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THE MATERIALITY OF DISCOURSE AS OXYMORON: A CHALLENGE TO CRITICAL RHETORIC

Recent rhetorical theory has adopted two versions--variously idealist and relativist--of the proposition that discourse is influential in or even constitutive of social and material "reality." This idea, which underpins much critical communication scholarship, I am calling the "materiality of discourse hypothesis." This essay documents and criticizes the idealism and relativism of the materiality of discourse idea in postmodernist and post-Marxist rhetorical theories, illustrates the critique with an extended critical analysis of Persian Gulf War news coverage, and defends materialist ideology criticism as an alternative to a critical rhetoric that has become increasingly affirmative of the social order and detached from reality.

The idealists . . . thought that mind and critical reason moved the world, or, in other words, that the intelligentsia directed progress. As a matter of fact, all through history mind limps after reality.

Trotsky (1923/1991, p. 9)

THIS ESSAY is addressed to the significant and growing minority of rhetorical scholars--Marxists, feminists, postmodernists, and other critics of the prevailing social order--who came to rhetorical studies out of the conviction that rhetoric provides a rich set of analytical and explanatory tools for social critique. Indeed, the study of rhetoric, of how power, consciousness, and resistance are crafted, articulated, and influenced in and by the act of speaking, is vital to the projects of critique and social change. Yet a reminder is overdue that discourse is not the only thing that "matters" in those projects.

Caught between the Scylla of idealism and the Charybdis of "vulgar" economism or simpleminded orthodoxies, critical scholars are trying to navigate safe passage by way of a

particular theoretical hypothesis: the materiality of discourse, or the idea that discourse itself is influential in or even constitutive of social and material reality (including the lived experience of work, pleasure, pain, and hunger). In the wake of the ideological turn in rhetorical studies (Wander, 1983; McGee, 1984), a generation of scholars (Crowley, 1992; McGuire, 1990; Ono & Sloop, 1992) has crafted a "critical rhetoric" (McKerrow, 1989) with the goal of claiming and analyzing discourses as sites of struggle over power. The attempt to redefine discourse as a constitutive element of material relations--in other words, to argue for the materiality of discourse is part and parcel of the poststructuralist shift toward discourse theory.

With the materiality of discourse at their center, poststructuralist theories of discourse and power are to varying degrees anti-realist (relativist) and anti-materialist (idealist). In recent rhetorical theory, there are two versions of the "materiality of discourse hypothesis," tending respectively toward idealism, on the one hand, and political relativism on the other. In my view, each version of this theory warrants caution on the part of political critics.

Criticisms of idealism and relativism in poststructuralist discourse theory have been articulated in other disciplines, from Marxist and feminist perspectives (Alcoff, in press; Callinicos, 1989; J. Clarke, 1991; Eagleton, 1991; Geras, 1987, 1988; Hennessy, 1993; Modleski, 1991; Norris, 1990; Wood, 1986). The purpose of this essay is to situate that critique within the field of rhetorical studies and to warn critical rhetoricians who would wear the materialist mantle about the potential political consequences of accepting the idea of the materiality of discourse. This article defends the tradition of materialist, realist ideology criticism as the version of the materiality of discourse hypothesis most consonant with the project of political critique.

The essay paints a synecdochal picture of our field, taking two theorists in particular, McGee and McKerrow, as representative and symptomatic of the shift toward the materiality of discourse in rhetorical studies. Their work reveals two prevailing versions of this idea: On the one hand, we find the limited claim that discourse is material because it has material effects and serves material interests in the world. This view, while tending toward idealism, does not equate reality with discourse. On the other hand, a more radical shift is evident, away from structuralist and realist ways of thinking. On this view, discourse not only influences material reality, it is that reality. All relations, economic, political, or ideological, are symbolic in nature. This view tends toward relativism.

DISCURSIVE AND IDEOLOGICAL TURNS

The discursive turn is emblematically represented by Foucault (1980), who argues that power is a matter of shifting discursive formations rather than economic relations. Poststructuralist theories in this light seem a natural outgrowth of Althusser's (1960/1984) structuralism, which argued that ideology and its apparatuses were determining forces in social relations, warranting a reclassification of ideological outlets such as the church and the schools as "state apparatuses." This theory marked a distinct, and unfortunate, idealist shift in Marxist thinking. Clegg (1991) argues that as Althusserian (and poststructuralist) Marxists shifted attention away from economic factors and toward ideology, all previous Marxisms were erroneously discarded as crudely empiricist and economistic. As a result, materialist historical analysis fell by the way in favor of a theoretical and critical practice increasingly disconnected from the material practices of exploitation and oppression that originally motivated Marxist critiques of society and culture.

With postmodernists and post-Marxists (see Baudrillard, 1975; Foucault, 1980; Laclau & Mouffe, 1985; Lyotard, 1984; Mouffe, 1988) this turn is taken to its logical conclusion, in arguments that reject the economic and political realms as sites of struggle, in favor of a politics of textuality. Baudrillard (1975) takes this position to its extreme, arguing that people can be "oppressed by the code" that establishes relations of consumption, which Baudrillard views as more foundational to late capitalism (Jameson, 1991) than the relations of production.

Idealism and materialism as philosophical stances are more often matters of emphasis than discrete critical categories. Yet, since the late 1960s, critical scholars have foregrounded the political inflections of historical materialism, the Marxist historical method emphasizing the role

of economic forces in structuring social change and arguing that consciousness is the product of social forces. Philosophical materialism is thus aligned with a progressive or Marxist critique of existing social relations. In rhetorical studies, that tradition of critique was inaugurated by Burke's (1935/1984) analysis of the ways in which language mystifies and legitimizes capitalism (see also Schiappa & Keehner, 1991). The ideological turn was later systematically defined and defended in the field by Wander (1983,1984) and McGee (1982,1984; see also McKerrow, 1983). Wander and McGee argued that it would be productive for rhetoricians to view discourse as an agency of economic and political power, and to bring rhetoric's considerable repertoire of textual analysis skills to bear on understanding how political and economic power is mediated, reinforced, perpetuated, and challenged in the texts we study.

