), which marked off one kind of culturally inflected rhetorical study, influenced also by the “myth-and-symbol school” of American studies (on which, see Trachtenberg, 1984). A second emerged from interwar literary studies, when critics on both sides of the Atlantic shifted from understanding culture as an achievement of art and taste to a more anthropological view of culture as a whole way of life. Burke made this move in the 1920s, which in turn fed his rhetorical view of literature as symbolic action. At Cambridge University, meanwhile, the literary critics F.R. and Q.D. Leavis were showing how to read literary and mass culture texts with an eye on the values and historical forms of life expressed through them, a tradition from which Raymond Williams would emerge, bending aspects of the Leavisite project into a Marxist analysis of culture and society (1958; see also Dworkin, 1997). Williams’ student Terry Eagleton took up the mantle of Marxist literary criticism and connected it back to the rhetorical tradition, which in his view took “speaking and writing not merely as textual objects . . . but as forms of activity inseparable from . . . wider social relations” (1983, p. 206). Williams’ writings also influenced cultural studies as developed at Birmingham, which through Lawrence Grossberg and others came to inform critical cultural studies of rhetoric in the U.S. (see Sloop and Olson, 1999). Aune appreciated Williams and drew frequently upon Eagleton, but as I elaborate below, he had little sympathy for Grossberg, Stuart Hall, and the cultural studies project.

Another strand of cultural rhetorical study, less prominent among rhetoricians, emerged from anthropology. It too can trace its roots back to the interwar period, when the idea of culture came to be seen as “the most central problem of all social science” (Malinowski, 1939; see Kroeber and Kluckhohn, 1952) and guided investigations of broadly rhetorical matters across a number of disciplines. Anthropologists began to cast language as a form of action taking place in what Malinowski (1923) influentially called the context of situation, an idea that influenced Bitzer’s formulation of the rhetorical situation. Linguistic anthropology later gave rise to the ethnography of speaking/ethnography of communication, a field named
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and conceived by Dell Hymes (1962, 1964). Hymes had been influenced by Burke, and the ethnography of communication would come into contact with rhetorical studies, particularly through speech scholars like Gerry Philipsen (e.g. 1975). He and other ethnographers opened pathways to cross-cultural rhetorical study, as did Robert Oliver (1971) in a different way, evidenced in his important early comparative study of ancient non-Western rhetorics. Only in the last 15 years or so, however, have rhetoricians begun to take up more anthropological approaches and ethnographic methods of cultural rhetorical study. Meanwhile, the International Rhetoric Culture Project has been consolidating four decades of rhetorically infused cultural theory and ethnographic fieldwork within anthropology (see rhetoricculture.org).

Though Aune absorbed rhetoric’s social turn in the 1970s—probably through deep readings of Burke and Critical Theory as well as Farrell’s influence—he seemed slower to embrace sociology or anthropology as articulating disciplines for rhetorical studies. This was partly because he came of intellectual age in the 1970s, when border disputes between humanist rhetoricians and social scientific communication researchers were sometimes pitched. Aune didn’t escape them, but they eased over time, perhaps aided by commitments to particular kinds of materialism and argumentative rationality that left him more open to social scientific knowledge than textualist critics have typically been.

One can find plenty of anticipations of his advocacy for injecting rhetorical studies with a stronger sociological imagination. I’ll call attention to just one—a provocative unpublished essay that mixed book review with reflections on the history and contemporary state of rhetorical studies (Aune, 1990, partially published as Aune, 1993). Reflecting on the fractured state of rhetorical scholarship and pedagogy and the problems it created for collective self-understanding and institutional justification within higher education, Aune advocated a “more anthropological view of rhetoric and communication.” Based partly on “the complex relationship between orality and literacy, and examining the social forces underlying shifts in rhetorical theory and practice,” Aune saw in it “a way of linking together the fragmentary impulses that we know as rhetorical studies, performance studies, cultural studies, and communication studies.” In an anthropological view, he saw an undeveloped paradigm that was potentially “congenial to the Deweyan, democratic strain in American rhetorical studies that provided the foundation for our best pedagogy, if not finally our research” (Aune, 1990, np). In barest outline, here were pieces for an overarching framework. Amplifying its faint details, it is organized around a conception of humans as rhetorical animals who do their work in different cultural contexts through a variety of communicative modes and media; who can be educated to see their rhetorical labors as embedded in broader socio-historical forces; and whose institutions of formal rhetorical education are designed to cultivate democracy as a way of life.

