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An X Too Far: A Review of Randy Allen Harris's *Landmark Essays on Rhetoric of Science: Case Studies and Issues and Methods*

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Landmark Essays on Rhetoric of Science: Issues and Methods
Edited by Randy Allen Harris
Routledge, 2020
360 pp.

Landmark Essays on Rhetoric of Science: Case Studies
Edited by Randy Allen Harris
Routledge, 2018
354 pp.

Science and all that it represents stands at the center of our civilization. There is an increasing interest, both within and without the academy, in the rhetoric of science, and I believe, despite the irony implicit in the request, that there is a need for further research in this area (Philip C. Wander 2020 [1976], 65).

Randy Allen Harris's *Landmark Essays on Rhetoric of Science* successfully captures the interdisciplinary, innovative, and occasionally polemical aspects of an emerging field. Harris's two-volume collection consists of thirty-five individual essays that span nearly seventy years.¹ Each volume is organized by one of two superordinate themes, *Case Studies* (2018) and *Issues and Methods* (2020). Together, these volumes serve as an invaluable resource for anyone interested in the conversations, disputes, and queries of rhetoricians who dared to expand rhetoric's purview into scientific domains, a shift that was not welcomed by all.

Harris, an English Professor at the University of Waterloo, is a befitting guide for this intellectually stimulating excursion into the rhetoric of science literature. His introductions to both volumes vividly weave together historical facts and conceptual details in an accessible narrative style. These sections are well-written and engaging. Harris is unmistakably a storyteller. But he is also a cartographer, charting, in detail, the bumpy rhetoric of science terrain for future travelers. In the hands of graduate students and early career scholars, these volumes can serve as handbooks for those interested in doing this kind of work. In fact, I was first exposed to Harris's anthologies while enrolled in a graduate seminar at the University of South Florida. I still frequently turn to the essays housed in these volumes as well as Harris's introductions for both inspiration and guidance as I write my dissertation. In a way, Harris's anthologies, including *Rhetoric and Incommensurability* (2005), have fundamentally shaped my understanding of the rhetoric of science field.²

Cases and Contestations

Harris's comprehensive grasp of the rhetoric of science literature is impressive, and I appreciated his willingness to not shy away from disciplinary quarrels. Specifically, Harris's introductions explore several conceptual debates that have occurred since the 1970s. Harris

¹ *Issues and Methods's* opening essay, "Ideas, Stray or Stolen, About Scientific Writing, No. 1" is undated. However, the author, American philosopher Charles Sanders Peirce, died in 1914, which indicates that Harris's edited collection spans over a century worth of scholarship.

² Harris, Randy A., ed. 2005. *Rhetoric and Incommensurability*. West Lafayette, Indiana: Parlor Press.

not only reveals these disciplinary controversies but uses them to conceptually organize the subsequent essays. *Issues and Methods* does this through its pairing of subcategories. “The Very Idea” subsection, for instance, consists of arguments regarding “whether it makes intellectual sense for there to be such a field as rhetoric of science” while the subsection “Through Thick and Thin” shows differing responses to the question: “Is the vocabulary of rhetoric thick enough to say anything worthwhile about science?” (2020, 3).

Case Studies, on the other hand, brilliantly traces the development of the field through shifting disciplinary allegiances and heated conceptual debates regarding the viability of this contested area of study. These volumes thus serve as roadmaps depicting the intellectual landmines hidden under the debris of nearly fifty years’ worth of disciplinary controversies, which (in my case) can help prepare graduate students for possible comprehensive exam questions such as: What was disputed at the Wingspread conference in 1970? Is science rhetorical? And, of course, who was right, Gaonkar or Gross? Ultimately, Harris’s extensive knowledge of the field, along with his sharp-witted writing style, is thoroughly engaging and will prove beneficial for anyone interested in this topic.

Though the main objective of Harris’s introductions is to contextualize the subsequent essays, his topology does a lot of intellectual legwork. From the subtitles alone, readers encounter a distinction paramount in the field of rhetorical studies; namely, criticism (*Case Studies*) versus theory (*Issues and Methods*). These categories represent two strains of rhetoric of science scholarship, “first through a few scattered and unaffiliated critical studies, second out of theoretical arguments” (2018, 2). These categories are productive though imperfect, as Harris himself explains: “the labels that segregate the sections...are artificial in the sense of crafting categories that allow us to see patterns in the development of our field” (2020, 3).