Since Wander's and McGee's initial forays, the ideological turn has persevered through variations and challenges (Crowley, 1992). Contributors to a recent special issue on ideology of *Western Journal of Communication* (Wander, 1993) argue various points of view within and against the ideological turn. While some authors argue that we must get past the language and logic of "oppressor and oppressee" ways of seeing (Condit, 1993, p. 186), others defend materialist critique and articulate a new (for our field) call for scholars to attend to and act on the consequences of discourses in the world outside of the academy (Andersen, 1993; Owen & Ehrenhaus, 1993; Rigsby, 1993; Wood & Cox, 1993). This latest installment in the ideology debates reveals that the ideological turn is not complete.

One argument that remains to be made in our journals is that materialist ideology criticism differs substantively from more recent postmodernist approaches to discourse. While many rhetoricians argue that postmodernist "neo" or "post" Marxisms are politically and philosophically aligned with the ideological turn (Crowley, 1992), the newer theories diverge in their basic assumptions from a materialist theory of language in ways that are disabling to critique. Thus, I would reject Crowley's (1992) broad definition of ideological criticism as "an umbrella term for any criticism that is primarily motivated by ethical or political concerns" (p. 452). Crowley adds, "This definition equates ideological criticism with rhetorical criticism, and, at the same time, frees it from necessary implication with Marxism" (p. 452). Crowley's definition leaves behind a materialist theory of communication that recognizes the importance of material forces (economic and physical) in relation to rhetorical action. Only in the "implication with Marxism" can we adequately acknowledge the legacy of materialism as the foundation of ideology criticism.

DEFINING MATERIALISM AND IDEALISM, REALISM AND RELATIVISM

In classical Marxist texts on language and culture one can discover two meanings of the word "materialist," the first suggesting that social relations and concrete, sensuous human activity are the source of human consciousness, and that human beings derive identity and purpose from their social contexts. Marx (1888/ 1978a) wrote, as "men" [sic] are products of their circumstances and upbringing, "changed men are products of other circumstances and changed upbringing" even as human activity produces changes in circumstances (p. 143). This dialectical model suggests that people must be understood as historically located and socially constituted. This idea is the starting point of materialist language theory's emphasis on the subject as a historically-situated product of discourses and relations (an idea that has been given renewed vigor by postmodernists, but which did not originate with them).

The second and broader definition of materialism consists in the idea that the mode of production, or the way in which goods are made and distributed in society, determines the social relations and forms of consciousness of any given epoch. Engels (1880/1978) summarized this position:

The materialist conception of history starts from the proposition that the production of the means to support human life and, next to production, the exchange of things produced, is the basis of all social structure; that in every society that has appeared in history, the manner in which wealth is distributed and society divided in classes or orders is dependent on what is produced, how it is produced, and how the products are exchanged. From this point of view the final causes of all social changes and political revolutions are to be sought, not in men's brains,

not in men's better insight into eternal truth and justice, but in changes in the modes of production and exchange. (p. 701)

On this view, the task of a critique of culture is to unmask the shared illusions of a society as ideas promulgated by and serving the interests of the ruling class, or those who control the production and distribution of material goods.(n1) In Marx's (1978b) words, "Life is not determined by consciousness, but consciousness by life" (p. 155). Idealism, when defined in opposition to historical materialism, refers not to the commonsense notions of wishful thinking or hopefulness about the possibility of social change, but rather to the tendency to overemphasize consciousness, speech, and text as the determinants of such change.

A materialist theory of language and ideology suited to a materialist view of history (Williams, 1973, 1977) suggests that economic forces and relations of power motivate discourses that justify, obscure, or mystify the workings of powerful interests and structures of power. Following Marx's insight that ideologies are instrumental in legitimating capitalism, Gramsci's (1971) theory of hegemony, developed in his prison writings, gives ruling-class rhetoric a great deal of credit in maintaining social order in the face of conflict and challenge. To Marxist theorists and their elaborators, ideas--or ideologies--have material consequences. This simple claim is not in itself idealist, but rather is congruent with historical materialism, which seeks to uncover the historically specific, interest-rooted motives of human consciousness rather than credit ideas as the motor of history.

Historical materialism is one version of realism, or a philosophy that insists that there is a truth independent of the individual knower or perceiver of reality (Hiking, 1990). But in contrast with a naive realism that assumes a universal reality independent of perspective, Alcoff (in press) defends, what she calls "imminent realism," which insists that truths are perspectival, and that we should privilege the truths of subordinate groups in society. For historical materialists, specifically, truth lies in relations of economic and political power (rather than in spiritual or moral principles), often obscured or selectively voiced in popular and political discourse. Realism is often understood in opposition to relativism, or a stance that asserts the reality-building function of discourse.(n2) Sometimes called social constructionism (Berger & Luckmann, 1967), unmitigated rhetorical relativism is at odds with both materialist and idealist realisms because in principle, relativism affords the critic no privileged perspectives by which to judge economic or political realities. On the other hand, social constructionism usefully challenges the idea that a given economic or political reality is natural, permanent, and transparent and argues that representations of that reality are persuasive constructs that obscure the real interests at stake and the possibilities of change. Social constructionism also challenges idealist humanism, or the idea that individual humans are agents in charge of their destiny, without regard to their place in relations of class, race, or gender or to the ways in which human action is constrained as well as enabled in ideology. These emphases provide constructionism with a productive materialist edge.

