



The Rhetorical Question Concerning Glitch

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Abstract

This article proposes that glitches and what has become known as *glitch art* offer models for expanding our current, critical approaches to rhetoric, especially as those practices concern mediation. Toward this end, this article surveys rhetorical practice as it follows Richard Lanham's (1993) concept of the bi-stable oscillation (looking at/looking through); examines recent scholarship that troubles critical approaches to mediation; responds by developing a *metastable orientation* for rhetoric by turning to Gilbert Simondon's (2009) concepts of individuation and metastability; locates in emerging glitch media art an informative model for practicing an expansive engagement with mediation; and, finally, concludes with a brief comment on glitch's implications for rhetorical theory and practice.

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One and the same material object can figure in an indefinitely large number of processes at once.

—William James, *Essays in Radical Empiricism*

“Dear %FIRSTNAME%”

Several members of the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) found themselves addressed by the salutation above in an email sent on June 11, 2012. Obviously, we read the salutation as a mistake, most likely the result of a communication error, a *glitch*, between the email application and the database where the membership information was stored. As most glitches go, this was relatively benign. Although it didn't crash the system, it was enough to make that system known. In what was to be an introduction to that organization's new “member liaison” (the communiqué's actual purpose) the email's automation misstep introduced its membership to a different sort of *in-between*.

Being members of groups like NCTE, we are somewhat aware of the impersonal arrangement, but we accept the pretense anyway. It is only when the system fails to function as anticipated or when some occurrence foregrounds the means of its mediation that we feel compelled to comment on or even notice the arrangement at all. We are, however, getting a lot of practice in noticing such things. As we rely more heavily on networked and digital mediation to manage our individual and collective activities, it is becoming a commonplace occurrence to fall out of step with our mediations through small mistakes, errors, and malfunctions. For instance, during the drafting of this article, several glitches made news: a widely-reported glitch occurred in the algorithmic software infrastructure of the stock market, sending stock trades toward volatile swings; a state's online course management system for its higher education institutions malfunctioned, granting instructor-level access to its students; and Apple's much heralded iOS6 unveiled an error-ridden new map application, frustrating the many early adopters of the company's new offering. With each occasion, an *in-between* ceased to be a transparent mediation and revealed itself as something that manipulates and as something that can be manipulated.

Current digital rhetorics along with many traditional rhetorical practices cherish glitch-like events like those I mention here because they offer a possibility to render *apparent* that which is *transparent* by design. When we are positioned to pay attention to *in-betweens*, especially the mediation work of interfaces and infrastructures, we often come to better understand how those *in-betweens* help configure our personal, academic, professional, and civic practices. The field's desire to understand technological mediation and to overcome its designed transparency was made quite clear in a recent *Computers and Composition* special issue concerning the interface. Joel Haefner (2009), in his editor's introduction, claimed that “[a]ccepting the concept of transparency, accommodating the idea of a transparent interface without question or examination, is actually a dangerous course” (p. 135). Tolerating transparency is dangerous, he continued, because of the “epistemological dimension” of interfaces that “inherently influence the way we think (and feel and act) because they provide frameworks for how we organize knowledge and what we can do with it” (p. 136). By foregrounding that which usually resides in the background, Haefner rightly emphasized the role that interfaces broadly construed play in our knowledge practices. This practice of foregrounding afforded by glitches is well supported in rhetorical scholarship as instances in which we attend to those transparent mechanisms through conscious and critical awareness. In this light, one can see much of contemporary rhetorical practice as the practice of creating glitch-like moments in that these critical occasions reveal and foreground knowledge of otherwise transparent structures enacted with our software, infrastructure, and technological policies throughout our institutions. However, before simply collapsing glitch and critical engagement and considering the matter finished, we might benefit from posing a question concerning the rhetorical opportunity that glitch offers: *Is the practice of foregrounding our only rhetorical practice available?*

In many senses, the task of organizing knowledge is only one of the functions of an email database, stock market software infrastructure, an education course management system (CMS), and geographic information system (GIS) mapping networks. Each of these interfaces and their extended infrastructures also shape and manage ensembles of actors. When these mediations falter, they also pose the risk and promise of reconfiguring those ensembles. Speaking toward these possibilities, Alex Reid proposed in his 2012 Computers and Writing Conference keynote talk that we understand the effects of technological glitches as not just epistemological but as ontological. Reid built on traditional rhetorical approaches, like those exhibited by Haefner (2009), by recognizing the capacity of glitches to direct our conscious attention to the boundaries between agents operating at the levels of the physical, discursive, and biological. We understand that when a glitch occurs, we get a sense of the enduring relationships between policy and practice, local and global, human and nonhuman. What we might consider as disruptive features, however, provide views that can only ever be partial because another function of glitch, Reid proposed, is not just a reminder of the boundaries of epistemological organization but also key “ontological conditions.” Reid further posited that we understand “glitches as compositional objections that might tell us something about the world we inhabit” (2012, para. 22). When these objections and glitches occur, Reid argued, they are not only reminders of the boundaries of competing agents but also a “source of agency” that recirculates and redistributes potentials in those moments of incompatibility that glitches afford.

Reid's consideration of ontology—ways of being in addition to ways of knowing—echoed recent work by Katherine Hayles (2012) that directly engaged the effects of technology and mediation. Hayles suggested that we come to understand technological mediation not as epistemic or even strictly as ontological but as “technogenetic” or as an ongoing, mutual evolution occurring between different milieus of the biological, psycho-social, and technological. Informed by the work of such thinkers as Gilbert Simondon, Bruno Latour, Nigel Thrift, and Adrian Mackenzie, Hayles claimed new approaches to mediation should attempt to forge relations with technology that account for “a shift from *seeing* technical objects as static entities to conceptualizing them as temporary coalescences in fields of conflicting and cooperating forces” (2012, p. 86, emphasis added). Ultimately, Hayles argued that our practices of mediation unfold through embodied interactions, relying on what Thrift called a *technological unconscious*, and that “it is difficult to establish clear-cut boundaries between technical ensembles and the society that creates it” (2012, pp. 86–87). Hayles's exploration of collectives and *technogenesis* followed her earlier work that explored media effects on individuals and their cognitive structures (2005; 2007). These earlier works made the case that interactions with new media actually affect physiological brain functions (synaptogenesis), and these arguments further blurred divides between the biological human and nonhuman technology. Building on these provocations offered by Reid and Hayles, then, we are compelled to reorient our rhetorical practices in a manner that exceeds what we can see or consciously know. Working with glitch as a model exercise, we can begin to also consider rhetorical practice as knowledge we *do*. One way rhetoric's *doing* can be understood is as a mutual practice between human and nonhuman, an ongoing,

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