

## Transcript

### Digital experiential (review) of Thomas Rickert's *Ambient Rhetoric* by Trisha Campbell

**Intro:** Instead of reviewing *Ambient Rhetoric*, where review means,

- 1) the process of going over a subject again in study or recitation in order to fix it in the memory or summarize the facts.
- 2) a general survey of something, especially in words; a report or account of something.)

I'm going to offer an ambient experience, remediation, re-view and "dwelling" of the book as a kind of thing or object a user can "inhabit" momentarily. (cut out--put up written quote: "to attune rhetoric to ambience is also to change how we inhabit the field of rhetoric"), which means also to change how we inhabit and re-engage with its own scholarship and texts. In this way, my review is a tiny experience of the *Ambient Rhetoric*'s main arguments as I inhabit them. To read the book, then, would be a wholly other experience, as I seek to offer an enactment of the text through/with/around media and your collaboration.

As I offer this experience, I am trying to remain faithful to what I feel and see and hear as Rickert's intervention into a shifting away from a rhetoric of suasion and speakers, hearers and towards (write this: "ambient dispersion" make this word disperse: dispersion), entanglement, and digital environments that create multisensorial and multileveled environments. I could make a speaker-hearer argument about his text, but instead I make an offering of his text via the ambient networks we're already entangled yet, I only aim to make them more palpable.

This digital review is not meant to be exhaustive, nor to stand in for the text. It is, rather, one understanding of the book as a surrounding (written: the word ambience comes from the Latin *ambientem*...meaning "to go about" (amb-, "on both sides," "around", "about" + ire, "to go"). It encompasses various shades of meaning, but largely it refers to what is lying around, SURROUNDING, encircling, encompassing, or environing" (7).

#### **Ambience:**

Rickert begins in chapter one, appropriately titled circumnavigation, tracing the word ambience from the OED's definition --to go about--to the French aesthetic dimension--where ambience comes to mean the arrangement of accessories to support the primary effect of work, but even more than this, it begins to convey the more elusive qualities about a work, practice or place, keyed to mood or some other form of affect.

Primary examples include musical environment, and the Lascaux caves, "Ambience melds the materiality of the cave with its other properties, and all become integral to the achievement of the whole, from the base material structure to the achievement of the design to the feelings and thoughts that are evoked" (6).

Being thorough and entangled, Rickert continues to trace "ambience" citing Leo Spitzer's study which demonstrates that "a consideration of what we call ambience was already in play going back to the ancient Greeks in the expression: *periechon aer* or to *periechon* literally means "that which surrounds, encompasses. As in, not only do we see and hear by means of air, but also air itself "Sees and hears with us" (8).

Periechon also has connotations of warmth, protection, and embrace, a sense that an environment conditions and encompasses, connecting humans to the earth and cosmos. So ambience meanders into meaning that which surrounds, including feeling, mood, intuition, and decision-making.

Back to Ambience by way of music-chora

Ambient music offers a place; it creates “a sense of place that complements or alters your environment” (28). Music generates a sense of potentially nonexistent place. In this way, music becomes its own material ground, out of which emerge future musical directions. Various feedback loops arise—sonic, affective, haptic, performative—and transform the music at every moment as it emerges within, permeates, and colors the local environment.

Rhetorical activity can do the same, can take shape in this way, as kairotic. It generates its own landscape, out of which on going reshaping and revealing of the world is composed.

Ambient music evokes the concreteness of place through various experiential registers, both for audience and composer, richly enough to constitute what Rickert means by “situation”—the affective, material “disposition in which one finds oneself” (29).

There is no person tacked onto environment. There is only person-ambience, person-entangled, attuning variously. This attunes our notion of ambience another degree: Ambience is what surrounds as material, spatial, and environmental. Second, it conveys our affective investment and emplacement within environs. Third, ambience itself has a kind of agency.

#### **Attunement:**

Ambience leads to attunement, which is not additive; it is an occurrence, rather.

It is always on-going.

Rickert turns to Heidegger, who remarks that “attunements are in some sense *already there*” (10). Heidegger says –Stimmung—which translates as attunement or mood.