THE RHETORICIANS, PART ONE: IDEALIST MATERIALISTS

In our field, McGee has been a prominent advocate of ideology criticism, and of a particular formulation of the materiality of discourse hypothesis. For example, McGee (1982) argues for a conception of rhetoric as material and as ideological. Rhetoric is material simply by virtue of its pragmatic effects in the world; it is ideological: "a distorted structure of facts and inferences" serving "intersubjective desires" (p. 43). In another essay, McGee (1975) takes the study of ideology in a particularly rhetorical direction, focusing on how a "people" can be constituted in persuasive discourse: "From a rhetorical perspective, the entire socialization process is nothing but intensive and continual exercises in persuasion: Individuals must be seduced into abandoning their individuality, convinced of their sociality" (p. 240). McGee is making the materialist point here that social cohesion and control depend on the persuasive work of ideology, as people are socialized into participating in their social system (or, could it be argued that people are seduced by ideology into seeing themselves as individuals and giving up their sociality?). Similarly, McGee (1980,1986) insists that rhetoric ought to be studied in the context of relations of material power, arguing that to describe mass consciousness as a formal vision or a voluntary fantasy (Bormann, 1972) obscures significant aspects of ideology,

domination, and power.

A critic of Persian Gulf War news coverage, working from the assumptions of the early McGee, would notice how a people was constructed in the discourse of yellow ribbons, slogans of support, news stories about families coping with the anxiety and risks of war, and the flow of news from stories on danger and violence in the Saudi sands to stories on unity and coping on the home front. One would notice how particular ideographs, such as (liberty) were invoked and redefined in support of the war effort. One would explore the contradiction between the phrase "liberate Kuwait" and the reality of the Kuwaiti aristocratic power structure and oppressive social relations to which the U.S. was reinstating the Emir and his royal family. Or one might explore the use of such formulations as "collateral damage" as they justified real civilian casualties.

During the Persian Gulf War, the Pentagon, the Bush administration, and popular news media outlets successfully crafted a pro-war hegemony in both complex and simply propagandistic ways, despite the fifty-fifty division of opinion about the war on its eve, and despite ruptures in, contradictions in, and challenges to pro-war perspectives (Cloud, in press; Kellner, 1992). Kellner's (1992) research documents the myriad ways in which lies were successfully deployed in answer to those challenges. In addition, mythic narratives of oversimplified good and evil (for example, television news introductions framing the war as a "showdown" in the Gulf), an embedded cultural anti-Arab racism (ubiquitous representations of Arabs as terrorists), revised histories of the Vietnam War (blaming protests and the media for loss of American lives and credibility), and other strategic discourses worked to obscure the costs of the war in terms of damage and death, to delegitimize diplomatic alternatives to warfare, and to marginalize and discredit protests.

Particularly persuasive was the dislocation of conversation about the war from political spaces to emotional ones (Cloud, in press). Support group and military family news was a constant feature of Persian Gulf War coverage, surpassing in terms of minutes hard news about military strategy, hardware, casualties, and protests in a ratio of two to one on national networks, including CNN. These stories, occurring at the end of newscasts, served to "wrap up" the day's news on a note of reassurance. This reassurance depended on a particularly gendered mapping of the home front, as the role of woman as silent keeper of family unity became a trope for a coping rather than protesting national community.

A typical story exemplifying this strategy ("War of Emotions," 1991) opens with anchorperson Lynn Russell. Over her left shoulder to the viewer's right, a map of New Hampshire is framed in a box. Below it, in blocked capitals, appears the word "SUPPORT," itself both a label and an implicit command. The segment cuts to a scene in Concord, where, as Russell says, people are "coping with the war." The story moves from street scenes to interviews with women in a mall, back to houses bedecked with yellow ribbons and U.S. flags against a background of sparkling snow and azure sky, back to more interviews at the mall followed by a cutaway to a rural woman alone at home and then with a group of supporters, then finally to Norma Quarrels, the correspondent, who wraps the whole thing up: "On the home front, the Persian Gulf conflict is a war of emotions [*italics added*]--as evidenced in small towns like Concord, New Hampshire." The war of emotions is one-sided in Concord, which, as the town's name suggests, is a place of unity and mutual support, not division, critique, or conflict. Images of a white, spacious two-story house, crusty with glistening snow, yellow ribbons adorning the house and a flag waving in the breeze construct an idealized patriotism. The segment cuts to a closer view of the ribbons, yellow on white, then to a bumper sticker on a pickup truck: "I SUPPORT OUR TROOPS IN OPERATION DESERT SHIELD."

When the scene shifts from the quiet outdoor scene to the bustling shopping mall where families gather for a photo session and letter writing stint, viewers are asked to connect the positive images of patriotic domesticity with the support group effort. Dissent speaks here in a lonely voice. The segment includes the voice of a token protester, a well-dressed, young white woman, walking alone in a shopping mall, in the illusion of journalistic balance: "I think we should get the hell out of there." She is shown alone, in contrast to framing scenes that show large numbers of community members engaged in a letter writing campaign to the troops for

Valentine's Day. The report does not tell us her name or provide any information about her identity in or attachments to this community. In this mythic opposition of characters, protest is defined as the willful abnegation of community spirit and belongingness. One mother comments, "They really do need our support. I don't want them to be unsupported like the men in Vietnam felt that they were unsupported." This statement precedes the brief cutaway to the unidentified woman who speaks out against the war, as if to chastise her for potentially creating another Vietnam War with her words.

From the perspective of ideology criticism, it is clear that this kind of "yellow-ribbon" news served a hegemonic function: to frame the war in terms of family unity and emotional support, to imply that protest is inappropriate in a space of such unity and emotional support, and thus to domesticate the home front. This observation is not to deny that despite the force of nationalism during the Gulf War, many people protested against the war, deploying rhetorical resources (within the available ideological frame) of their own, reconfiguring the elements of the discourse in phrases like "Support Our Troops--Bring Them Home." But we must also acknowledge that the persuasiveness of protest was limited severely by the dominant discourse's hold on the popular imagination and on public opinion, as popular opinion polls showed increasing support for the war (near ninety percent) as the pro-war propaganda campaign wore on.

