

Circumnavigation: An Interview with Thomas Rickert

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Part Two: Comings & Goings

[music playing: Wilco, "Magazine Called Sunset (Alternate Version)"]

Nathaniel: Yeah, so that was a great conversation we were having.

Thomas: Oh, there's a microphone on now.

Nathaniel: Those are some great points that you made.

Thomas: [laughs] Too bad you aren't here, people.

Nathaniel: Yeah.

Thomas: Maybe you'll pick it up from the ether. [laughs]

Nathaniel: But anyway...no, but to go back to the relativism stuff, part of the reason that I like [Bruno] Latour and a lot of this related whatever is that that was something that was hard. That's something that's hard to defend about the strong defense, [Richard] Lanham's (1993) version of it. His kind of social constructivism is really hard to defend, even by the most ardent sophist.

Thomas: Right, but even there, although Lanham doesn't really delve into this, a judge is guided by rules, and precepts, and prior case histories, so again, it's not relativist, although...

Nathaniel: No, and we wouldn't accuse him of that, because...

Thomas: ...it's very discursive and social.

Nathaniel: That's the problem. It's discursive, it's social, so how do you account for other things?

Thomas: I don't think it's...I think it's easy to augment Lanham on this.

Nathaniel: Indeed, you can change just a couple of letters to strong, huh?

Thomas: There you go. There you go.

Nathaniel: No, and that's why I like it too...

Thomas: I think the deeper question is to start rethinking strong and weak defense in a way that gets us a step past where Lanham was able to go...

Nathaniel: Yeah.

Thomas: ...which was quite far, Lanham's essay was fantastic.

Nathaniel: No. Well, and with the Latour, it's rather easy.

Thomas: Agreed.

Nathaniel: When he says social, you substitute what Latour would say about that, and you're almost already there.

Thomas: Or, again you can go back to [Donna] Haraway, and...

Nathaniel: Yeah, yeah.

Thomas: ...it's just a different kind of God trick. It's the reverse God trick, but if a person who believes in absolute truth finds some objective clinical out there, a relativist finds some sort of infinitely slippery subject that could simply believe anything, and of course that's an unsituated subject.

Nathaniel: Yeah, yeah.

Thomas: It's as false as the reverse.

Nathaniel: Yeah. No, that's why it's...that's why all this work is interesting. It's an attempt to not have that conversation.

Thomas: To say that the subject is fluid, to say that the subject is ecological is not to say it's infinitely malleable...

Nathaniel: [laughs] No.

Thomas: ...or friction free, in fact the opposite.

Nathaniel: No, that's...this is what I found, the Maturana and Varela (1992), their notion of...Is it, "reciprocal perturbation"?

Thomas: Something like that.

Nathaniel: That's not absolutism, but it's certainly not relativism.

Thomas: Bingo. It's ecological.

Nathaniel: Yes, we've talked about this before, I don't know why I said that, except an ethos move...

Thomas: Look at me, I'm repeating myself...

Nathaniel: Yes, I'm repeating myself...

Thomas: ...let me cite myself.

Nathaniel: ...and I've talked to him before.

Thomas: [laughs]

Nathaniel: Could you quickly parse the difference between ambience and ecology? Because you mentioned they're not quite the same, that they're related...

Thomas: They're related.

Nathaniel: ...but they're not interchangeable.

Thomas: Right, I think the pick out slightly different things. Ecology, I think, picks out a certain kind of relational circulation, or circulatory relations, that may be emergent. They may be nonlinear, but nevertheless, certain kinds of relationality and circulation amongst all the elements making up the ecology, or the outwards. Ambience includes...can include ecology but also picks out forms of disclosure, or attention, or perception and includes those in our sense of what's going on in a situation, or what a situation is...

Nathaniel: Yeah. No, I ask this as someone who tries to get quite a bit of mileage out of Jenny Rice's work on ecology (Edbauer, 2005).

Thomas: A lot of mileage is to be gotten because that's a very smart essay.

Nathaniel: I guess in another parsing out that I've actually recently tried to put these three in relation, the relationship between ecology, ambience, and network. Because these all seem to be circulating, seem to attract the same kinds of arguments, but again, even in the *JAC* article, you draw out the difference between networks and ambience (Rickert, 2004).

Thomas: I think the network, while it's the most popular term going right now, is resonant in part because we have the Internet.

It just resonates extremely well with the notion of digitally that's wedded to the Internet. However, the Internet itself, I think, is in the mode of transcending itself into something more ambient. We've got smart houses, we've got wireless, we've got all kinds of things that start getting us beyond the immediacy of the node, and lines that connect those nodes. There's too much of a contact, and direct connection of the undergirding to the concept of the network...

Nathaniel: Well, there's a notion that the whole...

Thomas: ...that gives it a certain limit.

Nathaniel: Yeah, well the notion that the whole network is contingent on the nodes already being there, and ambience, seems to...

Thomas: You don't need a node.

Nathaniel: Yes.

Thomas: Nodes are awaiting further disclosure in a situation, yes.

Nathaniel: There's a way in which...and I think he even described it as [Mark] Taylor (2003) leaves in place, a kind of nodular subjectivity.