**Imagining Rhetoric Sociologically**

He revised and developed that framework eighteen years later, in an essay for a special journal issue on Farrell, who like Aune died too young at 59. It was part of an immanent critique of Farrell’s important *Norms of Rhetorical Culture*. Though Farrell was committed to a refurbished Aristotelianism, Aune (2008) argued, he neglected “matters of social causation and institutional design that were essential to Aristotle’s conception of rhetoric.” Moreover, “by displacing the social in favor of the cultural—a displacement characteristic of much recent work in the social sciences . . . Farrell lacks a coherent account of the gap between the
normative aspirations of classical rhetoric and the empirical characteristics of public life in modern liberal democracies” (p. 402).

Addressing those shortcomings called for a history and sociology of rhetorical theory, practice, and public life. “No one would have predicted at the turn of the twentieth century that rhetoric had much of a future,” Aune (2008) rightly observed before turning to “the social and philosophical causes of [its] decline” (p. 404). On the social side, modern science, capitalism, increasing cultural diversity, changes in education, and the rise of the mass audience all played their parts in rhetoric’s historical displacement, factors he quickly ticked off in what might have been a blueprint for a book-length treatment of the subject he sometimes talked about writing. On the philosophical side, his account was more focused but less satisfying. Liberal political and ethical thought, condensed in the person of Immanuel Kant, valorized “the autonomous individual” as the centerpiece of moral right and political justice (p. 405). They helped fuel what Alvin Goulder called a new sociolinguistic code, “the cultural of critical discourse,” which Aune had written about in Rhetoric and Marxism (p. 6 et passim). It entailed a reflexive hermeneutics of suspicion about truth claims and “common sense” and privileged theoretical discourse as a way to escape cultural prejudice—all of which departed from the precepts of traditional humanistic rhetoric. Both the social and intellectual sides cast obstacles to constructing a rhetorical culture along neo-Aristotelian lines.

Addressing those obstacles called for a stronger sociological account of rhetorical practice in historical and cross-cultural perspective. This represented “a more thoroughgoing Aristotelianism” than Farrell pursued, Aune (2008) suggested, as well as a more sociological rhetorical theory. On the one hand, historical sociology could throw light on “the formation of nation-states in modernity, constitutionalism and institutional design, and the place of technology, especially communication technology, in social change” (p. 410). More generally, sociological topoi could guide the production of theory, empirical analysis, and pedagogical practice.

To those more general sociological ends, Aune offered what he drolly labeled “the rhetorical rectangle” (Figure 1). It marked off what he called “a conceptual space we can denote as ‘the rhetorical’” within any particular nation-state or social formation at a specific moment in history (p. 411). More than merely conceptual, the rhetorical was actually a social space that took form within the confluences of four groups of elements: (1) institutions and designed places for rhetorical practice, as established for instance in the constitutions of nation-states; (2) the communicative media that mark out “social space where economics and technology influence rhetorical practice”; (3) rhetorical practices themselves as maintained “within a framework of ethical and political choices by rhetorical agents,” and (4) “cultural rhetorics” made up of patterned norms and values that “govern the nature of emotional display, rationality, and collective deliberation” and indicate “how rhetorical action should best occur” (2009, pp. 411-16). He characterized the first two as material forces, the latter two as normative. All four, and the broader space of the rhetorical, come into clearer focus when viewed in historical or cross-cultural comparison.

The rhetorical rectangle offered a model for understanding how rhetorical performances emerge within an ecology of social structures and agential choices in a broader social formation. It can be read as a kind of sociological overlay upon the “structure versus