In this way, materialist ideology criticism notices that the images of the Persian Gulf War and other wars and the characterizations of war protesters are not accurate to a reality that exists outside of the text. It calls our attention to the fact that the domestication of the home front was part and parcel of a massive, real slaughter of Iraqi troops and civilians. It notices that the construction of discourse happens in strategic ways that serve powerful interests, both political and economic. While access to alternative media reports (for example, the BBC and a range of left periodicals) helped activists discover the real consequences and motives of the war, dominant media outlets rarely provided counter-ideological information or analysis (Andersen & Carpignano, 1991). Even when direct knowledge of a counter-ideological reality is unavailable, a materialist perspective holds out the possibility of extratextual reality in theory. In other words, if a bomb falls on civilians in Baghdad, and a critic is not present to see it, the bomb still did, in reality, fall.

While materialists "debunked" the nationalism of the Gulf War as the rhetorical inducement to unity and support, idealists affirmed the yellow ribbon campaign as a voluntary and positive enactment of national community, or held up some other "ideal" vision as an alternative, instead of exposing the oppressive "reality" behind the discourse. For example, popular media pundits condemned CNN reporter Peter Arnett for reporting widespread civilian casualties, accusing Arnett of attempting to destroy the unified U.S. national community (Leo, 1991). Rhetorical idealism, or the attention to how communication enacted and sustained national community, underpinned the ubiquitous appeals of the mainstream media to the flag and to the slogan "support our troops." The idea and ideal of the community and nation become more important than its motivations or consequences for people living and dying with the war--questions requiring a materialist conception of rhetoric (McGee, 1982) for answers.

Rhetorical scholars have yet to produce an idealist reading of Persian Gulf War rhetoric. However, we can get a sense of what rhetoricians, materialist and idealist, do with war rhetoric by reviewing rhetorical analyses of Nixon's November 3, 1969 "Vietnamization" speech (Campbell, 1972 a & b; Hill, 1972 a & b; Newman, 1970, Stelzner, 1971; Wander & Jenkins, 1972). Critics of this address (which was designed to discredit the anti-war movement and advocate continuing U.S. military involvement in Vietnam) did not explicitly label themselves materialist or idealist. However, Campbell (1972a) clearly represents a materialist view, contrasting the "mythical America" of peace and freedom constructed by Nixon with "nonmythical America":

Nonmythical America supports totalitarian governments all over the world. Nonmythical America is engaged in a war in South Vietnam in which it is systematically destroying the civilian population and agricultural capacity of the country it is ostensibly defending. Nonmythical

America practices a racism which makes a mockery of its mythic principles. (p. 56)

Earlier in the essay, Campbell takes issue with Nixon's account of the beginning of the war, calling readers' attention to omissions and lies. Campbell's approach depends on the materialist claim that there is a reality outside of its prevailing mythic constructions, one to which a rhetor might be called accountable.

On the other hand, both Stelzner's (1971) analysis of the speech as "mythic quest story" and Hill's (1972a) neo-Aristotelian approach reveal the limits of idealist, exclusively text-centered approaches regarding discourse so clearly motivated by powerful interests and designed to obscure or deceive. While not unmindful of Nixon's deception, Stelzner is reduced to describing Nixon's speech as a mythic quest narrative with Nixon and the American "silent majority" cast as heroes, concluding only that the speech "accomplishes some objectives" and "gains an audience and time" (p. 172). And Hill's mandate to describe the text based on Aristotle's categories and evaluate its success in terms of its effectiveness in reaching its target audience provides an even starker contrast with Campbell. While admitting that Nixon concealed his intent to keep U.S. forces in Vietnam and isolated anti-war constituents of his audience, Hill encourages critics to avoid locating the rhetorical act in its material contexts, in favor of appreciating the artistry of the speech in reaching its target audience. Hill (1972a) writes, "[N]eoAristotelian criticism does not warrant us to estimate the truth of Nixon's statements or the reality of the values he assumes as aspects of American life" (p. 385). Campbell (1972b; see also Black, 1965/1978), in turn, condemns Hill's method as producing "analyses that are at least covert advocacy of the point of view taken in the rhetorical act" (Campbell, 1972b, p. 453).

The debate over Nixon's speech constituted a premonition of the ideological turn, which, as Crowley (1992) has noted, cut against the affirmative idealism of the rhetorical tradition. McGee's (1975, 1980, 1982) essays are clearly a fulfillment of that turn, concerned with the way in which power is wielded and freedom constrained in discourse. He maintains a strong sense that there are material consequences to representation. In the ideological turn, the critic is figured as an engaged participant in social discourse, taking political and ethical stances, resisting oppression, and condemning rhetorical practices that maintain unequal relations of power. While postmodernists may claim continuity with the engaged political-critical stance, the assumptions of the postmodern turn are inimical to materialist ideology criticism. With postmodernism, the pendulum shifts back toward the idealist assumption that rhetoric, now conceived as a mosaic of cultural fragments in flux (Brummett, 1993), is all that "matters."

On first reading, McGee's (1990) most recent essay seems to extend a materialist perspective. The rhetor, he maintains, is an interpreter of culture, drawing from the heteroglossic, fragmented social space of CNN and MTV an articulation of the people that is neither permanent, stable, nor his or her own. The critic's job is, then, the task of rhetorical construction--the temporary fixing and stabilizing of discourse to reveal its location in social space and relations of power. "All of culture is implicated in every instance of discourse," he writes (McGee, 1990, p. 281), suggesting the materialist's emphasis on ideological patterns in formations of texts rather than in discrete instances (if such a thing can be said to exist) of rhetoric.

