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Retinking the Great Divide:
A Rhetorical Study of Orality, Literacy, and
Human Experience

“human consciousness- as expressed in speech and images, in self-definition and mutual designation...is the authentic locale of the determinant politics of being...What men and women are born into is only superficially this or that social, legislative, and executive system. Their ambiguous, oppressive birthright is the language, the conceptual categories, the conventions of identification and perception which have evolved and, very largely, atrophied up to the time of their personal and social existence. It is the established but customary subconscious, unargued constraints of awareness that enslave.”

-Michael Foucault, *Archaeology of Knowledge*

My experiences, rather than being transcendently original or unique, seem to be part of an enormous cultural metamorphosis. Like millions of others, I have been directed to enter and engage in a world where I must learn to feel as comfortable out there in cyber space, on the other side of my electronic-reality window, as I do living in the material world. My mind, like yours, needs to be suited up in “cyberwear”¹ and we need to understand how to float, swim, and navigate through the oceans of the electronic realm.

Our technologizing of the world has not only drastically been changing the way we live, work, and play but also the rhetoric that we employ within it to communicate with one another. “Cyber space” and “virtual reality” have become commonplace descriptors of social forms where people do not have to live, meet, or work face-to-face in order to develop or maintain significant social relationships (Gackenbach, 227). We no longer only meet “in person” for important discussions or send hand written letters to loved-ones for reception weeks later. Instead, today, we talk into cameras attached to telephones to close multi-million dollar business mergers and send instantaneous email messages that may exceed the length of even *War and Peace*. Televisions bombard our senses with advertisements promoting products that range from food to vacations and the computer screen is such a common, everyday machine that it absolutely must be mastered in order to compete in the contemporary working world. (In fact, one can not even check out a library book without computer knowledge due to the conversion to online database catalogs.) Our rhetoric has obviously been continually changing with time and

technology. However, our inquiries into the concurrent changing human consciousness and sub-consciousness that results from these new human experiences have not been pursuing advancements in coordination with these changes in rhetorical practice. So, in order to expand our hypotheses and theoretical performances for the ever-changing mass-mediated cyber-age, we must reinvestigate, critique, and deconstruct contemporary rhetoric's roots in the traditional literacy/orality binary of consciousness.

The privileging of literacy over orality is prevalent within numerous dominant rhetorical texts.² Throughout traditional histories of rhetoric, orality and literacy have been systematically defined as opposing forms of rhetoric that possess opposite characteristics. Orality has been defined within this system as rhetoric shaped by *mythos*; *mythos* being both mythology and the pattern of meaning and valuation expressive of basic truths and enduring apprehensions of a people's historic experience characteristically expressed and disseminated through a medium of high symbolism (as poetry). In opposition to orality, literacy has been defined as rhetoric shaped by *logos*; *logos* being "rational"³ argumentation based on logical proofs. Through the use of these divergent definitions, the two forms of rhetoric are defined as distinct activities, with one happening in the absence of the other or even to the exclusion of the other (Bakker, 7). Scilicet, clearly separating orality from literacy creates the assumption that certain mental operations, specifically an elaborated syllogistic logic and the introspection or critical distance presumed necessary for such logic, are not possible within an "oral" or "mythic" consciousness (Jarratt, 31).

This opposition of orality and literacy then leads to a disparity of importance between the two forms of rhetoric and the preference of literacy over orality. Literacy is often positioned as the more advanced, therefore the better form of rhetoric. In his essay, *From Hero to Citizen: Persuasion in Early Greece*, K.E. Wilkerson demonstrates the opinion that literacy is superior in advancement to orality through an analysis of Homeric epic poetry. He first labels literacy as the "sophisticated rhetoric" (22) and then proceeds to criticize orality for what he considers to be its lack of "secretiveness" (24)⁴, "instructive value" (23), and "complex development" (27).

Wilkerson also wrote that the arguments contained in orality are “arguments only in the most rudimentary sense (27)” due to their appeals to mythos rather than logos. With this essay, K.E. Wilkerson emphasizes his idea of the “lacking” of orality as compared to literacy

Several other scholars who study rhetoric and Classical Greek society also exhibit the belief that literacy is a more advanced form of rhetoric than orality. Similar to Wilkerson, Michael Naas described orality as “lacking.” Naas explains that orality, such as that of Homer, is lacking Aristotle’s third form of artistic proof, the logical proof and as a result lacks “what is logical, probable, apparent, or likely” (137). Kevin Robb labeled literacy as “progress” (125), and Jean-Pierre Vernant called the time period when orality was the dominant form of rhetoric the “pre-rational” centuries. Moreover, Walter Ong wrote that “...without writing, human consciousness cannot achieve its fuller potential, cannot produce other beautiful and powerful creations. In this sense, orality needs to produce and is destined to produce writing (literacy)” (15). Apparently, that orality is lacking in some way in comparison to literacy and that literacy would hence be considered as superior to orality is a widely held opinion.