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1 The Kantian autonomous individual did even more explanatory work in a kind of companion piece that followed the essay on Farrell, providing the main story line for an otherwise-excellent mapping of twentieth-century rhetorical theory (Aune, 2009). It was not the only time that, as John Murphy insightfully put it, Aune “mistook philosophers for advocates” (2013, p. 573).
struggle” dichotomy of classical Marxism that long animated him and stands as one of the organizing themes of his intellectual legacy (Murphy, 2013; Greene and Hiland, this volume). It offers materialist theories of rhetoric a more adequate sociology than they have typically had (though one doesn’t need to be a fire-eating materialist to embrace it). On the left side of the rectangle, rhetorical space is materially structured through institutional design (he mentions, e.g., constitutions, laws, systems of campaign finance, formal political roles like the presidency) and through the “media that constrain and transport rhetorical messages to audiences” (p. 411). On the right side, rhetorical space is normatively structured through cultural values and the habituated force of established social practices. These are less determining modes of structure than those on the material side of the rectangle, and Aune casts them as a space within which rhetorical agents make ethical and political choices. As John Murphy observes in his excellent memorial essay, Aune was deeply attentive to the social structures, political institutions, and state formations that embedded, constrained, and enabled rhetorical action (2013, p. 571). Over the course of his career, he drew upon several scholarly argots to make sense of these structuring and contextual dimensions of rhetoric.
Albeit brief, the rhetorical rectangle was arguably his most systematic effort to offer a model for them. It provided an opening for talking more carefully about the *structures* (plural) within which struggle takes place, adding sociological specificity to the traditional Marxian categories. Here were the inherited sociological circumstances within which humans made their own history, to graft onto *The 18th Brumaire*, though Aune’s traditionalist streak cushioned him from feeling the dead generations weighing like a nightmare upon us.

To fuel this kind of analysis, Aune pressed the value of historical sociology in “Modernity as a Rhetorical Problem,” though he also maintained some of his earlier interest in more anthropological views of rhetoric. “Just as Aristotle’s work displays elements of what later became separate social sciences—psychology, sociology, political science, anthropology, and economics—contemporary rhetorical scholars need to take seriously the material conditions for persuasion identified by the best work in the social sciences,” he wrote (p. 419 n.2). He advocated these alliances as a way to nudge rhetorical studies to add social *explanation* to its traditional commitments to interpretation, criticism, and pedagogy (cf. Reed, 2011). He argued that “human beings exist in a space of causes and a space of reasons” (p. 413), a distinction he adapted from Wilfred Sellers (2007) and which drove Aune’s distinction between the material and the normative elements of his framework (p. 418 n.1). Beyond joining rhetoric to history and the social sciences, Aune’s diagram also had “the advantage of uniting separate aspects of communication studies usually kept separate: the media, public address, rhetorical pedagogy, and rhetorical theory” (p. 412). Education was never far from view for him.

Aune’s rectangle was a scheme for generating questions and projects for rhetorical studies, an analytically productive heuristic. Each of the four corners of the rectangle provided *topoi* for inquiry and reflection: (1) Institutions and Places: “What types of reform of constitutional and other institutional designs might facilitate a more robust rhetorical democratic culture, at local, state, national, and international levels?” (2) Communicative Media: “What kinds of media reform do we need to improve civic participation and the quality of public argument?” (3) Rhetorical Practices: “[W]hat new forms of persuasive expression should be taught and practiced in our academic institutions?” (4) Cultural Rhetorics: “How might we metacommunicate across cultural divides about ideal forms of communication and persuasion?” (p. 417). These were deliberative questions he raised to illustrate the generative power of the sociological *topoi*, but we could also cash them out in terms appropriate for empirical investigation, critical inquiry, and social practice of many types. Though Aune didn’t delve much into the question of investigative methods, his sociological framework calls researchers to supplement textual analysis with original or secondary consideration of law, media sociology, and ongoing rhetorical practices. This means, in comparison to dominant modes of rhetorical analysis, paying less attention to discourses and texts and more to social structures and practices as the best means for understanding rhetoric as a social and material phenomenon.

**Reconsidering the Topos of Cultural Rhetorics**

Aune’s sociological rectangle was as much heuristic outline as fully conceptualized programmatic framework. Parts of it are ambiguous, tentative, or in need of revision. This is particularly true for the category of cultural rhetorics, arguably the weakest element of his model. I want to puzzle over his thinking on that front, draw out some of its limitations, and
sketch what I believe is a stronger alternative that would lead to a more powerful schema for a sociological and anthropological approach to rhetoric.