Here McGee (1990) argues (much as Campbell argued against Hill) against Leff and Sachs' (1990) text-centered approach that fails to locate a text in its ideological/cultural context for the purposes of critique. He then suggests that the stance of the rhetorical critic should be that of rhetor, taking texts that are, on their own, fragmentary expressions of culture and supplying additional premises as necessary in order to make a "text worthy of criticism" (McGee, 1990, pp. 281-283). While the task and the responsibility of the ideology critic have always been to expose ideological texts as such and to produce critical texts as acts of opposition or advocacy, McGee (1990) goes one step further to argue that culture itself is fragmentary, and that audiences are the true authors of rhetorical texts in that they assemble a meaningful whole from the fragments offered them in discourse: "In short, text construction is now something done more by the consumers than by the producers of discourse" (p. 288).

At this point, McGee's (1990) text risks embracing the flaws (from a materialist perspective) of an idealist critical stance. While acknowledging that texts cannot be understood except in relation to their contexts (a materialist argument), he defines those contexts as themselves intertextual, rather than material. So instead of discovering the economic or political interests motivating ideological discourses, the critic is reduced to describing patterns across cultural texts. Moreover, this description is likely to be uncritical of a commodified discursive space: Rather than bemoaning that "the public's business is now being done more often via direct mail, television spots, documentaries, mass entertainment" (p. 286), McGee advises us to hold our noses and dive into the swirl.

A second idealist theme in the "fragments" hypothesis has to do with the tendency to "overplay the audience" (Condit, 1990, p. 339). McGee potentially overestimates the capacity of audiences to make texts of their own from the fragments that bombard them, when, indeed, the fragments of culture often come together in stable ideological patterns and preferred meanings, as during the Persian Gulf War. In the rejection of any notion of "totalization" (McGee, 1990, p. 284), McGee argues that culture is actually fragmented and unstable: "We stand now in the middle ... of a seventy-year movement which has fractured and fragmented American culture. Contemporary discourse practices reflect this fragmentation" (p. 286). This assumption does not bear scrutiny in a world in which "postmodern" texts that, while aesthetically fragmented and reflexive, actually encode a stable hierarchical social order in a totality that incorporates moments of resistance and fragmentation (Harvey, 1989). From Nixon's "Vietnamization" speech to Bush's declaration of war against Iraq, from television coverage of the 1960s counterculture to the coverage of the Persian Gulf War, the range of popular fragments available to most people does not allow for infinite critical possibility.

Further, even if we cheerfully concede that audiences can and do perform critical readings, their moments of critical consciousness in and of themselves do nothing to challenge structures of power. Radical textual readings of romance novels or Star Trek, of game shows or Madonna, of biker culture or Oprah Winfrey or war do not undermine social relations unless those readings lead to some kind of concrete oppositional action--a successful strike, a demonstration that builds a mass movement, or other collective and effective refusal of the prevailing social order. And, the project of ideology and hegemony has been and still is the management of that conflict in the service of the dominant order (Cloud, 1992).

The "cultural fragments" model cannot fathom the interest-governed systematicity of ideological texts. If one were to follow McGee's (1990) critical model into the texts of the Persian Gulf War, it would be possible to affirm or ignore the totalizing nationalistic hype, the euphemisms ("collateral damage," "surgical strike") obscuring the impact of weaponry and the Iraqi death toll, and the almost seamless ideological narrative that convinced us that the Persian Gulf War was just and its consequences benign. Perhaps a follower of the later McGee would focus instead on the tiny cracks in the discourse, for example, rare moments in "support group" narratives in which family members acknowledged their anger and fear that their loved ones were fighting, proclaiming the discourse fragmented, and the audiences free to construct their own rhetoric of compliance or resistance. This critical perspective detaches texts from their material (rather than intertextual) contexts. It also potentially overestimates the degree to which people can achieve emancipation through discursive work on the fragments of the popular. Like neo-Aristotelian criticism, the cultural fragments hypothesis entails advocacy, implicit or explicit, of discourses that dominate and deceive. As cultural critic Ebert (1992-93) puts it, the critical emphasis on the audience tends to "substitute affirmation for critique" (pp. 743).⁽ⁿ³⁾ The affirmative tone of cultural studies also characterizes the second group of critical rhetoricians under consideration here, the relativists.

THE RHETORICIANS, PART TWO: THE DISCURSIVITY OF THE MATERIAL

Working from the insights of Foucault on discourse and power neo-pragmatist relativist philosophy (Rorty, 1982, 1989), deconstructionist methods, and post-Marxist social theories (Foucault, 1980; Laclau & Mouffe, 1985), McKerrow (1989,1991) has embraced the poststructuralist critique of totality and truth. This position argues that reality is a set of texts, or a discursive formation, rhetorically created and rhetorically altered. This view I will label

relativist, after Brummett's (1990) definition of rhetorical relativism: "the belief that what is real and true is determined only by the social, symbolic, and historical context from which the knowing human arises" (p. 82). This definition fits with broader definitions of cultural, ethical, and epistemological relativism, which, from the Sophists to Rorty, emphasize the existence of multiple, discursively articulated realities, the unknowability or impossibility of reality in itself, and the consequent difficulty in making judgments about differential cultural, ethical, or political practices. For example, some feminists, working from Foucault's insight that power is discursively produced, have argued that the harm and responsibility of child sexual abuse are discursive constructs; or in other words, that no real harm is done to the child in the absence of discourses framing pedophilia as a crime or violation (Rubin, 1984). According to Alcoff (1994), some version of realism is necessary to political judgment and action in such cases.

