

Nathaniel A. Rivers

Rhetorical Theory/Bruno Latour

*Enculturation*

Episode Eight: “Lines” Transcript

*Music begins: Ryan Adams and the Cardinals, “Trains”*

*Sliding title: Rhetorical Theory / Bruno Latour*

*Title Slide: Episode Eight: “Lines”*

*Block quote:*

We can now, perhaps, solve the insoluble problem of relativism. (Bruno Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern* 96)

*Slow pan over image of train track diverging.*

Narration: Drawing lines has always been important to rhetoric: praise or blame, just or unjust, wise or foolish. Rhetoric is often choosing and doing so in conditions of great uncertainty. Rhetoric’s unique attunement to the drawing of lines is its positioning of this work as creative: lines are drawn rather than simply discovered—lines are negotiated, decided upon.

*Slow pan over image of train track diverging.*

Narration: And, as such, these lines are timely and contingent: they can be renegotiated at any time. Finally, and relatedly, lines are multiple, varied, and shifting. As Diane Davis put it during the Q&A following her paper at RSA (as part of a super panel on nonhuman rhetorics): the key is resisting the temptation to draw only one line (in this case between humans and nonhumans), but instead to insist upon drawing many lines. There isn’t one clean break between humans and animals, but many, smaller distinctions across a range of attributes. And these can shift.

*Slow pan over image of train track diverging.*

Narration: This is all crucial to rhetoric, which is about judgment and adjudication. Rhetoric's response to contingency and multiplicity is not to say that anything goes but is rather that we need to get better at deciding, to get better at drawing lines, precisely because how we draw these lines shapes how we decide. And when it comes to drawing many lines, rather than only one, Bruno Latour is rather helpful.

*Block quote:*

These differences constitute countless small divides, and there is no longer a Great Divide to take one apart from all the others. (Bruno Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern* 107)

*Slow pan over image of train track diverging.*

Narration: Near the end of *We Have Never Been Modern*, the book where Latour takes his first explicit crack at what he calls the Modern Constitution, he addresses the question and charge of relativism. That is, Latour anticipates that as he “deconstructs” the modern divide between society and nature and replaces it with collectives he will face the charge of relativism (and he did).

*Slow pan over image of full train lot.*

Narration: Latour quickly turns the tables on his would-be critics, however, arguing that relativism is in itself a product of the great modern divide between society (and politics) on one hand and nature (and science) on the other. That one big line creates a world in which lines, differentiations, and distinctions are either *a priori*, discovered, and employed or they are non-existent, made-up and ignored because, as made-up, they are of equal value.

*Slow pan over image of full train lot.*

Narration: What Latour argues is that in the absence of the great divide we have many shifting, composed, and fine grained distinctions. And these distinctions are not any less real for being composed and negotiated by collectives. Through Latour, these distinctions cannot be known ahead of time because it is precisely these distinctions, these lines, that are drawn by collectives.

*Block quote:*

In other words, the differences are sizeable, but they are only of size. They are important (and the error of cultural relativism is that it ignores them), but they are not disproportionate (and the error of universalism is that it sets them up as a Great Divide). (Bruno Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern* 108)