Thomas: Yes.

Nathaniel: It's still sort of there, holding on to the notion of a node being connected to a network.

Thomas: Right, in spite, I think, of some of his efforts to move beyond that, but I think his metaphors catch up with him, amongst other things.

Nathaniel: Yeah, it's weird, when you put the microphone on it gets more formal, doesn't it?

Thomas: Yes. But you can also say it forces us to have more game.

Nathaniel: Sure. [laughs]

Thomas: Which is just part of the fun.

Nathaniel: It focuses our attention, right?

Thomas: That's right.

Nathaniel: What are you trying next?

Thomas: That is the question.

Nathaniel: Yeah.

Thomas: Why don't we pause?

Nathaniel: OK.

[music playing: The Bird and the Bee, "Phil"]

Nathaniel: Clearly [Martin] Heidegger is a significant source both for you, but probably for the current turn or return to the material, so projects such as new materialism, feminist materialism, speculative realism, and object-oriented approaches. Given that your project speaks to these developments, but does so through and in rhetoric, what do you think rhetoric specifically has to offer that these other approaches do not?

I'm thinking specifically...or not specifically, but Byron Hawk's (2010) most recent RSA talk where he made an argument along the lines of, if object-oriented ontology is going to have any kind of future, it's going to have to become an object-oriented rhetoric, as well as your own critiques of [Graham] Harman.

This sort of object-oriented, new materialist, what does rhetoric—in addition to just finding it interesting—what does rhetoric do with that stuff that, for instance, someone from the philosophical perspective doesn't?

Thomas: One of my favorite quotes from Nietzsche, and this is a paraphrase, possibly a bad one, but catches the gist of it, "Every great intellectual advance rediscovers the sophists."

Nathaniel: I know it well. I'm thinking about getting it as a tattoo.

Thomas: [laughs] I think that applies because sooner or later you have to deal with, I think, the terrain that Diane Davis (2010) has opened up in her book, and I think it's a landmark argument. It basically says, you have to deal with affect. Affectability, and that is written into...well, she makes the argument it's written into, not just the structure of the social, but what gives rise to the social in the first place. It's the conditions of possibility for having a social. But you could extend that further, and I think must.

In some ways, I think Diane is already headed there, and you have to say, I think at some level the world itself cradles, and works through, forms of affectability. Now, these forms of affectability have different

modalities, and different bearings, and different trajectories. They don't all mean the same thing. Persuasion is a particular form of it, but I don't think you can limit rhetoric to that.

Nathaniel: Yeah. I guess pushing on that further then, I guess to ask the question again, even though I think...which is not to say that you haven't begun to answer it. What do you think an explicitly rhetorical approach, so the way in which you talk about materiality and ambience in terms of rhetoric differs from someone approaching objects or materiality from a philosophical perspective? Harman's investment in metaphysics, as opposed to relations, or something like that.

Thomas: That's tough to say, because I think Harman himself, in terms of his project, is still evolving. I don't think he's settled necessarily on anything.

Nathaniel: Yeah, sure.

Thomas: I'm hesitant to make any claims about that. Even within philosophy, philosophers rediscover the sophists in their own way. Look at [Jean-François] Lyotard. We can look at him as a latter-day sophist in many ways. Same time, philosophy can bring its own rigor to the table, and we don't want to forget this...

Nathaniel: Yes, which is certainly something Harman does.

Thomas: I think it's too easy in other words to single out these two strands. There's a philosophy strand, there's a rhetoric strand, and to pretend that we've a full understanding of what these two things are...I think that is precisely one of the questions that should be put back on the table, "What are they?"

Nathaniel: Oh? Yeah, yeah.

Thomas: "How would we differ and change them?" I think it's an ongoing question, rather than a settled issue that we can simply adjudicate here and now.

Nathaniel: Sure, yeah. Particularly because it seems like this is a moment of a lot of overlap between the two.

Thomas: Absolutely.

Nathaniel: Which, as you say, should be an opportunity to revisit the distinction, as opposed to reify it.

Thomas: Yeah, I mean, go back and look at Plato. Plato, held to be the first philosopher of writing at least, and yet if philosophy is going to differentiate itself not only from rhetoric, but from myth, across certain principles and beliefs, why is it that Plato is stuffed to the gills with myth? I mean, these questions are far from settled.

Nathaniel: Good. I only have two questions left, which we're going to take up at the next place, because they're about consequence. They're concluding kinds of questions.

Thomas: Sure.

Nathaniel: You've got two things left in your tasting thing.

Thomas: You want to just chat?

Nathaniel: Yeah. Do I turn this off then?

Thomas: Up to you.

Nathaniel: Yeah, turn it off.

[music playing: Cat Power, “Lived in Bars”]

Nathaniel: Here I am. It’s already going. I wanted to get some prep stuff, do a little radio lab thing where there’s some outtakes...

Thomas: Yeah, yeah, yeah, a little banter, a little banter.

Nathaniel: Yeah, some good banter.

[music playing: Cat Power, “Lived in Bars”]

[silence]