By positing literacy as the superior framework for rhetoric, orality’s existence as a form of rhetoric becomes diminished. Wilkerson demonstrates how cultures eliminate or diminish poetry as a guide for educating citizens with his claim, “By the end of the fifth century, manuals on the art of rhetoric were readily available in Athens, and in the most significant development, rhetoric was well on its way to replacing poetry as the mainstay of educational discipline” (20)⁵. Wilkerson argues that poetry/orality was not sophisticated enough as a form of consciousness to educate the citizens of late fifth and fourth century Athens, and that rhetoric as a literate form of consciousness was sophisticated enough. Extending this separation to modern day education, William A. Covino and David A. Joliffe also exclude poetry as a form of rhetoric. They claim that, “rhetoric is not poetics...” but rather a related field of language (8). With such exclusive definitions, these scholars strip poetry and orality of a great deal of its existence as a method of educating citizens to live well in the world that they are faced with living in. However, with

today's new technologies, we are faced with yet another paradigm shift in communication, the electric paradigm shift (i.e. internet, email, instant messenger, etc.), which warrants a rethinking of how we live and learn through symbolic activity in a cyber/electric culture.

Thinking within the binary construct of literate cultures as superior to oral cultures restricts the human mind and reduces the human experience of language. In general, the subordination of orality ignores the great extent to which aesthetic experiences⁶ affect the human consciousness and interrelate a social community. Francis Hutcheson, whose treatise *An Inquiry Concerning Beauty, Order, Harmony, and Design* significantly begins with an epigram from Cicero's *De officiis*, argues that philosophers who deny the finer pleasures discovered through the internal sense fail to recognize the true spiritual quality that undergirds human life (33). In his work *Inquiry into the Human Mind*, Thomas Reid echoes this concern in arguing that philosophical writings such as those of Hume have subordinated the common sense that truly guides human affairs to artificial strategies of reasoning that do little to promote the public welfare (99-101). Thomas Sheridan as well contends in *A Course of Lectures on Elocution* that there is danger in allowing written language to achieve uncontrolled domination over the spoken word and asserts that rhetorical theory in the modern era has encouraged mental processes that are unconsciously directed toward the artificial as manifested in writing as opposed to the natural quality of oral speech (Agnew, 10-11).⁷

This idea that writing has in some cases fostered a philosophical community removed from the concerns of real life has widespread consequences for rhetorical theory because poetics and orality are of intrinsic value in the definition of self and the expression of personal experiences in any age be it oral, literate, or electric. In his work concerning philosophy and rhetoric entitled *Philosophy and the Return to Self-Knowledge*, Donald Phillip Verene argues that philosophy, a tool of memory aimed towards self-knowledge, must maintain a relationship with poetry and myth in order to keep in touch with the "root meanings and functions of language." This relationship is intricately important in the process of human self-realization in light of the

understanding that “The context for thought is supplied by the language of the narrative, the rhetorical forms of the oration, and the tropes of poetry (xvi).” In other words, philosophy and thought require both literacy and poetry, a chief form of orality, to accomplish self-knowledge. This key use of poetry in the text emphasizes the importance of orality not only in the realm of rhetoric, but also in the study of philosophy and thought.

Poetics and orality can also be useful in helping to understand technological changes of society. Carrie Noland’s work *Poetry at Stake* reiterates the important need for placing orality and poetry in rhetoric by arguing poetry’s pertinence, its impact on and implication in the formation of cultural practices both in the past and especially in the modern technological age. She advocates the existence of “extensive ties, both practical and epistemological, linking human evolution and modernization to poetic forms of subjective expression” (7). And, she agrees with the French poet Apollinaire that “the technological was already presupposed by the compositional dialectics of the poetic text” (4) and that poems both nourish and draw sustenance from the realm of the mechanically reproduced”(7). Noland’s research demonstrates clear connections between the technological development of society and the resulting poetic/oral expression of the changing times through analyses of poets from Rimbaud to contemporary performance artists as Laurie Anderson in order to demonstrate orality’s important social role in a cybernetic rhetorical world.