But in a relativist's world, reality is malleable and subject to interpretation. The critic is not in a credible position to adjudicate the truth or falsity of a discourse, or to speculate about whose interests are served by a particular set of texts. To commit oneself to any reality claim is to be open to the charges of dogma and intolerance. The critic is implicated in the structures of power under investigation, and must be reflexive about her or his own interests in pursuing a particular critical goal.

Further, power on this view can no longer be thought of as negative or repressive, and in fact to speak of oppression within this framework can no longer make sense. Instead, power is fluid, unstable, existing in shifting networks of discursive control (Foucault, 1980, pp. 92-97). In poststructuralist social theory, power exists in discursive form, or rather in discursive formations, that constitute reality itself. In this view there is no distinction between the real or material and the discursive. For this reason, the theory of discourse here is more properly called the discursivity of the material rather than the materiality of discourse. The oppositions material-ideal and real-ideological are completely collapsed into one another, so that the distinction between ideology and reality, superstructure and base, no longer have meaning. The materialist project of demystification is abandoned in the process, as examination of postmodern critical rhetorics reveals.

Although they are not, strictly speaking, rhetoricians, Laclau and Mouffe (1985) put forward a commonly cited theory of rhetoric for socialists that hinges on the discursivity of the material (Eagleton, 1991; Geras, 1987). Laclau and Mouffe argue that hegemony is the ability of groups to formulate antagonisms to the system based on articulations of "the people" in unified, counter-hegemonic coalitions, (in contrast Marxists before the "posts" have understood cultural hegemony to mean the tendency of culture to appropriate and contain oppositional moments and discourses in the ultimate service of the stability of capitalist relations; see Williams, 1977, pp. 108-114). Laclau and Mouffe explicitly reject any distinction between the discursive and the real or material. They consider themselves post-Marxists because they locate revolutionary agency in discourse rather than in the insurrectionary activity of classes with particular economic positions and interests.

They define discourse very broadly, as the whole ensemble of social relations, of which linguistic actions are only a part (Laclau & Mouffe, 1987). Later they explain, "Human beings socially construct their world, and it is through this construction--always precarious and incomplete--that they give to a thing its being" (Laclau & Mouffe, 1987, p. 89). They define their project as "anti-realist" rather than anti-materialist (Laclau & Mouffe, 1987, pp. 86-87), meaning that what they reject is the usefulness of the notion of ontological, pre-discursive reality, not the imbrication of discourse with power. Like McGee (1986), they reject the idea that the world falls into line according to some set of a priori idealized forms or concepts.

Unlike McGee, however, Laclau and Mouffe (1985,1987) completely collapse the distinction between discourse and the real. McGee (1986) is quite clear in his refusal of this conflation:

Action is doing-to the world, the chopping of trees.... There is a tremendous gulf between action and discourse, the distance between murder, for example, and the `symbolic killing' of name-calling.... In truth, the only actions that consist in discourse are performed on discourse

itself. Speech will not fell a tree, and one cannot write a house to dwell in. One can act through discourse to guide or control the meaning people see in selected representations of the world. Discursive action, however, always stands in anticipation of its consequences, an act that requires additional acts before one is clear that it ever was more than "mere talk." (p. 122)

When one lets go of the distinction between material reality and the ideal or ideological, the social structure ceases to be recognized as a set of material power relations but becomes instead a set of competing reality definitions that are unfixed, free-floating, and malleable regardless of the material circumstances in which one finds oneself. In the competition among rhetorically produced realities, there are few resources for privileging one construct over another. Further, when discourse counts as material, emancipation is seemingly possible in "mere talk," the construction of counter-hegemonic articulations of "the people." The risks of such a view are idealism (as described above), political relativism, and the endorsement of a merely descriptive critical project.

The realist critique of discourse theory has been argued by feminists (Alcoff, in press; Ebert, 1992-93; Hennessy, 1993) and Marxists (Norris, 1990, 1992). Specifically, poststructuralist and postmodernist approaches to discourse have come under fire for their abdication of critical judgment. This critique bears directly on our own field. For as Wood and Cox (1993) put it, "From the Frankfurt School to post-Marxists to other players in postmodern theory, materiality is out and discourse, as a constituting agency of consciousness, is in.... Scholars in our own field have paralleled this move" (p. 278).

Among rhetoricians, the relativist views on power and discourse characteristic of poststructuralism are most clearly manifest in McKerrow's (1989,1991b) "critical rhetoric" project. McKerrow (1989,1991b) argues for a critical practice that can encompass both a critique of domination, or the unmasking of realities obscured by ideological discourses, and a critique of freedom, or a description of what discourses accomplish without reference to an extra-textual reality. By this he means that we ought to attend to Foucault's definition of power as positive/creative as well as oppressive, power as discursively deployed, resistance as plural and localized, texts as open, and discourse as autonomous from or inclusive of economic and political structures.

McKerrow's eight principles of critical rhetoric (one of which is that discourse is material, in the relativist sense) encompass both the critique of domination (of negative power, oppression) and the critique of freedom. We need both, says McKerrow (1989):

It is the case that state power exists, is repressive, and is accessible to critique. It is equally the case that power is not only repressive but potentially productive, that its effects are pervasive throughout the social world and that these effects are accessible to analysis. (p. 101)

Like Marx (1932/1978b), McKerrow acknowledges that despite the pervasiveness and persuasiveness of ideologies, and despite the existence of exploitation and oppression, the working class and dominated groups are not powerless, but rather possess tremendous potential power against their rulers. However, what McKerrow's (1989) language obscures is the possibility that the critique of domination and the critique of freedom are mutually contradictory in the task of ideology criticism. We cannot talk about unmasking repressive, dominating power without some understanding of reality and oppression. Yet following Foucault (1980), McKerrow (1989) suggests that one cannot identify categories of oppressor and oppressed, nor can one take a stance on the truth and falsity of discourses. He states, "[a] critical rhetoric examines the dimensions of domination and freedom as these are exercised in a relativized world," (McKerrow, 1989, p. 91). Accordingly, McKerrow wants to argue for a view of rhetoric as "doxastic," concerned with the creation and maintenance of social consensus about what is real, true, and good, rather than with reality, truth and goodness per se. He maintains that the rhetor is not a free agent, as Aristotelian theory would have it, but "speaks the culture," in ways that empower and constrain her/him at the same time. The critic, then, must take up what Foucault would call a genealogical task--to describe the shifting articulations of the

discourse, to situate rhetoric within the discursive formation and the relations of power inscribed there, performing an act of textual construction that is itself rhetorical. This project of describing rhetoric as doxa finds itself at odds with a project that seeks to expose the naturalized common sense of a people as an ideology obscuring certain features of material reality.

