

### Material Rhetoric – A Frankenstein Rhetoric

All four articles assigned this week deal with texts in a postmodernist, post-deconstructionist period in which we are left to create new ways of creating and interacting with all fashion of texts from the traditional spoken and written texts contemplated since the time of the ancient Greeks (in the Western Civilization tradition) to our contemporary concept of “texts” that has expanded to embrace all forms of communication and interaction including visual (painting, sculpture, film, architecture, landscaping, fashion, ) and performed (music, theater, dance, sport, cooking, medicine, education, law, politics), in various formats from the long-standing ink and paper to digital and virtual spaces. The theme coming out of all the texts is that rhetoric can no longer solely be considered a tool by which to measure or to study effective communication, but that rhetoric must now also be considered the communication method itself. In conjunction with this concept of rhetoric not only being a methodology but the creation, as a verb and a noun, of meaning is the idea that although humans are the manufactures of meaning, our creations are beyond us. Once we have created them, we cannot restrict how they are used and interpreted by others; not in our current context of minimally shared contexts--in the context of cultures that have moved from prescribed, inherited understandings of beliefs and behaviors to dynamic, swift-moving, multiplicities of understanding and being. This is freeing and damming. We are free to create and communicate meaning without the dictates of convention, but we also cannot insist on our conception meaning to others what it means to us or that others will “use” it in the way we intended. Our rhetoric is a rhetoric of unbounded creation and, in reality, uncontrollable consequence. We our rhetoric is the rhetoric of Dr. Frankenstein.



The article I ended up focusing the most on was Wendy Hesford's "Reading *Rape Stories*: Material Rhetoric and the Trauma of Representation." It was the first article I read, and I picked it because of its title, which I misread. I assumed it would be about the experience of reading rape victims stories, perhaps even of them telling their stories. And while to some extent this article does discuss this, its primary focus is to analyze how we should understand, how we should “read,” films about rape, in particular Margie Strosser's autobiographical documentary film [Rape Stories](#), Shekhar Kapur's [Bandit Queen](#), and Mandy Jacobson and Karmen Jelincic's [Calling the Ghosts](#). Hesford does this in terms of “material rhetoric.” That term is part of her title, but early in my reading of the article I did not pay attention to the idea, assuming Hesford's focus would be to question the representability of the trauma of rape and the purpose of such a representation. These seem like legitimate questions and Hesford spends the first few pages of the article discussing concepts of historical, or material, and psychological realities and their co-existence which could be used in understanding how to “read” rape victims stories of trauma in terms of coping and catharsis. Even though I was wrong about why Hesford presents this idea of co-realities, her presentation did draw me into thinking about experiencing co-realities, that may or may not intertwine, and to question the nature of understanding of an experience. After all, we are

all familiar with a situation in which our psychological experience of an event varied from an “external” experience of the same circumstance: a photograph from a family event – when you show it to a friend they see a group of people who look similar smiling, you see yourself and remember the fight you had with your parent right before the photograph was taken, and you can still feel your anger. So with the concept of different realities existing together, I read on and slowly realized the importance of the term “material rhetoric” in the title of the essay.

What Hesford shows her reader in this essay about the interplay between individual experience of trauma and cultural scripts that help create the rape act itself as well as how victims, and perpetrators, respond to such cultural scripts, both in terms of compliance and rebellion, is masterful and enlightening regarding the individuals involved in the trauma, but even more so in terms of the representation of those violent acts in film and how these representations may take on a life of their own and convey a meaning unintended by the directors: “...the visualization of rape in *Bandit Queen* may play into the colonial idea that the Third World is a site of ‘monstrosity,’ a link that reaffirms the idea that the West is orderly and civilized” (p. 211). After this example of unintended meaning, I was beginning to understand. Hesford uses the term “material rhetoric” to refer to meaning that is created and conveyed to others over which the creator ultimately does not have control in regard to how it is understood by the receiver of the message. Implicit in this idea is the concept that the created communication is an entity unto itself. Add to this the idea that there were beliefs and assumptions about reality held by the creator of the communication that shaped her/his creation process and, likewise, there are beliefs and assumptions about reality held by the receivers of that creation that guide their perception of it. All of this is an abstract way of saying that material rhetoric is both a way of creating and perceiving meaning based on any number of socially constructed values that interact with one another during both processes. It is the vision and creation act of Dr. Frankenstein; it is the monster he generated; it is the way the



monster interacts with its environment; it is the way in which different people interact and respond to the monster, be it with flowers or torches.

