

Nathaniel A. Rivers

Rhetorical Theory/Bruno Latour

*Enculturation*

Episode Five: “Responsibility” Transcript

*Music begins: John Murphy, “In the House—In a Heartbeat”*

*Sliding title: Rhetorical Theory / Bruno Latour*

*Title Slide: Episode Five: “Responsibility”*

*Block quote:*

Deeds are always done by someone, and replacing the doer of the action, the agent, with an amorphous force [...] leaves us with no basis for assigning responsibility for actions. (Marilyn Cooper, “Rhetorical Agency as Emergent and Enacted” 438).

*Slow pan over color image of courtroom.*

Narration: The common question with respect to approaches that distribute agency come down to responsibility and a specifically legal understanding of it: how do we hold people accountable? The assumption here is often that if some other, strange force is somehow responsible for our actions, then we somehow aren’t at all.

*Slow pan over color image of courtroom.*

Narration: This is a zero sum game I am not very much interested in playing. I want to use Latour, who doesn’t believe in strange forces like “society” and the “social” but rather chains of actants that can be traced and his notion of the actant and of hybrid actors to show that,

*Slow pan over color image of courtroom.*

Narration: in fact, where agency is distributed there is a surplus of responsibility. And, in line with a legal metaphor for responsibility, I argue that all actants must go on trial and that, in some limited ways, this is already what happens (even though we could probably do it better).

*Block quote:*

It is neither people nor guns that kill. Responsibility for action must be shared among the various actants” (Latour, *Pandora's Hope* 180).

*Slow pan over color image of courtroom.*

Narration: Because he is all about tracing and following the actors, Latour offers a version of distributed agency that might serve as an alternative way to bring distributed agency to rhetoric, which remains concerned with questions of motive, intent, and accountability. Latour’s reworking of the classic do guns people or do people kill people debate offers a third way to address a less stable and less possessed agency.

*Slow pan over color image of courtroom.*

Narration: In brief, for Latour the gun is not a passive receptacle of human motives any more than it is the cause of them. It is rather that a gun being held and person holding a gun are distinct from an un-held gun and an unarmed person. “You are different person,” Latour writes, “with the gun in your hand.” And, I’d argue, you are no less responsible though being a different sort of actor or agent.

*Slow pan over color image of courtroom.*

Narration: To put it bluntly, I’d put all involved on trial. Put the person, the gunman, the gun, the gun manufacturer, gun laws, gun shops, saltpeter, and many other actors who come together to create murderous hybrids on trial. If more responsibility is what we want, then we need to try more litigation. We need to follow the actors, trace all translations, and probably hire an attorney. We don’t need less complicated notions of agency; we need bigger courtrooms.

*Block quote:*

To use the word ‘actor’ means that it’s never clear who and what is acting when we act since an actor on stage is never alone in acting. (Latour, *Reassembling the Social* 46)