

Circumnavigation: An Interview with Thomas Rickert

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Part One: "Only the Easy Ones"

Thomas Rickert: By the way...

Nathaniel Rivers: What?

Thomas: Why are all your pictures on Facebook now with these salmon red pants?

Nathaniel: There's just two. That's because people like them and it keeps showing up on your feed. It's called being a big deal. Also, they're not salmon, they're just red. They show up salmon.

Thomas: Fair enough. Just curious.

Nathaniel: So, shall we start?

Thomas: Yeah, just a second.

Nathaniel: Okay. No hurry.

Nathaniel (Narration): While Thomas gets ready I'll quickly tell you what we're up to. Traveling to two breweries in St. Louis, Missouri, Thomas and I discussed his book, *Ambient Rhetoric: The Attunements of Rhetorical Being*, recently published by the University of Pittsburg Press as part of their Series in Composition, Literacy and Culture.

This is Thomas Rickert's second book in the series. The first was *Acts of Enjoyment: Rhetoric, Žižek, and the Return of the Subject*.

We chose an audio interview to in some small way attune the interview itself to ambience, the sounds of bars, chatting, outbursts of yelling, peals of laughter and glasses clinking together would shape both the interview itself and its present digital form. We hope you enjoy it.

Nathaniel: We are here at the 4Hands Brewery in fabulous downtown St. Louis.

Thomas: We are indeed.

Nathaniel: I am here with Thomas Rickert. I'm, of course, Nathaniel Rivers.

I guess we should start at the beginning. How can you, or can you describe the genesis of this project and its development over time? I'll point out, for instance, your *JAC* article "In the House of Doing: Rhetoric and the Kairos of Ambience" was published in 2004.

You've been at work at this for a while, it seems.

Thomas: I have been at work at this for a while. But as far as a beginning, that is already fraught with all kinds of interesting ways. You snigger and yet you know.

In terms of the beginning, why don't we just say that certain things coalesced at a particular time in terms of my writing, although all the things I write had their beginnings already in various ways. I'd like to say that the key element, perhaps, was music prior to anything else. That may be why I gravitated towards the term *ambience*.

Brian Eno (1999), most particularly, is somebody who coined that term for a particular kind of music. But Eno certainly wasn't an originator, it had already been ongoing. But he was a great popularizer. He also theorized it in some interesting ways.

Then you have lots of bands who had been delving into it in new ways. I was listening a lot to Sigur Rós at the time. In fact, one could say that, in fact, I think I say this somewhere in the acknowledgements, I wrote that first ambient essay on Sigur Rós and prednisone.

Nathaniel: Nice, yeah. Well, I even mentioned to you, we talked once about one of their album covers that's just the parentheses.

Thomas: Right on.

Nathaniel: Which was...

Thomas: That was the one I was listening to over and over again, because it scratched the prednisone itch in an interesting way.

Nathaniel: Well, that was a good one.

Keeping with the theme of origins, and given that, when did *Acts of Enjoyment* come out? 2007?

Thomas: Correct.

Nathaniel: We've got the *JAC* article in 2004, book comes out in 2007.

Thomas: The acts book.

Nathaniel: Was there then, the *Acts of Enjoyment*?

Thomas: Yes, that book.

Nathaniel: What did you call it?

Thomas: The acts book.

Nathaniel: The acts book? We're coming back to the act. I've got "the act" question.

I'm wondering if there was then any overlap between the first book, *Acts of Enjoyment* and this one. Asking you to speak more about these connections. The reason I ask this is I can imagine that some will see the jump from a psychoanalytical take on cultural studies to something like material rhetorics to be a big leap in terms of moving from one project to the next.

I have two quotes from *Acts of Enjoyment* that I want to draw your attention to in terms that I think maybe speak to this most recent book. You write, "Rhetoric is bound up with the intransigent psychic glue that dis/joins us to each other in an infinity of possible relations, offering everything but the transcendence that would rescind the offer" (2007, p. 29).

A few pages later, you write, “Ultimately, what the Act describes is a particularly potent form of invention, or an unleashing of the eventual within the ongoing, belated process of symbolic integration” (pp. 31-32).

I’m wondering if in light of those quotes and this notion of offering everything but transcendence, this notion of inventing or unleashing the eventual, how those in your mind connect to this notion of ambient rhetorics in light of that project.

Thomas: Only the little questions.

Nathaniel: Only the little questions. We’re in a bar. We have to ask big questions.

Thomas: I think one of the key points of connection lies in affect itself. I find that psychoanalysis might best be described as simply a rhetoric of affects given a particular background theory out of which to place it and give it its trajectories.

If you simply take that theory of affect and start expanding on it or intensifying it, add a material element that maybe at odds with what Žižek understands materialism to be. But even there that’s complex. I don’t necessarily want to get into that now.

