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Rhetoric's Active Matters

1 Preliminary Remarks

In the following pages, I attempt, in the field of the historical theory of language, and thus also of poetics – and that means, in a long-term perspective, above all in the field of rhetoric – to trace a structural analogy to conceptions of active matter developed in the fields of physics, chemistry, biology, and the materials sciences. This attempt is risky for at least two reasons. First, is it not possible that the author has simply not or poorly understood the concerns and implications of the debates arising within these disciplines in which he is not a specialist? In that case, rather than a structural analogy, what was intended as part of a parallel undertaking would at best give the impression of a distorted and deceptive similarity – this similarity would then rest solely on the misunderstanding or incomprehension of what produced this anamorphic illusion. Second, and perhaps less seriously, might not the sought-for structural analogy be the mere effect of an illegitimate transference?¹ Even if the author has been able to grasp a few of the methodological concerns of active matter research, this still would not guarantee the transferability of the parallel findings. Indeed, as might be objected, even a more or less legitimate similarity should not automatically be accorded the dignity of an epistemic argument. Such transference problems are illustrated with one of the most frequently used examples of the constitution of metaphor as an abbreviated comparison: while Achilles may well have been as courageous as a lion, as far as we know he did not thereby acquire a hide, main, and quadrupedalism, let alone a lion's musculature and metabolism [Kohn et al. 2011] as a result of the 'as' of the comparison being omitted and replaced by a metaphor.²

As the previous example suggests, with these risks (as with their explication, which has assumed here the securitized form of a *dubitatio*, that is, the figure of an ostentatious doubt) we are already moving within the contentious history of

¹ I will discretely pass over the aggravating circumstance that, while in my academic training and profession I have specialized in modern German literature, in the following I am forced to trespass into the territories of classical philology. Consequently, it cannot be ruled out that this too could lead to transference problems.

² A fictional *experimentum crucis* of such tropic transference problems can be found in: [Lewitscharoff 2011].

Acknowledgment: The author would like to thank Benjamin Carter for translating the text.

The author acknowledges the support of the Cluster of Excellence 'Matters of Activity. Image Space Material' funded by the Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft (DFG, German Research Foundation) under Germany's Excellence Strategy – EXC 2025 – 390648296.

the elementary language-related *technē*³ known as rhetoric, and thus, if standard epistemological definitions of this *technē* can be trusted, ultimately outside any claim to certainty. In this sense, the two risks mentioned at the beginning perhaps only prepare the ground for an additional rhetorical gesture: the disclosure of the *doxa*, and hence of the two or three things I *think* I know about active matter. First and most obviously, the classical distinction between form and matter, which ascribes to the former the prior and literally defining role in the ontological framework, and understands the latter as a secondary, passive-receptive category. Already in its choice of epithet, however, active matter has renounced its allegiance to this well-established understanding of matter with its many affiliated semantizations. Operating under the premise of self-movement and self-organization, matter here is conceptualized “as a nonrandom assemblage of particles whose self-movement, just as the resulting total motion” follow common laws [Friedman and Krauthausen 2017, p. 167]. Second, these laws are not imposed on it by a superordinate principle named spirit or form, or used in the context of human and/or mechanical processing; they are articulated dynamically and emergently as principles of motion and organization, and for this reason often involve an extraordinary degree of complexity with regard to their observation, description, and modeling. Third, and as a consequence of this, the traditional philosophical site of the question of matter should not be permitted to shape the discursive field in which the question of active matter is negotiated. At issue here is rather a phenomenal, often directly application-related material complex, which is primarily the object of pragmatics. Even when it is a matter of questions of observation and description, one will still tend to seek agreement concerning the operativity of this matter rather than its ontological status. The activity here gives rise, namely, to formal and structural effects, which need to be inquired into. Fourth and finally, what appears to have been called into question is a no less time-honored fundamental conceptual difference to the phenomena, discourses, and practices around active matter – that is, the culture-founding distinction between natural object and artifact. The table of contents of a publication on active matter lists a series of hybrids that for ontological fundamentalists just as for strict guardians of the border between nature and culture or between nature and technics are likely to appear equally monstrous: programmable bacteria,