Poetic theorists and poets themselves likewise understand orality’s wide-ranging significance in the human experience. Theorists Frederick A. Pottle and Paul Zumthor both realize the potentialities of poetry. Frederick A. Pottle wrote that he believes that the poetic is not merely either printed words or recited language, but can even consist of the words held in the consciousness but never uttered (63). He contends that during all of our waking or dreaming life we are engaged in the poetic activity by which our mind expresses itself (63). Accordingly, Paul Zumthor articulated the need to have an interest in understanding orality as a result of the fact that writing stays put and stagnates while the voice flourishes and provides human language with its “absolute dimension”(210-227). It is through orality that the human imagination and creative self-

expression takes form. Influential poets such as William Carlos Williams and Dylan Thomas have conceived of poetry as the freedom of language. Williams wrote that he perceives that rhythm and measure of verse allow human language to escape directly from the words that restrict it and return to the “tune” in the mind (Scully, 71). And, Thomas perceived that “one of the arts of the poet is to make comprehensible and articulate what might emerge from subconscious sources; one of the great main uses of the intellect is to select, from the amorphous mass of subconscious images, those that will best further his imaginative purpose, which is to create the best poem that he can (Scully, 191)”. Viewed from these perspectives, the binary’s subordination of poetry and orality to literacy restricts expression of the interior self which is obviously an integral part of the individual human experience in literate, oral, and cyber cultures.

More specifically, the binary which privileges literate cultures and subordinates oral cultures is dangerous in that our contemporary world has become “electric”⁸ and is no longer dominated by either the printed or oral word alone. Today, through advances in technology, our world has become mediated and constructed of a fusion of orality and literacy which has been labeled by Kathleen E. Welch as “electric rhetoric”. Electric rhetoric is that technological rhetoric with which and from within which modern individuals interact on a daily basis in the form of computer screens, televisions, videos, and much, much more. It demands the human mind to continuously perform as an instant information-processing device that can simultaneously interact with sight, sound, and touch. This electric rhetoric subsumes the human consciousness and subconsciousness into a universe of electronic signals where we must learn to “exhale as well as inhale in the datashpere” (Leary, 4). Our rhetorical worlds are rapidly changing into digital realities that require humans to interrelate orality and literacy at the same time rather than separately as enforced by the binary.

In her book entitled *Electric Rhetoric*, Kathleen E. Welch performs a rewriting of the history of rhetoric that emphasizes the current need for constructing new rhetorical theories of orality for the present and future mediated ages due to the profound changes in writing and

discourse brought about by electric forms of communication. She argues that technology is a combination of orality and literacy with which humans interact on a personal daily basis. Though technology like computer screens are most often read and could hence be considered a form of literacy (requiring a literate mindset), the computer also demonstrates nine characteristics traditionally attributed to orality by Walter Ong in his book *Orality and Literacy*.⁹ As a result, Welch contends that new technologies such as computers can not be labeled as either oral or literate separately and hence must be understood from a new rhetorical perspective.

Reiterating the need for further development of theories to help the human consciousness better understand the highly technical world in which we live is the works of Paul Berger, Jayne Gackenbach, and Timothy Leary. Paul Berger calls for new consideration of the human consciousness due to the current human state of the “homeless mind” with its inability to interpret all of the information generated in the technological communication age as a result of individuals’ reluctance to admit ignorance of the current era. He views the problem with the current state of consciousness to be that modernity is assumed to be not only distinctive but also superior to prior ways of living and that a large number of individuals presume that they know authoritatively what technological modernity is all about (24-40). In her book, *Psychology and the Internet*, Jayne Gackenbach presents the idea that technology forces society to reevaluate the state of its consciousness in order to evolve with changes in communication. She wrote, “As a society we pay a price for devoting so little attention to our own technological history. Part of that price is we regularly confuse the difference between one-way and two-way communications technology. And in doing so, we misunderstand the dynamics between people and new technology”(15). Lastly, Timothy Leary’s work *Chaos and Cyber Culture* argues that we need to “cure the current apathetic, torpid television addiction” by breaking down the chaos created by cyber space through a greater democratization of future cyberscreen politics (18). With the present human consciousness unprepared and unable to fully comprehend the new technologies being developed everyday, a new way of thinking about the world around us must be perceived. But, in order to

create and extend contemporary rhetorical theory for electric rhetoric, we must now deconstruct the traditional binary of the Great Divide that has reinforced the subordination of orality to literacy.