But if you do that and if you take seriously an argument such as Diane Davis’s (2010) argument that affect precedes the symbolic, which is an absolutely brilliant argument and, I think, right on. Once you start doing that there’s all kinds of connections. Connections that I haven’t even begun to mine yet that could be mined despite what seems to be more dissonance than resonance.

Nathaniel: Sure. It was a loaded question.

Thomas: Yes.

Nathaniel: In many ways I do think they work well together. But in terms of how they may be immediately present themselves it is an interesting connection.

Thomas: But once again even in terms of the symbolic the Big Other functions in an ambient fashion that transcends any subject—the subject is always swimming around in the symbolic and is never at home in the symbolic and simply finds little things to glue itself to and give it a sense of stability that is of course phantasmatic.

Nathaniel: Across both books there’s a similar treatment of subjectivity in terms of in *Acts of Enjoyment* the way that subjectivity plays in terms of desire and fantasy and those kinds of things and in the way in which subjectivity is in ambience. That’s clearly a tight connection between the two works.

Thomas: Agreed. I do think though that I’ve had a certain shift in that psychoanalysis and Žižek in particular sometimes wants to pin down certain aspects of what it is that makes a subject show up.

One of the things that I get out of [Martin] Heidegger is an opening up. There’s always further disclosures possible. It’s a way not just of getting past the problem of Oedipalism but just jettisoning it altogether. I think in some ways that could be a productive move.

Nathaniel: That of course leads me to my next question, this being a well-structured interview. In the preface you write, and I’m going to quote here so the listeners can hear your prose, which is another fantastic element of the book, it’s a joy to read. You write, and this is in the preface.

Thomas: You are too kind.

Nathaniel: Well, that's been said of me. "On this approach, rhetoric cannot be understood as suasion attempted between discrete or among aggregate subjects embedded in a transitive subject-driven view of rhetorical situations. Rhetoric is not finally a shift in the mental states of subjects but something world-transforming for individuals and groups immersed in vibrant, ecologically attuned environments" (2013, p. xv).

I'm going to keep going. Later you argue, and this is just to demonstrate that you come back to this point again and again, "Rhetoric is not exclusively a symbolic art, nor does it issue solely from human being" (p. 176).

As I just said, ambient rhetoric is full of such moments. You also write, "Rhetoric from an ambient perspective can no longer be situated solely in human subjective performance" (p. 29).

As with your first book, this book has consequences for understanding of the practice of rhetoric. Some readers might even find these consequences dire. However, you see this notion of human subjective performance as what you say, what you call narrowing.

Can you speak to these consequences for how we are approaching rhetoric, and more specifically, in terms of the doing of rhetoric and maybe by extension, the teaching of rhetoric? Given that I think for several, not several, for lots of people in rhetoric, if it isn't this human subjective performance, then how can it be understood as rhetoric in the first place?

Thomas: Only the easy ones, huh?

Nathaniel: That's just number three, too, by the way. This is two sided.

Thomas: Oh great. Making me work for my beer.

[laughter]

Nathaniel: Yes, banter.

Thomas: Too bad we can't hear the snigger. Well, there's so many things that can be said here and I'm just not even going to be able to even partially address the question. Why don't I just find like one little thing to start with?

Nathaniel: Please.

Thomas: You might go back and look at that...

Nathaniel (Narration): The exchange we're discussing here emerged from the 2003 meeting of the Alliance of Rhetoric Studies. In 2004, Cheryl Geisler published a report of that meeting in *Rhetoric Society Quarterly*, issue 34.3. In a 2005 issue, 35.4, Christian Lundberg and Joshua Gunn responded. Geisler, in the same 2005 issue, responded to their response. The exchange won the 2006 Charles Kneupper award from the Rhetoric Society of America.

Thomas: That exchange, I think, puts these issues on the burner. And, I think Lundberg and Gunn are just spot on with their analysis of how there's a certain contingent that wants to cling to a certain notion of agency because they believe that agency is something that you simply have or don't have.

Further, they seem to think that our theories somehow impact whether or not we have agency. Like, if you read [Michel] Foucault and again, I want to mention somebody who's made this argument very clearly, John Muckelbauer (2000).

Yeah, Foucault doesn't supply a theory of agency. So what? That doesn't mean stuff can't get done. I mean, Foucault was a noted activist. Obviously, you don't have to have a "theory of agency" that presupposes an agent who has this possession called agency to get stuff done.

Perhaps the challenge is to jettison the idea that we're simply these isolated monads or subjects that have this capacity just simply inherent in who we are. Start theorizing ourselves as already connected and that the disclosure of our connectedness unleashes potential that actually stems from that ecological interconnectedness.