³ In the following, I employ the Greek loanword *technē* (from ἡ τέχνη; the *Greek-English Lexicon* [1940] by Liddell and Scott provides the following basic meanings: “art, skill, cunning of hand”; “way, manner, or means whereby a thing is gained”; “a set of rules, system or method of making or doing”) that can play an opposition role to nature in the present-day differential pairs nature/culture and nature/technics. *Technē* links the system claim that we associate with the concept of culture with operativity or operationalizability, which is at the basis of the *dispositif* of technics. Also and particularly for rhetoric, this double figuration is fundamental. Hence, from this Greek perspective, the German term *Kulturtechnik*, which brings together both areas of focus, and is often used in such contexts, would have to be seen as a pleonasm. In *technē*, just as in the Latin term derived from this, *ars*, the semantics of ‘technics’ and ‘art,’ which in the modern period have become increasingly divergent, are integrated to an equal extent and without substantial distinction.

heat-active textiles, self-folding polymer sheets, communicatively interacting materials, and so on [Tibbitts 2017].

For the literary historian, all this has a structural resemblance to the history of key questions relating to the theory of language as they have been developed in the field of rhetoric from antiquity to the modern period. While with the abandonment of the paradigms and claims of 'old rhetoric' in the eighteenth century⁴ a considerable mistrust of this kind and site of linguistic questioning of language began to establish itself, might it not be possible, with a sideways glance at concepts of active matter, to provide a different reading of the history of this challenge of/through rhetoric? It would be both presumptuous and superfluous to speak of a vindication of rhetoric; however, from the perspective of the discussions outlined above, the lines of conflict of an enduring debate nevertheless appear in a new light. Is language considered by itself a passive, neutral medium that transports and advances the concerns of the beautiful, the true, and the good – as well as of course, if we are not careful, those of language-shapers with less pure intentions? Or is it rather on the basis of the structure and use of language that the ordering framework that makes it possible to distinguish the beautiful from the ugly, the true from the false, and the good from the bad first emerges? In relation to what is the proper use of language to be measured? To the truth of its communications or to the knowledge of its rules and their implementation? If the experienced speaker (who to this end must undergo a rigorous training and supervision) is responsible for the effects of persuasion and the production of conviction, is the user therefore responsible for the use of this *technē*? Or is it the power of speech itself that affects the listener almost like a psychoactive substance? Passivity or self-activity, ontology or pragmatics, instrumentality or inherent logic – since its beginnings, the history of rhetoric has been inscribed along the threshold of these opposing poles. Accordingly, it is hopefully a little more than professional bias that allows the literary historian to surmise the said structural analogies in the discussions around active matter. In short: (1) rhetoric understands language not as a material that is formed, but as a forming principle that acquires a regulatory and performative function; (2) the emergence of rhetorical order is reflected in the fact that the *ars rhetorica* is articulated both as an analytical and as a poietic systemic praxis – which means that, according to its premises, the rhetorical artifact can be both produced and judged; (3) that rhetoric is a pragmatic discipline cannot be doubted even by its severest enemies – indeed, one is in the habit of reproaching it for precisely this in order to deny it an independent epistemological status; (4) it is only in relation to the *physis/poiesis* distinction that a comparable claim to hybridity for rhetoric and its products seems unlikely – nevertheless, it will be shown that the problems raised by this distinction also pertain to the present field of inquiry.

4 For a pertinent study, see: [Bender and Wellbery 1990].

On the legitimacy of the suppositions outlined above, even the one who makes them can hardly decide. It must be left to the experts in their respective fields. Will they recognize and accept an object of study that shows the traits and characteristics set out in the following as an object of their own research interests and questions? Will they recognize in the problems and issues raised structural parallels to their own? In view of this uncertainty, I will simply attempt to show what a consideration of particular moments in the history of rhetoric inspired by the initial findings of the discussions around active matter believes to have concretely found, without overstretching this inspiration. To this end, I have selected a number of scenes in which the negotiation of rhetoric's status becomes especially visible, as well as debates that have had a particularly lasting influence. I will begin (in Section 2) in the fifth century BCE, where following a prologue on the theater I will turn (in Section 3) with Gorgias to a threshold and founding figure of this history, and reconstruct the establishment of a specific power of speech. Section 4 focuses, if only in exemplary highlights, on the status of the relation between nature and technics in rhetoric's founding (Gorgias) and systematization (Aristotle). Lastly, in Section 5, I will consider the return or reactualization of these inaugural debates at the beginning of the twentieth century in structuralist linguistics.