Though Walter Ong may not have set out to write his work *Orality and Literacy* with the intent of generating a “Great Divide” in the study of rhetoric¹⁰, this text has provided one of the central theories of separating literacy from orality by means of the designation of different psychodynamics to each form of rhetoric.¹¹ Research conducted in recent years has portrayed that there are certain basic differences between the ways of managing knowledge and verbalization in cultures of dominant orality and in cultures based in literacy. Consequently, many rhetorical scholars believe that oral cultures and literate ones have very different mindsets that can be distinguished by means of descriptive psychodynamics. This theory correspondingly assigns different psychodynamics of thought and expression to both literacy and orality. In turn, orality and literacy have been established as distinctly separate forms of rhetoric.

According to this theory, orality is typically characterized by at least nine psychodynamics¹². The main nine psychodynamics are: 1)additive, 2)aggregative, 3)redundant or “copious,” 4)conservative or traditionalist, 5)close to the human lifeworld, 6)agonistically toned, 7)empathetic and participatory, 8)homeostatic, and 9)situational (Ong 31-77). Orality is additive in that it supposedly lacks the linguistic structure of literacy and continually uses the word “and” in order to link events and ideas together. Oral cultures are aggregative and redundant because they use adjectives rather than analysis to describe people and they repeat thoughts already presented to the audience several times. As conservative and close to the human lifeworld, orality repeats information of the past in attempts to preserve knowledge as well as passes along explanations of real life trade skills. Orality is agonistically toned by its enthusiastic use of audience challenging scenarios and it is empathetic due to its continual identification of the rhetor with the audience. Finally, orality is homeostatic and situational through its emphasis on present

conditions and connections to the real live circumstances of the audience. Clearly, each one of these psychodynamics helps to establish the certain criteria for rhetoric to be labeled as orality.

This theory then characterizes literacy by six different psychodynamics. The six psychodynamics are: 1)analytic, 2)objectively distanced, 3)abstract, 4)autonomous discourse, 5)back-scanning, and 6)metalinguistic (Ong 31-117). Literacy is analytic in that it questions attributions of objects rather than simply using adjectives as in orality. It is objectively distanced because creators of literacy have the ability to continually proof-read and edit their work. Literacy has the capacity to be abstract because the readers of literacy have the ability to continually re-read theoretical arguments in order to grasp them while they do not have such an opportunity with orality. Literacy is also marked by autonomous discourse in view of the fact that literate texts cannot be directly questioned or contested as oral speech can be because written discourse has been detached from its author. Lastly, literacy can be characterized by back-scanning and metalinguistics since authors of literate works have the ability to prevent redundancy in their texts and to use more complicated or less “everyday” language. All of these psychodynamics specifically set literacy as a form of rhetoric apart from orality.

However, this theory created to separate literacy from orality can actually be generally deconstructed by using the categorized psychodynamics to demonstrate how the two forms of rhetoric are similar rather than different. Although orality and literacy can be considered as different mindsets for rhetoric within certain cultural situations, there is room for interpretation of the psychodynamics that allows for these separated psychodynamics to be successfully applied to both of the forms of rhetoric in order to break out of the restricting thought binary as called for by today’s electric rhetoric. As a general example of the possibilities and implications that psychodynamic cross-application provides for contemporary rhetorical insight, we will apply orality’s psychodynamic of conservative/traditionalist nature¹³ to both orality and literacy to reveal that orality and literacy are not necessarily as distinctly opposing forms of rhetoric as they are currently believed to be.

Orality's psychodynamic of being conservative and traditionalist illustrates how orality is similar to literacy. For orality, this psychodynamic addresses the idea that due to the lack of written knowledge, the people of oral cultures, such as that of Ancient Greece, preserve and repeat knowledge through orality (Ong 41). A conservative mindset is then established due to the repetitiveness of ideas and the resulting lack of experimentation in oral rhetoric. Yet literacy is conservative in its own right as well. Several literate texts reiterate old, already accepted ideas (as evidenced by Aristotle's *On Rhetoric*) as do oral ones. Though literacy may potentially not create the same traditionalist mindset as orality, it still has the same tendency to be repetitive and conservative (Ong 41).