This is how one finds oneself in the world, *embedded*. This means our surrounding environment, our cave, as it were, is not an objective stage, on which we dance, but rather we are always co-creating in continual ambience. This means “a mind needs a body, and a body needs a world—“we do not have a body; we are bodily. We do not have a world; we are worldly” (10).

So finally, the implications for rhetoric and world are vast. If who we are—that is, “the ways the body and the local environment are literally built into the processing loops that result in intelligent action” then we can attune ourselves to a rhetoric that practices in the everyday world ambiently, which de-seats the mind, and resituates us as worldly and bodily co-responsive agents (29).

#### **Dwelling:**

to live or continue in a given condition or state: *to dwell in happiness.*

3.

to linger over, emphasize, or ponder in thought, speech, or writing (often followed by *on* or *upon*): *to dwell on a particular point in an argument.*

Rickert points out that Heidegger’s work is perhaps most relevant now as he sought to re-think subject and object dichotomies. Human beings, for Heidegger, show up only insofar as they have a world. Change in that world must include changes in human beings, too. This is the I-situation, where the I is always situated, entangled. This rethinks the Cartesian cogito of I think therefore I

am. That I am does not require that I think, rather it is enough to say “I dwell” and this dwelling makes the thinking and the being possible.

Dwelling, for Heidegger, is meant to compliment “being –in-the-world.” We need our world and other beings to “show up in the first place.” That world then hails us, conditions us, moves us. In this way, we do not gather up things in the world but are “rather gathered across them” –co-gathered.

In this way, to say “I dwell” rather than I think or I am, is to foreground the enmeshed environment in which I dwell and through which dwelling is possible.

“Dwelling” is, then, a kind of an attunement “that can generate various kinds of knowledge, in particular a knowledge of how the world gives, as it were, or how the world transcendent of human thought and power is integral to how life takes shape” (27). Yet it is more than this, too. Dwelling is not simple existence; it is a “flourishing”; as Rickert eloquently puts it “dwelling indicates active lived relations woven into complex ecologies of the worlds things and forces” This changes our relationship to place. (see chora pod) as place becomes the ambient environ, the surrounding from which we are actively entangled so that the I who dwells is only partially individuated, forming a whole through/with/ and across complex relations.

### **Rhetoric:**

Rhetoric has traditionally been “a speaker’s or writer’s self-conscious manipulation of his medium with a view to ensuring his message as favorable a reception as possible on the part of the particular audience being addressed” (35). Yet for Rickert, the speaker is always working within an ambient environment, the speaker ceases to be only the speaker, so the **intent** of the speaker is “causally irrelevant” to the effects produced in the audience. This means intent becomes just one part of a much larger co-creating environment of feelings, people, technologies, sounds, colors, shapes, forces and so on. Intent alone is insufficient.

This doesn’t mean we abandon the history of rhetoric, but that we “work anew” as rhetoric itself is part of our dwelling. So we attune to different parts of rhetoric—its material dimension, as it’s being practiced in the world. This is what Rickert sets out to do, attune differently to rhetorical notions like chora, kairos, and movement while adding new lines of thinking, like dwelling, to form the theory and practice of ambient rhetoric, which arises through these transformations. The struggle is to quite literally think of rhetoric as inhabitable.

### **Chora:**

The chora is receptacle (*hypodochēn*) and matrix (or womb, *metra*) for all that comes to be. Indeed just as intent is no longer sufficient, nor is saying my bounded off body resides here and my bounded off mind stops thinking at the edge of here. What ambience allows us is a way of seeing not only our selves inhabiting spaces, but spaces inhabiting us. This suggests a “fresh foray” into the chora, a third place, which is the “ancient attempt to think the relation between matter and activity, work and space, background and meaning” (42). It was thought of as space before Plato adopted it in the *Timaeus*, and it was often used with *topos* synonymously to refer to space and place. What Rickert wants to maintain with this history is that Chora, being the older term, was also closely associated with land, city, region or ground. So Chora is place, but it is also city and land. Rickert cites McEwen’s reworking of book 18 in the *Iliad*, where the dance and the dance floor are both choros, suggesting that Deadeulus, the first architect, personifies the realization that Place and making are conjoined” (48).