Harris initially reveals these patterns with two exemplary essays, John Angus Campbell’s “Charles Darwin: Rhetorician of Science” (2018 [1987]) and Carolyn Miller’s “Kairos in the Rhetoric of Science (2020 [1992]). For Harris, these titles alone signal an important difference. Campbell’s title, for instance, declares “its focus on the symbolic activities of one individual; Miller’s, on the symbolic implications of one concept” (2020: 4). In other words, Campbell’s essay is an investigation of a particular text, motivated chiefly by the power and influence exerted therein while Miller’s overt theoretical aim is to reveal a broader function of a specific theory (e.g., Kairos) in scientific discourse. As Harris later puts it,

The *Issues and Methods* essays deploy their examples and critical analyses as data in arguments for points of theory...The *Case Study* essays, on the other hand, while certainly not ends in and of themselves, subordinate whatever particular points they articulate to the provisioning of a storehouse [of] empirical accounts to undergird “the development of theories comprehending more general principles that operate across larger bodies of discourse” (Halloran 2018 [1984], 86) (2020, 4).

Case Studies and *Issues and Methods* thus make visible a boundary between rhetorical criticism and rhetorical theory through a valuable conceptual distinction.

Designating Landmarks

Each landmark essay in its own way defies this distinction, however, which calls into question the utility of this binary for contemporary scholars. Harris's expertise is helpful in this regard, especially for determining how each landmark essay defies the category to which it has been assigned. For instance, Harris acknowledges that "Miller's essay includes the same degree of close reading and textual analysis as Campbell's essay" and adds that "Campbell's essay is framed as documentary evidence for the very idea of rhetoric of science, beginning and ending with the claim that its analysis demonstrates that rhetoric is a necessary bridge between science and culture" (2020, 4). For this reason, I contend that Harris's chief conceptual contribution is the identification of each essay's "landmark" qualities, which is to say, those "governing themes of rhetorical criticism" that "chart" and "define the field" (2018, 20-1). However, each essay lends itself to various interpretations, which offers readers several possibilities for understanding each investigation of scientific discourse. I suggest, then, that the value of each landmark essay comes from the ways in which each author weaves together theoretical arguments and close readings of specific texts.

For this reason, the *Case Studies* volume is organized topically by various theoretical and practical issues that twentieth century rhetoricians were dealing with. These topics are: Giants in Science, Conflict in Science, Public Science, and Writing Science. Harris utilizes these topics because "they exhibit the governing themes of rhetorical criticism when its eye turn[ed] to science; suasive greatness, paradigmatic debates, public policy concerns, and writing issues" (2018, 20). In a way, these sections further reveal the messiness between the criticism/ theory divide. This is to say that "case studies are not case studies," Harris argues, "unless they participate in a field of issues; nor can they do so without exemplifying a set of methods" (2020, 4).

For instance, Harris explains that in the *Case Studies* volume, "we see S. Michael Halloran arguing for the transitivity of ethos, John Lyne and Henry Howe charting the complex interrelations between fields of discourse and scientific expertise, Michelle Sidler examining the implications of the internet for reception studies" (2020, 4). In addition, we see Lawrence Prelli (2018 [1989]), Leah Ceccarelli (2018 [2011]), and Jeanne Fahnestock (2018 [1989]) explore conflicts in science through close textual readings while expanding theoretical understandings of scientific argumentation. Simply put, case studies, especially the ones included in this volume, can offer profound theoretical insights about rhetorical discourse beyond the individual cases they examine.

"Meanwhile, theories have to touch ground," Harris writes. By this Harris means that theoretical issues about rhetoric "cannot be examined without illustrations, even if only through a network of scattered mentions; methods," he adds, "cannot be sold without demonstrations of their worth" (2020, 4). Harris is clear here that the *Issues and Methods* volume houses "essays that deploy their examples and critical analyses as data in arguments for points of theory" (4). This means that there is a recognizable difference between the criticism of *Case Studies* and theoretical investigations that seek to offer conceptual arguments

that can be applied to an array of discourses and situations. For instance, Harris summarizes the theoretical aims of the essays in *Issues and Methods* by stating,

Miller to introduce the importance of Kairos, Condit for her modal materialist approach, Gross to demonstrate the relevance of his dual-coding approach to visuals, Xiao to show the cultural amalgamation of the discourses of religion and science, Mehlenbacher and Maddalena to argue that Rhetorical Genre Theory can explain material objects (2020, 4).