Orality's traditionalist and conservative tendencies are illustrated in Homer's *Iliad*. One important belief of the Greeks that was continually reiterated in orality was the belief in the importance and power of ethos. For instance, at the beginning of the book, Agamemnon is persuaded to rearm his troops by a dream presented by the trustworthy character of Nestor. In Book II, ~~as quoted earlier in this paper~~, Agamemnon persuaded the elders to begin arming the sons of the Achaians by means of his personal credibility alone. Then, Nestor again used his credibility as an elder to persuade Agamemnon to battle. Nestor commanded, "Most noble son of Atreus, Agamemnon king of men,...let us go thus in concert through the wide host of the Achaians, that the speedier we may arouse keen war" (31). And Agamemnon followed his word, "So spake he and Agamemnon king of men disregarded not. Straightway he bade the clear-voiced heralds summon to battle the flowing-haired Achaians" (31-32). The *Iliad* also details how Iris is able to persuade men through her admired ethos as a goddess. For example, in Book II, Hector follows the commands of Iris simply because he reveres her as a goddess.

So spake she, and Hector failed not to know the voice of the goddess, and straightway dismissed the assembly, and they rushed to arms. And the gates were thrown open wide, and the host issued forth, footmen and horsemen, and mighty din arose (42).

Similar passages can be found throughout the entire epic poem and each narrative demonstrates the repetitiveness of the Classical Greeks' emphasis on ethos in orality

Another example of the conservative and traditionalist psychodynamic of orality can be found in the *Iliad*'s reiterating theme of how the gods control human lives. In Ancient Greece, the gods were worshipped as the powerful directors of life (*Preface* 170). To continue the following of this traditional belief, the *Iliad* portrayed the importance of the gods through orality. For instance, when king Agamemnon's men desire to stop fighting, he tells them that they can stop if they want because he knows that he will still win because he has "Zeus, lord of counsel" on his side (6). Then, in Book II, Zeus is depicted as losing sleep over his decision on how to give honor to Achilles on Earth,

"Now all other gods and chariot-driving men slept all night long,
only Zeus was not holden of sweet sleep; rather was he
pondering in his heart how he should do honour to Achilles and
destroy many beside the Achaian's ships" (19).

Later, in Book XV when Zeus awakens from his sleep with Hera, he bids Apollo to revive Hector and restore the fortunes of Troy (266). In each narrative of the *Iliad*, the gods are portrayed as the rulers of the world who have the power to dictate and run human affairs on Earth. By continually reiterating the power of the gods, the *Iliad* demonstrates how orality can be conservative and traditionalist in order to preserve accepted knowledge from the past.

Still, this psychodynamic is not unique to orality for literacy is conservative and traditionalist in its own way too. Though it has been believed that literacy frees the mind from conservatism by taking on the task of memory work, the fact still remains that the literacy itself tends to be conservative (Ong, 41-42). In Chapter 5 of *On Rhetoric*, Aristotle presents the argument that happiness is the aim of life and he lists several different conceptions and constituents of happiness such as prosperity, health and beauty (24-29). These arguments are obviously not radical new ideas concerning happiness, but rather are founded in the widely held common beliefs of Aristotle's audience. He used conservative ideas of happiness in Chapter 5 to

support his views on rhetoric. Likewise, in Plato's *Phaedrus*, conservative ideas are used to present new concepts to the reader. In the dialogue between Socrates and Phaedrus, Socrates employs the traditional use of mythology in attempts to relate his abstract ideas. His myth of the soul as a charioteer with two horses, though a new myth in and of itself, is conservative and traditional due to its qualification as a myth and its exemplification of the common belief that mythology is a useful tool in the education of others. Quintilian also used traditional and conservative ideas in his literacy. In *Institutes of Oratory*, Quintilian repeated several already accepted views of rhetoric similar to Cicero and Aristotle.¹ He reiterated the following: 1) A speaker must have a high moral character, 2) It helps if the speaker has knowledge of a broad range of subjects, and it is imperative that he knows the subject on which he speaks in-depth, 3) He stresses the importance of the ethical appeal (*auctoritas*), 4) Arrangement of the speech depends on the occasion, and 5) He sees the importance of the Greeks as sources (even though they do receive their share of criticism). Evidently, literacy can use conservatism and traditional thinking as can orality.