Aune’s idea of the cultural is grounded in a mid-century, Parsonian theory of “the cultural aspect of the modern social system” as consisting of norms and values (p. 403). This starting point leads Aune to see cultural rhetorics as “implicit” (p. 416), doing their work by guiding emotional display, rationality, collective deliberation, and overall expression of the self (e.g. the liberal autonomous self populating American modernity). He seems to want culture to do more, however, which leads him to briefly touch upon the importance of comparative rhetoric and the possible value of George Kennedy’s (1992) turn toward evolutionary biology as an anchor for an anthropological rhetorical theory (pp. 416–17). But the thinness of his view is evidenced when, as an instance of questions raised by the *topos* of cultural rhetorics, he can only raise the issue of metacommunication across cultural divides about ideal forms of communication.

Aune’s turn to Parsons was I think a reflection on his ambivalence, if not outright rejection of cultural studies. He admired Raymond Williams’ work but lamented the way in which Williams’ cultural materialism was “partially responsible for the drift of cultural studies away from class analysis” (1994, p. 95). He rejected the idea that analyzing literature or popular culture was by itself a means of conducting political work. He argued that cultural studies, as developed by Hall and Grossberg, operated with “a conception of discourse that is utterly useless for political purposes” (ibid, p. 94). Though he was sympathetic to Williams’ understanding of culture as a whole way of life and held out Williams’ “structure of feeling” as a useful concept for a rhetorical social theory, second-generation cultural studies seems to have turned Aune away from the view of culture as signification and meaning. Despite his radical politics and groundbreaking studies of economic rhetoric, Aune had a strong traditionalist streak when it came to both rhetoric and Marxism—championing the civic locus of the first and the materialism of the second. Rejecting the Foucauldian “descent into discourse” and popular culture of Hall/Grossberg-style cultural studies (ibid, p. 112), Aune maintained the traditional Marxist attention to class, labor, history, institutions, and political economy. He also maintained the traditional Aristotelian-Ciceronian conception of rhetoric as a public, civic practice, where argumentation and critical-rational judgment held privileged position. With Williams and against Hall and Grossberg, Aune continued to uphold the category of lived experience as part of a left critical humanism that cast rhetoric as engaged civic activity.

Aune’s distaste for Grossberg and Hall may explain why he wouldn’t take up a view of culture as discourse or semiotic struggle. It doesn’t explain why he took up the abstract if not idealist conception of culture as residing in “values,” relegating the important category of cultural rhetorics to doing behind-the-scenes regulatory work. It might be that he wanted another vocabulary to mark the normative dimension of rhetoric, scattered across the whole cultural landscape, and revealing the moral goods that agents oriented themselves toward in their purposeful rhetorical practice. This kind of sociology could undergird Aune’s moral philosophy, which was informed by Alasdair MacIntyre and the communitarian critics of liberalism (marked e.g. by Sandel, 1984). A Parsonian sociology of norms and values within social systems also potentially gave Aune another *topos* for causal explanation, providing a way to think about, for example, the differential production of hate speech across cultures—say looking for cultural values of tolerance as against group-based purity, which could then be mapped against the rhetorical expression of hate.
While analysis of rhetorically regulative values has a place within the analytic *topoi* that fall under the heading of cultural rhetorics, we need to supplement Aune’s vintage Parsonian view with other, thicker understandings of culture. I lack the space to do more than offer the barest sketch of what this might look like, but I’ll suggest that Aune’s earlier instinct to look toward anthropology was correct. I would make a case for the creative combination of elements of two very different programs, one tied to rhetorical anthropology, the other to new materialism. Both can articulate with Kennedy’s (1992) productive understanding of rhetoric as a basic form of energy, which opened into both the comparative and evolutionary biological frameworks that Aune rightly saw as possible anchors for an anthropological view of rhetoric.