That should be our starting point. What's at stake there isn't whether or not our theories are going to grant us or just allow us, we have agency. I think it simply gives us a more honest understanding of what it is that we do. In no way, I think, does it prevent us from developing theories of accountability. However, it does challenge many of our extant theories of accountability. But that's a different conversation.

Nathaniel: It is. I don't have a question for that, so we don't have to have that conversation.

Thomas: That isn't what I meant. What I meant was that that hand in hand with the sense that we have to have a theory of agency in order to have a theory of accountability, it's that tight connection between the two. If you get rid of the theory of agency, there's also, well, there's no accountability, either.

That's not necessarily the case. Perhaps it's that our theories of accountability are insufficient, and so we have fresh ground to explore.

Nathaniel: Yeah. I'm wondering, that seems to connect, Marilyn Cooper (2011) has a fairly recent essay in *CCCs* where she engages [Bruno] Latour. That fear that if you don't have that notion of agency, it's impossible to hold anybody responsible or accountable seems to be, I mean, I'd almost describe it as a fear.

Thomas: Agreed.

Nathaniel: There's a genuine worry that we'll no longer be able to hold people accountable if we don't have a certain notion of agency in place. Which is why, the question was sort of phrased in terms of "dire consequences" that people might feel in response to this, your idea of ambience.

Thomas: But once again, I think that places way too much gravitas on our theories.

Nathaniel: Sure.

Thomas: As if, you know, somehow we don't have the proper theory of agency, suddenly we're reduced to being mere functions or tools of, yadda, yadda, yadda.

Nathaniel: And as if even half rate defense attorneys haven't been blaming society for the crimes of their defendants for years.

Thomas: Yeah. Yeah. But if you're an attorney and your client's in dire straights, as it were, why not run that up the flagpole and see if the jury salutes?

Nathaniel: Yeah, blame Brian Eno.

Thomas: [laughs] Or blame the judge.

Nathaniel: Airport music made me do it.

Thomas: Blame the court system.

Nathaniel: Sure.

Thomas: Yeah, on the one hand. On the other hand, if the argument works, it works.

Nathaniel: Then that would be what it is.

Thomas: If the glove doesn't fit, you must acquit.

Nathaniel: That says a lot for embodied rhetorics, right?

Thomas: [laughs]

Nathaniel: I'll let you take a sip, whet your whistle. I'll ask one more and then we'll take a break.

This actually builds on where you were going. Getting down with ambience, pause for laughter, you make an important distinction that ambience is not simply the human plus an environment. In two places, you argue, "There is no person who can then be tacked onto the environment" (2013, p. 8).

Then additionally, calling on Heidegger, which we'll get to, you write, "It is neither inside nor outside, as Heidegger says, but 'the way of our being there with one another'" (p. 9). I'm wondering if you could speak more to this idea.

My question, then, is why is this distinction so important for an understanding of ambience and for ambient rhetorics? That ambience is not simply a human plus an environment but a little more nuanced understanding of that relationship.

Thomas: Whether you're talking about materiality of bodies, a body needs a world. A body won't take shape the way it is without being in the world as it is. How can you speak of a human being somehow pre-existing that insertion into the world when the world is already part of what makes a human being a human being?

I think Timothy Ingold (2000) makes a very interesting point in his argument against a lot of evolutionary theorists who point out that early Paleolithic people, if you gave them a haircut and a shave, and put them in a Brooks Brothers suit, they walk down New York City street, no one would bat an eye.

Nathaniel: Yeah.

Thomas: Well, yes and no. Because what that presupposes is that you just have a genotype that supplies what it means to be a human being. That it's all genetics, so it's genetic fundamentalism, as opposed to being inserted into an environment and developing a way of life. If you really wanted to push that theory on its actual precepts, you couldn't get a Paleolithic person to walk down a New York City street, because they would freak out.

Nathaniel: Yeah, because...

Thomas: They would be absolutely incapable of even doing that.

Nathaniel: It's one of the chapters where he's writing about walking versus riding a bicycle.

Thomas: Yes.

Nathaniel: Or walking and riding a bicycle, not writing and riding a bicycle. That we treat walking as a function of biology, and riding a bike as a function of history...

Thomas: Bingo.

Nathaniel: ...and that these are two different narratives that don't intersect.

Thomas: Bingo. Whereas, and he does the thought experiment, if you have children who are actually born in space, and are reared there, after a few generations you will see a huge change in our body morphism.

Nathaniel: Yes.

Thomas: I mean, you have no gravity to shape the body, you're going to look different.

Nathaniel: The scene in *Wall-E*, where they're told that you and your passengers might have experienced some slight bone loss.