A critical performance based on the critical rhetoric model could analyze the competing constructed "truths" of the Persian Gulf War from multiple perspectives, from Colin Powell to Iraqi civilians in the rubble after the devastation, from George Bush to anti-war protesters. But after one has sought out the voices of the war-mongers and the voices of the Iraqis and the voices of the Palestinians and the voices of the mothers waiting for their sons and daughters to return from battle, what then? Does the critique of freedom negate the possibility of privileging some of these voices over others in an act of judgment? If the discourse is the reality, would a critic of the "freedom" inherent in the discourse around the war be forced to grant the nationalistic 1991 Superbowl half-time an ontological status equal to the suffering of thousands of Iraqis as they were buried in the sand?

Most advocates of the critical rhetoric project would probably be loath to take the materiality of discourse thesis so far as to make critique impossible. For example, McKerrow (1991a) defends the project of Marxist ideology critique in other contexts, suggesting that to leave open the question of political commitment in theory does not preclude taking a political stand (albeit open to future critique) in practice. Yet, the potentially relativist consequences of the "critique of freedom" in a rhetoric conceived as doxastic are revealed in two articles, "Reality Gulf" and "The Gulf War Never Took Place," by postmodernist Baudrillard. Baudrillard (as summarized by Norris, 1992, pp. 11-31, 192-196) makes the argument that the war was not a "real" event, but rather was a hyperreal product of media construction. Norris (1992) condemns Baudrillard and other postmodernist intellectuals who adopted a relativist philosophical and textualist stance, arguing that they abdicated grounds on which to evaluate the war. The problem with the various poststructuralist intellectual movements, Norris argues, is their treatment of language and texts as entities without reference to a world we might designate as "real." We need not deny that the war seemed to television news audiences to be an "unreal" product of textual construction to suggest that the fabrication of a sense of unreality was a persuasive ideological strategy that diminished our capacity to respond critically and politically to the consequences of the war.

While Baudrillard cannot be read as speaking for all postmodernists, his stance serves as a warning buoy marking the existence of a dangerous idealist and relativist undertow in the postmodern sea. Within rhetorical studies, Ono and Sloop (1992) have noted these dangers. They accept McKerrow's call for reflexivity on the part of the critic, but warn critical rhetoricians that without a telos or guiding political project or purpose, criticism becomes a relativist, insular endeavor (see also Charland, 1991). Yet, Ono and Sloop reject the commitment of Wander's (1983) ideological turn as a dogmatic modernist project, arguing for a postmodern reformulation of telos that recognizes that truths are contingent, and scholars sometimes mistaken in their projects and commitments. While amending the relativism of poststructuralist theory, Ono and Sloop (1992) adhere uncritically to its idealism, lauding criticism as in and of itself "discursive struggle" (p. 52) that will achieve liberation from dominating discourses. Similarly, Brummett (1991), McGee (1990), and McGuire (1990) have argued for a conception of criticism itself as the transformative act rather than theorizing the action of groups to change material structures in their own discourse. Thus, Ono and Sloop advocate as one example of a transformative critical act the rethinking of the meaning of "homosexual." Ono and Sloop's suggestion is an example of identity politics, which consists of the heralding of the constitution and expression of oppositional identities as political action, in a social space presumed to be fragmented, combined with the denial that oppression has a material base in social class (i.e., that racism is not simply about identity, but is about the denial of material benefits like money and physical safety based on identity). Identity politics pervades not only contemporary critical practice but also contemporary social movements, which have often been undermined by a personalized focus on the self rather than a political focus on social transformation (Adams, 1989; S. Clarke, 1991; Kauffman, 1990; Smith, 1994).

What a defense of the ideological turn offers, in contrast, is the insistence that it is not only discourses and codes from which many people need liberation. A politics of discourse, even where the project is grounded in the critic's commitments, assumes that those who are oppressed or exploited need discursive redefinition of their identities, rather than a transformation of their material conditions as a primary task. The project of ideology critique, modernist as it may be, (n4) is the only critical stance that suggests discourse may justify oppression and exploitation, but texts do not themselves constitute the oppression. In other words, when one assumes either that historical agency lies with texts (idealism) or that textuality is all there is (relativism), one risks leaving behind the project of critique. There is a difference between the 150 thousand Iraqi casualties of the Persian Gulf War and their discursive construction as "collateral damage," "terrorists," or "human shields." No doubt, the constructions have persuasive force, but cannot be regarded as being as real as the dead and wounded people. This acknowledgment is necessary if we are to be able to privilege politically the voices and realities of people who are, in some real way, oppressed. Hartsock (1983) argues for crediting the voices and standpoints of those who are exploited and oppressed with more ontological significance and political truth than those of the dominant culture. In other words, it is important for, the critical rhetorician, as for any critical person, to seek out counter-ideological information and perspectives whose contradictions with the prevailing constructions of "reality" expose those constructions as mystification.

The alternative is the aestheticization and depoliticization of political struggle. Farrell (1993), in the recent Western symposium on ideology, writes.