I’m suggesting a grafting. One set of resources comes from the anthropologists affiliated with the International Rhetoric Culture Project (www.rhetoricculture.org). Over the last decade, in periodic conversation with U.S. rhetoricians like Robert Hariman and Ralph Cintrón, they have consolidated 40-plus years of rhetorically infused cultural theory and ethnographic fieldwork, advancing a model that conceives rhetoric as a dynamic force for fixing meanings in a world of disagreement and cultural flux (Strecker & Tyler, 2009; see Simonson, 2014). Michael Carrithers, for instance, argues that culture is a reservoir of rhetorical resources that people use on themselves and others to establish scenes, make movements, and lead to performances (2010, p. 167). That core insight and others are filled out in the ethnographic and historical studies published across six (soon to be eight) volumes of essays. Theirs has been an avowedly humanist understanding, but one that can also open out into post-humanist directions. We need only shift to a passive voice and say that cultures are reservoirs of rhetorical resources *used on* selves and others. And we move toward an even more powerful view of cultural rhetorics if we inject a rhetorical keyword from Cicero into new materialist thinking: those reservoirs encompass both symbolic and material agencies for *moving* bodies and minds through meaning-making activity, where meaning is determined not just through language but also through productive interactions among people and things (see Ingold, 2011, pp. 63–88). Thus enhanced, the *topos* of cultural rhetorics leads us into the realms of symbols, texts, discourses, artifacts, materials, and the narratives and logics of meaning-making that govern how they fit together. Cultural rhetorics do not just provide norms for the kinds of displays we rhetorical animals make. They also supply the performative and interpretive materials through which rhetorical movement and meanings occur.

**CONCLUSION**

Heuristics are generative devices for discovery and invention. The useful ones help us think in fresh or otherwise productive ways. The versatile ones are open to revision and further development. Aune’s is both useful and versatile. Though twentieth-century rhetorical theory has been, as Ehninger observed, social or sociological, the bulk of our analytic energies have been limited to Aune’s *topos* of cultural rhetorics and, to a lesser extent, rhetorical practices. Texts, discourses, narratives, arguments, and symbols have been the main currencies of rhetorical studies into the twenty-first century. Embodied performances, interactions, social argumentation, campaigns, and movements have attracted our attention as well, though we’ve often cashed out our analyses through the main currencies. Aune injected a sociological materialism into rhetorical theory. Institutions, design, media, and political economy provide another array of *topoi* and direct us toward pathways of inquiry. That opens up more space for rhetorical analysis to be a piece of social explanation,
supplementing our traditional commitments to interpretation and criticism. It also provides openings for pedagogy and reflective practice with attention cast toward the institutional and normative structures that constrain and enable rhetorical performance within particular environments. Finally, it provides additional sociological precision to materialist theories of rhetoric.

At the same time, as Aune would have been the first to admit, his heuristic is incomplete. I’ve called attention to limitations in the category cultural rhetorics, which may have been overly influenced by Farrell’s attention to norms. There are others, too. Though Aune alluded to the formal role of the presidency under the *topos* of institutions and places, he neglected other less formal social roles inhabited by rhetors—e.g. activist, blogger, evangelist, door-to-door canvasser. These roles and the social expectations around them clearly structure rhetorical performances and vary across historical settings. They tend not to be institutionally designed in the same way that the presidency is, so perhaps they would fall within a more elaborated version of the corner devoted to rhetorical practices. But they need more attention than he gave them. Patterns of social interaction are also sociologically fundamental but underdeveloped in Aune’s model. They are related to rhetorical practices but transcend them, establishing social contexts within which practices arise. Here we might consider, for instance, the ways that what Raymond Williams called “mobile privatization” (1974, pp. 20–24) has contributed to patterns of social segmentation and limited the kinds of stranger sociability that underwrite richer forms of civil society, thus altering broader patterns of public rhetorical practice. Finally, falling within the category of the “larger economic, political, and cultural forces” that Aune brackets for purposes of clarity in the model (pp. 411–12), sociological rhetorical analysis needs to attend to circulations of affect and force-fields of power, both of which he touches upon only in passing. Here Kathleen Stewart’s (2009) beautiful *Ordinary Affects* points the way toward ethnographies of rhetorical performance erupting from the hard-to-grasp but undoubtedly real charges of affective energy that flow through social life.

I don’t want to end on a supplementary note, though. Jim was an intellectual hero of mine. He did work of a sort no one else did, with a mix of critical acumen, moral passion, wide-ranging erudition, and cranky good humor. For many of us, he was an uncommonly important anchor in the field, intellectually and humanly. We are fortunate to have had him in this world for as long as we did. His writings continue to benefit and provoke, and through them he remains somehow present. I’ve engaged one of them here, trying to give an important but overlooked essay the kind of serious attention it deserves. That essay channels some of the distinguishing qualities of twentieth-century rhetorical theory and advances them in potentially important ways. It’s left to us to push them ahead further.

REFERENCES


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