Furthermore, the literate *imitatio* that occurred during the Renaissance reinforces the application of orality's conservative psychodynamic to literacy. Although sometimes indebted to medieval culture, renaissance rhetoricians most frequently echo the writers of Greek and Roman antiquity such as Plato, Aristotle, Cicero, Quintilian, and Tacitus. A number of dissertations were produced imitating ancient arguments concerning political life, philosophy and truth, among them the *Art of Rhetorique* (1553) by the English statesman and writer Thomas Wilson (1525?-81), the *Art or Craft of Rhetoryke* by the English schoolmaster Leonard Cox (fl. 16th cent.), and treatises by Pierre de Courcelles (fl. 16th cent.) and André de Tonquelin (fl. 16th cent.), both French rhetoricians. Also, translation is one branch of renaissance *imitatio* in that it is an attempt to recover the past for the present. These translations took the form of reproductions of key

¹ These similarities can be found by comparing Aristotle's *On Rhetoric*, Cicero's *On Oratory & Orators* and Quintilian's *Institutes of Oratory*.

rhetorical texts and handbooks such as Aristotle's *Rhetoric*, Plato's *Gorgias* and *Phaedrus*, as well as Cicero's *Dialogus de oratoribus* (Kennedy, 271). By copying and extending upon the rhetorical ideas of the ancient Greeks, the rhetoricians of the Renaissance were participating in a continuation of conservative and traditionalist ideas by means of the written word. Consequently, literacy and orality can both be classified by the psychodynamic of conservatism and traditionality and it can be perceived that there are no clean cut lines between the characteristics of orality and literacy.

This same theory can also now be more specifically used to demonstrate how our electric rhetoric can no longer be understood from within either a strictly literate or oral culture. Although orality and literacy can be understood as distinct mindsets for rhetoric in certain cultural situations that necessitate a differentiation in order to further understanding of either form, our cyber culture provides no such necessity. Instead, cyber culture demands a greater unification of the oral and literate mindset to participate within society through the medium of screens. By analyzing orality's psychodynamic of being close to the human life world and literacy's psychodynamic of being objectively distanced, electric rhetoric is revealed as a fusion of orality and literacy necessitating an equal knowledge of both forms of rhetoric in coordination.

Computers and the internet, staples of communication in today's electric rhetoric world, exemplify a combination of the oral quality of being close to the human lifeworld and the opposing literate quality of being objectively distanced. As expressed by Ong in *Orality and Literacy*, orality was close to the human lifeworld in that "oral cultures must conceptualize and verbalize all their knowledge with more or less close reference to the human lifeworld, assimilating the alien, objective world to the more immediate, familiar interaction of human beings" (42). Similarly, computers are close to the human lifeworld in that they have the capacity to incorporate and communicate instantaneous personal experiences from a rhetor to his/her audience. The internet access provided by computers offers the capacity for sending instant

messages from any place around the world to any other specific location within seconds. This means that if one individual sent a mass message via technology such as email or electronic video he/she could receive immediate responses from the audience while at the same time sending instantaneous reactions to any and all members of the electric audience. Such an interaction between rhetor and audience implies immediate sensory involvement and thought between the communicators that exists close to the human lifeworld and is expressed through the technological medium of electric rhetoric.

At the same time, computers also exemplify the literate characteristic of being objectively distanced. Even though computers allow for instant communication, they also offer a rhetor the time and privacy to abstractly analyze messages before interaction. With computer screens, an individual can take as much time as desired to question and interpret a received communication or deliberate over his/her response. Technology presents the option of reviewing thought in order to objectively distance the rhetor from the content of the rhetoric. In addition, electric rhetoric often places rhetors outside of physical contact with their audience which in turn provides a semi emotional sensory barrier to communication that again aids in objectivity in rhetoric.

Electric rhetoric fuses the contradictory characteristics of orality and literacy together undermining the Great Divide binary. Comprehending that one thing may be both centered in immediate human contact and objectively distanced at the same time is a difficult concept, but electric rhetoric is just that. It is a rhetoric of opportunity which places artistic choices in the hands of individuals. Rhetors have the ability to choose and hence create from within both an oral and literate mindset simultaneously when utilizing new technologies like computers. Clearly, electric rhetoric can no longer be constrained within the Great Divide binary of rhetoric.

Still, even though orality and literacy share in some of the same psychodynamics and are fused within electric rhetoric, this does not imply by any means that one is exactly like the other or that the two should not be considered separately in certain circumstances. To create a monolith of rhetoric could potentially cause as many problems in human understandings as does a binary.

And, as a result of the unclear and narrow distinctions between the two forms of rhetoric as encompassed in the Great Divide theory, there is the danger that the distinction will seem relatively empty and that one of the two subjects will begin to appear nonessential: in this case, orality. In other words, with the distinction between the two forms undefined, orality and literacy begin to lose their distinctiveness as separate forms of rhetoric which in turn undermines the hierarchical theory of a binary. Hence, orality and literacy should not be compared or judged as superior or inferior as is currently the case, but rather considered in their own right and respected as equally integral parts of rhetoric in the human experience.