In this way, the chora is material and info-material; it both initiates and maintains in a dynamic interplay and that the human cannot be the prime facie of invention. That instead, the human and the non-human are interacting chorically, which suggests our “mind are oat once embodied, and hence grounded in emotion and sensation, and dispersed into the environment itself, and hence no longer autonomous actants, but composites of intellect, body, information, and scaffoldings of material artifacts” (43).

Which means as we interact with our media, we are *chorically* surrounded, and thus media might be better thought of as place, not medium, where place is not a static, locatable thing, but moves, too, dynamically and ecologically, both giving form and being form.

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**Sound byte:** the main argument of the book: “an ambient age calls us to rethink much of our rhetorical theory and practice, indeed, calls us to understand rhetoric as ambient. Rhetoric can no longer remain centered on its theoretical commonplaces, such as rhetor/subject, audience, language, image, technique, situation...rather it must diffuse outward to include the material environment, things (including the technological), our own embodiment, and a complex understanding of ecological relationality as participating in rhetorical practices and their theorization. More comprehensiveness, in short.

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**Conclusion:** I wanted this part of the chora to be all about Heidegger, but in Rickert’s ambient style Heidegger, ambience, the Lascaux caves,—all of it—are intertwined, co-dependent and feeding back and forth into each other throughout the book. My chora, here, is not meant to make the images/ideas/creators/concepts separate, but rather always in relation to the other actively emerging things in the chora. And so trying to make Heidegger (even if comically) his own part proved unfaithful to Rickert’s argument. Each piece represented in the chora here is constantly interacting with another piece in the chora. If you listen and watch carefully, they inter-animate each other. So, to be faithful to Rickert’s work, I conclude with a few remarks about this remarkable book. I have, purposefully, created a review with my voice and my experience of the book. This renders my voice, if you choose to listen to any part of it, as a material, integral to the experience, and the environment, of the book and your interaction with the book and this review. But my voice also exceeds me, outgrowing my intent as rhetorician, or persuasive agent. Part of me is afraid to see how and where it exceeds me, but part of me offers this as a dwelling. This review only emerges across multiple “distributed forms of mutual conditioning across many actants” and which all condition.

Yet finally while *Ambient Rhetoric* offers many things to the field of rhetoric and composition, what I think I find most important is its careful recreation of pathways and concepts, like –chora, ambience, dwelling, attunement, and kairos—from which to build future work on ambience, digital space and other emerging research interests in the field, so emerging that they do not yet have a bedrock of concepts from which to build. Speaking as a graduate student trying to find language, media and legibility with my own emergent scholarship, Rickert’s work offers a much needed repository for more emergence, more ways to practice and think through inhabitable rhetoric(s), sustainable rhetorics, as a thing that comes from the world.

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**The ambient soundspace:** This pod is dedicated to modern ambient sounds. Rickert notes in chapter 4 the very first artworks—like that of the Lascaux cave—were usually produced in spaces of the cave where sound was part of the environment. Rickert quotes Stephen Waller as

noting that cave art was placed in chambers chosen for their acoustic properties. This points to Brian Eno's famous ambient compositions, most notably the 1995 Windows startup music, which I would play for you if it weren't against copyright. Eno was known for creating non-imposing sounds or ambient sounds, which might promote calm, but do not impose upon listeners too much.

What's important about Eno's sound and even the sound of a Mac book clicking or typing is not just that it emotionally and crucially integrates sound with social and material environment. It does do this. These sounds no doubt create an emotional relationship to the computer, as well as, over time, a sense of familiarity, which does meet the ends and goals of Microsoft. However, Rickert reminds us that this attention to sound is not enough or it is too little. That indeed the sound and the design of the sound itself exceeds its users intent, and in its existence invites human and non-human agents into the interaction and ambient environment so that what results and is still resulting may be best described as a "cradling" environment that produces affects and effects without force.

Rickert ends chapter 4 by paraphrasing Eno whose ambient music is inherently political, "evoking new senses of place and how human beings inhabit it" (155).

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