Thomas: [laughs]

Nathaniel: That always makes me think of Ingold, were you've got the images of the people getting progressively...and the bones get smaller and smaller.

Thomas: That's right. But to give certain evolutionist theories their due, their argument is perfectly logical. If you believe that the genotype is the expression of human phenotype, and you abstract the environment from your sense of the most basic forms of expression, then that's your logical outcome.

Nathaniel: Yeah, and it also, to tie back and this notion of ambience, genes are a force. The human being...

Thomas: One doesn't want to ignore genes, yes, that's correct.

Nathaniel: ...in an environment, wouldn't become just anything for instance.

Thomas: That's correct.

Nathaniel: I had something else there as a follow-up, but I don't know. I will take a break.

Thomas: Well actually, we were going to talk about the psychical maybe, right?

Nathaniel: The what?

Thomas: The social, or psychical.

Nathaniel: Oh.

Thomas: Newborns start looking at faces almost instantly upon being born, and they've already heard their parents' voices.

Nathaniel: Yeah.

Thomas: Their mothers, their fathers, and other people that may be around. There's a sense in which even in the womb a child is already being socialized even prior to being born.

Nathaniel: Yeah, well this is the...

Thomas: At some level.

Nathaniel: Part of the argument in...is it Greenspan and Shanker (2004), *The First Idea*?

Thomas: Yeah.

Nathaniel: Where they map on language developments in infants to language development in general, and the ways in which it looks like a switch has been flipped, but there's actually been this recurrent functional emotional signaling, is that what they call it?

Thomas: That's right.

Nathaniel: That process develops into language...

Thomas: Yes.

Nathaniel: ...which looks like it comes from nowhere, but is actually the result of this interaction.

Thomas: All kinds of interactions that build upon each other in some sort of emergent sense.

Nathaniel: As opposed to simply a gene that got...

Thomas: Well, we got the language gene.

Nathaniel: Yes, there was a rare genetic mutation, and then all of the sudden human beings could talk.

Thomas: Although no good scientist really believes that you can just simply have a language gene.

Nathaniel: Sure, sure. Right, it helps to have... Steven Pinker (1997) gets close, right?

Thomas: Eh.

Nathaniel: You give him a once for in the book too, right? There's a paragraph or two?

Thomas: Pinker's disrespect of music I find to be [pause] problematic.

Nathaniel: Sure, well he also thinks the reason we're offended by the word "shit," is because poop has germs and it, which I'm willing to buy, but you know.

Thomas: Right, and that just opens up all whole can of worms that I'm not prepared to get into, except to say that in the new book...

Nathaniel: He's making dramatic hand gestures, for those of you following along at home.

Thomas: In the new book, I am going to delve into some of these issues, including the attempt to demonstrate that morals, amongst other things, are not external to rhetoric, i.e. rhetoric isn't something that we place in the service of morals, but it's already inherent to what rhetoric is.

Nathaniel: Yeah.

Thomas: Meaning then, that for Pinker to say...make a claim such as that poop has germs in it, therefore it's revolting, already purges language of something that's inherent to it, such as certain notions of purity.

Nathaniel: Yeah.

Thomas: It's not a matter of germs solely.

Nathaniel: Yeah. Now you got me thinking about [Kenneth] Burke (1937), and his discussion of why he doesn't like CH words, because it makes him feel like he's choking when he has to say them...

Thomas: [laughs]

Nathaniel: ...which he thinks is traceable to some childhood trauma.

Thomas: Yeah, yeah. If you want to go Burke, maybe a better example would be his sense that social hierarchies are fundamentally rhetorical already, they're not exterior to rhetoric, but interior to rhetoric, meaning rhetoric is already hierarchal.

Nathaniel: Yeah. This would be something like the term, the word, "order," already suggests disorder, so the whole notion of order and disorder is already bound up in language, as opposed to external to it.

Thomas: Yeah, right. This of course opens up yet another issue about, "What do we mean by rhetoric?" and of course we can talk about different levels or gradations of rhetoric...

Nathaniel: Or intensities of it?

Thomas: ...or intensities, yes thank you.

Nathaniel: Take a break?

Thomas: Take a break...

Nathaniel: OK.

Thomas: ...driver eight.

[music playing: Morphine, "Cure for Pain"]

Nathaniel (Narration): While we take a quick break here, I'd like to thank 4Hands Brewing Company for hosting us this evening when we did the interview, 4Hands can be found at 4, the number four, 4handsbrewery.com. It is located in downtown St. Louis, Missouri. They have many fine beers, and we would invite you to check them out. Thank you.

[music playing: Morphine, "Cure for Pain"]

Nathaniel: It was a drug.

Thomas: Well, I consider music a drug anyway, so there you go.

Nathaniel: That's very Gorgias of you.

Thomas: Thank you.