Nevertheless, to end our inquiry into the place and power of electric rhetoric at this conclusion would still leave the problem of oral/literate coordination unresolved. Our world has no doubt been changing throughout the centuries from an oral culture, to a literate culture, to our current cyber culture that clearly demands both an oral and a literate mindset. But, the term cyber is not adequate for describing our present rhetorical situation. Cyber refers more closely to that space in which our communication mediums and our words interact rather than the actual acts by which rhetoric is performed and received. Perhaps a better way for understanding our “new” culture would be to examine the rhetorical changes in light of the concept of a cathartic culture.

Katharsis or catharsis, traditionally considered as the effect of tragedy on spectators, has been a central concept in drama and literature since the time of Aristotle and its meaning has changed from age to age and from critic to critic throughout the history of literary criticism. Although by no means a simple aesthetic response, according to historical theories of catharsis, the cathartic process can be reduced to two main elements: 1) emotional arousal that leads to 2) intellectual understanding.¹⁴ This oversimplifies the complexity of the problem, but this reduction summary is useful in that it signifies the beginning and the end of the cathartic process, the reaction and understanding that occur in a spectator or reader when catharsis has been experienced.

Catharsis has customarily been understood to begin by the arousal of the audience's (addressee's, recipient's, reader's, spectator's, etc.) emotions. These emotions are contradictory, and when they are reconciled, they leave the audience with a sense of repose or reconciliation. The repose or serenity of the audience and its members after experiencing "art"¹⁵ comes from their understanding of the causes of the action and incidents of the art form that results in their raised consciousness. Understanding could be of different types such as psychological, moral, or metaphysical.¹⁶ However, today's modern world of technology calls for a new theory of catharsis in which the emotional and the "rational" occur simultaneously in the mind to generate cognition of individual perspectives.

As pertains to contemporary rhetoric, catharsis is the effect of rhetoric on the audience by which the audience is moved to personally interact with the delivered art form (be it oral, literate, or both) and *cognitively* realize (be it through subconscious actions or conscious deliberation) a change in his/her consciousness as a result of the art. Catharsis now begins not only by the arousal of emotions, but also by a concurring rational stimulation. One part of the process does not precede the other, *eros/mythos* does not lead to *logos*. Instead, *eros/mythos* and *logos* work at the same time to generate a complete human cognition of a rhetorical experience.

For instance, when I enter cyber space on a daily basis, I am continuously interacting with a fusion of orality and literacy that equally demands my attention in the communication process. As I write a document, email a friend, or just check the weather forecast, I am constantly seeing flashing colors, moving advertisement pictures, and hearing buzzers or music as well as reading the projected message on the screen. All of these forms of rhetoric are happening at once and they all equally demand my attention and consideration. As a result, my mind must continuously be coordinating the oral and the literate together to generate a comprehensive conception of the electric rhetoric with which I am interacting.

The compounded cathartic process unifies and coordinates orality and literacy for electric rhetoric. Treating the computer as either orality or literacy means that one is ignoring a gigantic

part of the message being sent out by the machine. At the same time, attending to one before the other, again, generates the problem of subordination of thought. To act in this manner, one would have to choose one of the forms of rhetoric as superior to the other which would then lead to specialization in one of the forms, such as the current social specialization in literacy. The only method for effectively communicating with new “screen” technologies is by accepting a combined view of orality and literacy as inextricably united in our cathartic interaction with both forms of rhetoric simultaneously.

Catharsis breaks down the hierarchy of thought and provides for a coordination of the forms of rhetorical expression as does the electric rhetoric itself. Catharsis brings rhetoric into the personal realm of the human experience by reinstating the power of orality without taking from the power of literacy. The cathartic process offers orality a place in electric rhetoric with its technological advancements of instant message transmittal as well as offers orality power to influence and affect the human mind as a pertinent form of rhetorical communication. Likewise, catharsis brings rhetoric into the abstract realm by extending the possibilities of literacy in contemporary human experiences. Catharsis presents literacy with a place in electric rhetoric with its commonly typed messages and printed letters as well as presents power to literacy to persuade the human mind with a changed form of the “literate” word. By accepting both orality and literacy as unified in the current cathartic human experience of language, the subordination of thought is denied and a coordination of rhetorical forms is established.

So, we must continue to change into our cyberwear and dress our minds in our expanded understanding of electric rhetoric in order to stay afloat in Cyber Space. The coordination of orality and literacy in the human mind’s cathartic process empowers us individuals to actively communicate, perform, and create electronic realities. Understanding how both forms of rhetoric are unified and coordinately affect the human consciousness and sub-consciousness in catharsis provides deep insight into the ways in which our electric rhetoric is continuing to change and the

direction in which our rhetorical future is headed. For, we as a society are learning how to not only communicate with these rhetorical tools, but also to live within them.