The site of struggle in the academy has been relocated to a realm entirely interior to texts.... Rhetoric, that practically conscientious discourse of struggle and conflict, has been aestheticized.... The cult of textuality has had the effect of blinding many of us to and also insulating many of us from the places where real material grievances are stored and sometimes lost. (p. 149)

With the poststructuralist turn as it is represented by McGee (1990) and McKerrow (1989,1991b), we may no longer have a stance from which to perform the still-relevant task of rhetorical-ideological criticism. In the acceptance of a relativist world view, a critical rhetoric that loses sight of the material realm threatens to render critical judgment inconsequential.

THEORIES HAVE CONSEQUENCES

This article has argued that there are two problematic versions of the "materiality of discourse" hypothesis: one represented by McGee (1990), McGuire (1990), and Ono and Sloop (1992) stating that rhetoric, language, and culture transcend and determine material relations of power (idealism), and another represented by Laclau and Mouffe (1985), McKerrow (1989,1991b), Baudrillard (1975), and Foucault (1980) suggesting that rhetoric, language, and culture constitute reality and that therefore there are no ontological or epistemological grounds for moral or political critique (relativism). A third way, the way of the ideology critic, avoids relativism and idealism while acknowledging the persuasive force of rhetoric in history.

Those who will label the call for a return to pre-poststructuralist frameworks impossible, given that we live in a "post-poststructuralist" historical moment, assume (in idealist fashion) that poststructuralist and postmodern theories are historical determinants rather than being ideological expressions of late capitalism, as in Jameson's (1991) formulation. German (1991) argues that behind the influence of poststructuralist and postmodern theories "is the [wrong] idea that the society in which the ideas of socialism and communism flourished is itself dead or dying: consumption is the key, the working class is disappearing, collective action is a thing of the past" (p. 40). Harvey (1989; see also Schiller, 1991) provides much evidence that capitalist and neoimperialist power relations, far from being dispersed, disabled, or otherwise fragmented, have extended and deepened their reach and strength, and that therefore the task of ideology criticism on the classical model is still vital.

This is not to say that ideology criticism should remain uninformed by its encounter with recent rhetorical theory and criticism. McKerrow (1983) calls for a "rhetorical conception of ideology"

that can account not only for economic determination of ideas but also for "the possibility of human intervention in the progress of history" (p. 200). However, an emphasis on the individual human agent should not obscure the ideological power of dominant economic and political interests in structuring, framing, and setting the limits for rhetorical action. One way for the materialist to acknowledge human action is to conceive of rhetorical acts as strategic deployments of symbolic resources within an ideological frame.

To mitigate against dogmatic and simplistic approaches to texts, ideology critics might also accept the poststructuralist impulse to acknowledge complexity where it exists, in addition to the insights that collectivity and meaning are rhetorical processes, and that much of human experience is textual, strategic, and rhetorical. In particular, attention to the ways in which some truths (e.g., about sexuality, drug addiction, mental illness, and other formations) are constructs that function persuasively and even coercively is an important extension of the task of ideology criticism. Yet, we ought not sacrifice the notions of practical truth, bodily reality, and material oppression to the tendency to render all of experience discursive, as if no one went hungry or died in war. To say that hunger and war are rhetorical is to state the obvious, to suggest that rhetoric is all they are is to leave critique behind.

Critical rhetorical theory's easy adoption of poststructuralist ideas entails the evacuation of the critical project as elaborated by Wander (1983) more than a decade ago:

An ideological turn in modern criticism reflects the existence of crisis acknowledges the influence of established interests and the reality of alternative world views, and commends rhetorical analyses not only of the actions implied but also of the interests represented. More than 'informed talk about matters of importance,' criticism carries us to the point of recognizing good reasons and engaging in right action. (p. 18)

In light of a critical project geared toward the emancipation of real people engaged in struggle, we would do well to herald the activist turn (Andersen, 1993) and in our critical practice, to retain notions of the real; of the material; and of the structured, stable, and dominating. For without these, any claims as to the "materiality of discourse" will be oxymoronic indeed.

ENDNOTES

(n1.) Classical formulations of the relationship between the economic and the ideological (base and superstructure) were rarely as simplistic as popular stereotypes have it. Trotsky (1923/1991) argued that the relationship between culture and ruling class interests is not always direct or obvious, suggesting that it is only in historical perspective that movements in art and culture can be understood and evaluated as a product of its social, economic and political contexts. For this reason Trotsky opposed the Stalinist commissioning of "politically correct" socialist realist art. See Williams (1973) for a rehabilitation of the base-superstructure model.

Critics of materialism sometimes assume that it was materialist philosophies of discourse (rather than the material conditions of Stalin's rise to power) that led to Stalin's tyranny, which seems to me not to follow. My defense of materialism should in no way be read as a defense of Stalinism.

(n2.) The debate over rhetoric and epistemology has been the site of much argument over the merits of realism and relativism in rhetoric. See Condit (1983) for a summary of this debate; also Cherwitz and Hikins (1986,1990) and Farrell (1990).

(n3.) Ebert is writing about "the depoliticization of cultural studies" (see Grossberg, Nelson, & Treichler, 1992) and the work of Fiske (1986,1987), who like McGee theorizes the oppositional potential of audiences engaged in against-the-grain readings of popular texts. Ultimately, such arguments neglect that polysemy is a primary feature of hegemonic texts that can simultaneously acknowledge and recuperate resistance. Allor (1988), Biocca (1988), and Condit (1989,1990) make versions of this argument.

(n4.) Critics who fault the philosophies of modernity for their affiliation with the projects of positivism, humanism, and imperialism seem to forget that modernity also has given rise to traditions of anti-imperialist, anti-humanist critique (notably Marxism), as well as to concrete, massive struggles against the forces of capitalism and imperialism. See Habermas (1986,1987) for a defense of critical modernist rationality against postmodernism and poststructuralism.

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