If I promise to turn a spotlight on the history of rhetoric, it is important to bear in mind that 'rhetoric' here is not to be understood as the name for the slightly disreputable soft skill of self-marketing, or the even more disreputable technique for the manipulation of others, as is now often the case far from the historical contexts of the discipline. According to its status within an order of knowledge that has remained stable for over two millennia, in which world knowledge is more or less synonymous with the knowledge of (the proper use of) language, rhetoric is considered as a kind of relay, one that both mediates between the mastery of language (grammar) and the rules of argumentation (dialectics) and reflects on their relation. A mediating foundational science that is also linked with an explicit praxis claim – does this not show at least a promising elective affinity to the present-day interdisciplinary of active-matter research?

2 Prologue on the Theater: Aristophanes' Αἰνεφέλαι

In the first scene of Aristophanes' comedy *Clouds* (423 BCE),⁵ we are introduced to an Attic landowner who after a troubled and sleepless night is up at dawn examining his ledger. This is the elderly Strepsiades, who because of his son's passion for

⁵ All ancient texts are quoted from the bilingual editions of the Loeb Classical Library to the extent that they are available there. In this instance, see: [Aristophanes 1988]. In the following, the quotations will be indicated with the verse number. Also consulted was [Aristophanes 1968].

horses, and despite his not inconsiderable assets, has become burdened by debts, and now fears being forced “right off my property” (ἐκ τῶν ἐμῶν, v. 33). At the origin of this economic – and that means financial and familial – misery is, as we learn, what seems to have been a slight *mésalliance*. The prosperous farmer found his bride in the urban aristocracy – and the latter’s concern for the outward signs of her social standing has clearly been passed on to their son. As the despairing father suspects, this was already in evidence at the time of their son’s naming. The mother had insisted on the name having a knightly semantics – and she got her way. The boy was called Pheidippides, because the mother “was for adding *hippos* to the name” (ἵππον προσετίθει πρὸς τοῦνομα, v. 63). What to do? Strepsiades has learned of “a Thinkery of sage souls” (ψυχῶν σοφῶν [...] φροντιστήριον, v. 94), where he would like to send his son to study. He has heard that its members are able to “argue convincingly” (λέγοντες ἀναπείθουσιν, v. 96) about the most unbelievable things, and whoever goes there to study – in exchange for a fee – is able to win every debate (λέγοντα νικᾶν, v. 99) he participates in. What Strepsiades expects from such a training, he openly declares to his son:

I’m told they have both Arguments there, the Better, whatever that may be, and the Worse. And one of these Arguments, the Worse, I’m told, can plead the unjust side of a case and win. So, if you learn this Unjust Argument for me, then I wouldn’t have to pay anyone even a penny of these debts that I now owe on your account.⁶

Pheidippides rejects his father’s offer, but not because of moral scruples, but for fear of social humiliation within his peer group. In his view, the residents of the Thinkery have a far too unknightly constitution, being “pasty-faced” and “unshod” (v. 103). And so it is the old man himself who knocks at the door of the Thinkery. Strepsiades’ confidence in his ability to fully master the arts he has heard spoken of is rightly low; and so it comes as no surprise when his teacher Socrates – this, we learn, is the name of the school’s head – soon despairs of the rustic habits and, in particular, the intellectual failings of his new client, and turns him out. However, by putting to use what he believes to be the skills he would have acquired from the school, Strepsiades is nonetheless ultimately able to rid himself of his creditors. While it is certainly boorish antics rather than subtle sophisms that form the basis of his arguments, the distraction and confusion into which this casts his creditors allows Strepsiades to believe, at least for a time, that he has achieved his purpose.

6 εἶναι παρ’ αὐτοῖς φασὶν ἄμφω τῷ λόγῳ,
τὸν κρείττον’, ὅστις ἐστὶ, καὶ τὸν ἥττονα.
τούτοιον τὸν ἕτερον τοῖν λόγοιν, τὸν ἥττονα,
νικᾶν λέγοντά φασι τὰδικώτερα.
ἦν οὖν μάθῃς μοι τὸν ἄδικον τοῦτον λόγον,
ἃ νῦν ὀφείλω διὰ σέ, τούτων τῶν χρεῶν
οὐκ ἂν ἀποδοίην οὐδ’ ἂν ὀβολὸν οὐδενί (v. 112–118).