¹ I borrowed this idea of cyberwear from Timothy Leary. For further discussion of cyberwear, read Leary's *Chaos and Cyberculture* which is a compilation of articles written by Leary.

² It must be noted here that Plato's *Phaedrus* is an example of a dominant rhetorical text that does not privilege literacy over orality. In the myth of Theuth and Thamos, Socrates argues to Phaedrus that writing is a destructive means by which we come to know truth in that it causes citizens to become forgetful as a result of their trust and dependency on written texts. In addition, Socrates argues that writing stabilizes meaning in the absence of dialogue (274b-279c).

³ I find the term "rational" to be problematic in the development of this paper. For, again traditionally, the adjective "rational" has been used to describe what is considered to be logical mental operations and is founded on the premise that mythos and eros are separate mental capacities that circumvent any sort of reasoning. I disagree with this premise. Hence, when I use the term "rational" in this work, it is only as a technical adjective in that traditional sense of the word and not necessarily what I personally understand to be the definition of "rational" or its applications/implications.

⁴ Wilkerson claims that orality such as the epic poetry of Homer has a "transparency of self" in which characters' actions are unabashedly expressed to the audience and the facts of a case are made apparent to all (24-27).

⁵ Wilkerson bases this conclusion on his reading of Eric Havelock's *Preface to Plato*, pp.47-49, 303-5. Wilkerson is claiming that due to new political alignments in Athens, rhetoric (especially in literate form) became tailored to suit the polis as an effective social instrument and as a result replaced the poetic form as a means of social expression during the late fifth-century.

⁶ I am defining aesthetic experiences of rhetoric as those experiences generated by contact with forms of rhetorical orality which are characterized by high sensory involvement between the audience, the rhetor, and the art.

⁷ I must make it clear here that I am not a modern and I am not attempting to write an enlightenment theory of rhetoric. Rather, by appropriating these "Fathers of the Enlightenment" theorists, I am only demonstrating how other influential scholars have addressed the problem of privileging literacy over orality during a time period in which significant cultural changes were occurring.

⁸ I am borrowing this term from Kathleen E. Welch's recent book entitled "*Electric Rhetoric*."

⁹ For a more in depth summary of Welch's work, read pages 184-189 in *Electric Rhetoric*.

¹⁰ In *Electric Rhetoric* Kathleen Welch argues that the Great Dividists misinterpret the texts of Walter Ong and that Ong's work really sets out to demonstrate how primary orality, literacy, and secondary orality are all intricately linked together. This may be true, but several rhetorical theorists have bought into the Great Divide theory as detailed in the preceding portion of the essay and many of their arguments are rooted in this work of Walter Ong. Moreover, Ong himself is encouraging a divide in his choice of language for his book's title as well as his constant referral to the "contrast" of orality and literacy. Hence, these prevalent ideas are still expressing the existence of a binary and must be addressed/critiqued for a comprehensive analysis of the placement of orality and literacy in rhetorical theory.

¹¹ Walter J. Ong's *Orality and Literacy* has provided me with the majority of my information concerning the theory of differing psychodynamics for each form of rhetoric. Most of my background discussion of this theory has its roots in Ong's explanations of the differing psychodynamics.

¹² I understand that Ong does not mean to place the psychodynamics that he addresses in his book as the "exclusive" set of psychodynamics and that he is open to interpretation of new ones. But, for the purposes of this paper, I am only going to directly use his nine psychodynamics of orality and six of his psychodynamics of literacy as the basis for the psychodynamics theory.

¹³ In deciding on which psychodynamic to focus on in this paper, I chose the one psychodynamic of orality, that could most clearly be applied to both forms of rhetoric though several of the other psychodynamics can be proven to overlap both forms of rhetoric as well.

¹⁴ My definition of catharsis has been highly influenced and adapted from the work of Adnan K. Abdulla in his text *Catharsis in Literature* and his summaries and interpretations of other cathartic critics. A succinct summary of this definition in particular can be found on pages 118-119.

¹⁵ With the word "art" I am encompassing all forms of human expression such as rhetoric, poetry, drama, and music.

¹⁶ *Catharsis in Literature*, 9, 119 (Really, these ideas of this paragraph are explicated throughout each page of the book, but perhaps more directly on these two pages)

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