The overt theoretical focus of these essays is clear. But each essay is just as valuable as a piece of criticism. For instance, Miller's assertion that "postpositivist thinking about science is remarkably congruent with a rhetoric in which Kairos is central" (184) is brilliantly grounded in her close reading of several scientific texts. Her theoretical contribution, therefore, is no less a product of criticism than Halloran's, Prelli's, and Ceccarelli's essays. I suggest, then, that the *Issues and Methods* categories best represent the desire to form the rhetorical boundaries of an emerging field. Put differently, Harris's topology not only reflects certain patterns exhibited by rhetorical scholars, but also serves to constitute them along with the broader rhetoric of science domain. In this regard, Harris's anthologies do some important rhetorical work for the field.

Neoclassical or Neomodern?

Harris's two methods subsections represent distinct approaches for analyzing the symbolic-material constructs of science, which he calls "Neoclassical" and "Neomodern." For Harris's organizational purposes, "the Neoclassical essays are concerned with the lexical instruments of rhetorical antiquity. The Neomodern essays draw in the instruments of other disciplines" (2020, 3). Later in the introduction of *Issues and Methods*, Harris provides the following distinction:

Rhetoric is a field both with a long and rich tradition of methods for interrogating symbolic action and with an anxious opportunism to augment and even displace those methods with the latest developments in other fields. To the extent that the former of these tendencies dominates in works of theory and criticism, an emphasis on tradition, leveraging the ancients, it is Neoclassical. An emphasis on externally derived approaches, borrowing from the neighbors, is Neomodern (2020, 18).

Harris refers to Lawrence Prelli as the prophet of the Neoclassical approach and Alan Gross as the prophet of the Neomodern rhetoric of science. Prelli's *A Rhetoric of Science* (1989), for instance, is heavily rooted in the rhetorical theory of antiquity.³ According to Harris, Prelli's piece "brims with stases and topoi, ethos and invention, presumption and burden of proof, instruments that were either first developed in antiquity or developed in scholarship with unbroken allegiances to that antiquity" (2020, 18). Similarly, Lynda Walsh and Kenneth C. Walker (2020 [2013]) adopt ethos as their primary Neoclassical tool, Gordon R. Mitchell (2020 [2010]) turns to the ancient method of *dissoi logoi*, and Miller, of course, reimagines the classical figure Kairos in a contemporary setting.

³ Prelli, Lawrence J. 1989. *A Rhetoric of Science*. Carbondale: University of South Carolina Press.

Harris then underscores Gross's *The Rhetoric of Science* as exemplary of the Neomodern approach because of how it pulls from traditions not typically associated with rhetorical studies.⁴ For instance, Gross “deploys social philosopher Jürgen Habermas’s theory of Communication Action ... cultural anthropologist Victor Turner’s social drama framework, analytic philosopher W. V. O. Quine’s linguistic epistemology, [and] sociologist Robert K. Merton’s work on the emergence and disciplining of social norms” (2020, 18). Similarly, Ashley Rose Mehlenbacher and Kate Maddalena’s (2020 [2016]) essay is considered Neomodern because it utilizes Actor Network Theory, a concept with heavy ties to Bruno Latour. And Craig O. Stewart’s essay “Socioscientific Controversies: A Theoretical and Methodological Framework” (2020 [2009]) blends together rhetorical theories with perspectives from sociolinguistics. The included essays by Celeste Condit (2020 [2008]) and Xiaosui Xiao (2020 [2004]) also successfully exhibit the benefits of the Neomodern approach in two unique ways.

My only reservation about the neoclassical and neomodern distinction comes from my own experiences fighting my way into this field. On the one hand, it seems that my desire to pull from the rhetorical traditions of antiquity are constantly met with the comments: “this is good, but it is not innovative enough” or “this is interesting, but it will never get published in a top-tier journal.” It often seems, from my perspective as a graduate student, that the neoclassical route may not be the best decision if the goal is to obtain an academic job after graduation. On the other hand, my neomodern aspirations for incorporating economic theory with rhetorical theory are constantly met with comments like: “this is interesting, but where’s the rhetoric?” In other words, though I value this distinction and find it helpful to justify certain approaches to rhetoric of science work, I am not convinced that these categories fully account for the methodological and theoretical expectations of current rhetoric of science scholars. And even though I am unable to point out these scholars specifically, their existence is often known through their infamous title “Reviewer #2.”

Ultimately, both volumes of *Landmark Essays* offer profound insights not just about rhetoric of science, but the rhetorical studies field in general. The essays included in these books offer profound insights about the nature of rhetoric and I encourage rhetorical scholars of all types to consider exploring these works. Rhetoric of science is a field constantly evolving, and Harris’s anthologies serve as invaluable resources for anyone interested in continuing this area of inquiry. In closing, I must agree with Harris that *Rhetoric of Science* is not an X too far.

⁴ Gross, Alan G. 1996 [1990]. *The Rhetoric of Science*. 2nd edition. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.