Here is not the place to consider the details of the plot or the comedy's controversial reception history. A brief observation will have to suffice. The main characteristics of Socrates and his school depicted in the comedy [Gelzer 1956] correspond exactly with the accusations that led, a quarter of a century after the play's first performance, to the trial of the historical Socrates: the corruption of youth, who, goaded on by him, revolted against traditional values and customs of Athenian society; and impiety (ἀσεβεία), which is, to say, the rejection of the official Athenian gods and the adoption of new, self-chosen deities. When at the end of the play, Strepsiades – having just been given a beating by his son Pheidippides – sets the Socratic Thinkery alight, he does so, as he says, “most of all for wronging the gods” (μόλιστα δ'εἰδὼς τοὺς θεοὺς ὡς ἡδίκουν, v. 1509). In his *Apology*, Plato lets Socrates refer explicitly to *Clouds* when he responds to the accusation brought against him by remarking, “you yourselves saw these things in Aristophanes' comedy” (19c).

Kenneth J. Dover was certainly not wrong to point out in this connection “that the Athenians did not necessarily do what Ar[istophanes] told them to do” [Dover 1968, p. lvi], and thus to reject the assumption that a comedy that at the time of the trial was hardly fresh in the minds of the Athenians might have contributed even in part to Socrates' conviction. With respect to the accusation of impiety, however, the first scene of the comedy does give wide scope to Socrates' self-authorization to appoint more suitable gods than those of the Athenian canon. The manner in which this is justified explains my decision to begin my history with this prologue on the theater. *Chaos*, *Tongue*, and the titular *Clouds* – according to the Aristophanean Socrates, it is these deities and no others that are suited to his method of schooling, and therefore the gods that should be honored at the Thinkery, and to which he initiates Strepsiades (τὸ Χάος τουτὶ καὶ τὰς Νεφέλας καὶ τὴν Γλῶτταν, τρία ταυτί, v. 424). *Chaos* would have been known to the Athenians from Hesiod's *Theogony* as the gaping, empty abyss from which the world first arose – and thus as part of a well-established cosmological metaphor of emergence.⁷ The *Tongue* as a personification of the organ of speech should hardly surprise as a god of choice for a school of rhetoric. But what of the titular *Clouds*? In the first scene, the Aristophanean Socrates outlines the area of responsibility of these specially selected deities as follows:

they're heavenly Clouds, great goddesses for idle gentlemen, who provide [παρέχουσιν] us with judgment and dialectic and intelligence, fantasy and circumlocution and verbal thrust and parry.⁸

⁷ Whether the understanding of the term as a disordered confusion that has been popular up to the present had already established itself in the outgoing fifth century has not been settled. Given the depiction in the comedy of the conditions and events in the Thinkery, however, this does not seem improbable.

⁸ ἀλλ' οὐράνιαι Νεφέλαι, μεγάλαι θεαὶ ἀνδράσιν ἀργοῖς,
αἵ περ γνῶμην καὶ διάλεξιν καὶ νοῦν ἡμῖν παρέχουσιν
καὶ τερατεῖαν καὶ περίλεξιν καὶ κροῦσιν καὶ κατάληψιν (v. 316–318).

In the Greek wording of Socrates' praise of the *Clouds*, these do not appear exclusively as mere agents or 'providers' of epistemic and practical competencies. παρέχειν – particularly when natural contexts are in play – means, very generally, 'to bring forth,' that is, to bring into appearance and to make available. To the eager Strepsiades, to whom the divine immortality of what he had previously considered mere atmospheric matter, "mist and dew and smoke" (v. 339), refuses to fully manifest itself, the *Clouds*' song appears despite these reservations to have already placed him in a certain disposition:

So that's why my soul has taken flight at the sound of their voice, and now seeks to split hairs, prattle narrowly about smoke, and meet argument with counterargument, puncturing a point with a pointlet.⁹

According to Socrates, the *Clouds*, which in the form of the chorus also appear performatively on the stage, "feed" a whole host of eulogists, principally sophists (v. 332). Furthermore, their appearance allows the comedy by means of a metaleptic joke to treat another important aspect. Strepsiades wants to know why the *Clouds* that appear on the stage, unlike those in the sky, "look like mortal women" (v. 341–342), and learns that they are equipped with an unlimited potential for metamorphosis, and are capable of coming into being in any conceivable form (γίνονται πάνθ' ὅτι βούλονται, v. 348).

When, in her considerations on the digital techniques used in animated films, Esther Leslie notes that clouds as a "source of any imaginable form," rather than being "a metaphor of something else" [Leslie 2017, p. 230] are capable here "of acting like metaphors" themselves [ibid., p. 234], she only names a present-day technological and aesthetic realization of a principle of activity for which the Aristophanean Socrates had proposed the deification of the clouds:

But with all these forms of cloud, the cloud, every cloud, painted clouds, cinematic clouds, clouds of fantasy and clouds of particles, there is no fixed form or essence. The cloud, these clouds are made of an assemblage of materials, assorted ideas, beliefs and practices. The cloud is itself and something else. It is the cloud of all history and of none at all. The cloud is the shape of something really in the world, as much as it is the sign of an effervescent affective actuality. [ibid., p. 234]

In Aristophanes' comedy, the fifth century BCE had already realized its own staging of this cloud-like potential for self-activity and self-animation: rhetorically shaped speech, λόγος (*logos*).

⁹ ταῦτ' ἄρ' ἀκούσας αὐτῶν τὸ φθέγγ' ἡ ψυχὴ μου πεπότηται
καὶ λεπτολογεῖν ἤδη ζητεῖ καὶ περὶ καπνοῦ στενολεσχεῖν
καὶ γνωμιδίῳ γνώμην νύξας' ἑτέρῳ λόγῳ ἀντιλογῆσαι (v. 319–321).

3 *Dynamis* of Speech

If Aristophanes' *Clouds* mocks sophist rhetorical didactics under the name of Socrates, what strikes us as odd from today's point of view is that the Platonic Socrates was himself one of rhetoric's severest critics, and another protagonist for such an attack seems much more plausible: the Sicilian orator and teacher of rhetoric Gorgias.¹⁰ In the history of rhetoric, Gorgias is considered the first representative of the discipline whose work and teaching has been at least partly preserved and documented; his fellow citizens Tisias and Corax, who are considered the 'inventors' of rhetoric, have more of a legendary status. Gorgias was a native of Leontini, a city close to present-day Syracuse in Sicily. While there is some disagreement about the exact dates of his birth and death (the two surviving testimonies differ by approximately 15 years), all sources agree that Gorgias reached an age of well over 100, which is astonishing not only for Greek antiquity. He was born either around 500 BCE (according to one source), or more plausibly in 484 BCE (according to the other), and died either around 390 or in 376. In either case, this means he would have lived through a large part of the fifth century BCE that was so important for the cultural history of ancient Greece. However, Gorgias did not live permanently in the geographical center of these political, scientific, and artistic developments. He is said to have arrived in Athens for the first time only in 427 – and thus already at an advanced age – as part of a diplomatic mission on behalf of Leontini. Nevertheless, his life in the provinces did no harm to his supra-regional fame as a rhetorician. Later, Cicero would report that he was so highly honored in Greece that a statue erected for him in Delphi was not merely gilded, but – uniquely – made of solid gold (*non inaurata statua sed aurea statueretur*) [Cicero 1942, p. 100, sec. 129].

Besides his lucrative teaching activities, Gorgias also appears to have been politically active – that is suggested at least by the said diplomatic mission to Athens, during which he successfully petitioned for military support for his home polis of Leontini against the neighboring city of Syracuse. Moreover, he was not only a practicing teacher of rhetoric; according to a number of sources, he also authored a system for teaching rhetoric, a so-called *technē*. If true, this would have been one of the first rhetorical textbooks. However, nothing of this has survived, not even fragments, as with almost all of Gorgias' other writings. With the exception of two speeches, namely, none of Gorgias' writings have been preserved in their entirety; and even the surviving versions of the two speeches are paraphrases made long after Gorgias' death. These circumstances are further exacerbated by the fact that the only extensive contemporary depiction of Gorgias – it is also the most famous and influential – is found in a highly partisan account, or at least not one that could fall in favor of the rhetoric teacher from Leontini. This is Plato's dialogue *Gorgias*, whose partiality is already shown by the fact that, of all

¹⁰ On the affinity between Aristophanes and Socrates, see [Euben 1997, pp. 109–138].

those participating in the debate, and despite his notorious eloquence, Socrates' titular antagonist has, both quantitatively and qualitatively, the least to say. It can probably be stated without exaggeration that the Platonic *Gorgias* is ultimately a strategic straw man in a war of words for the intellectual high ground.

What has been said of Gorgias can also be said of the anything but homogenous group of sophists. In this respect, the divine patronage of the Aristophanean *Clouds* does not appear to have been much help. Even the contemporary discussion about the achievements and merits of sophistics turned out to be totally to their disadvantage. And just as with Gorgias, the same is true of the posthumous treatment of their writings. Of the numerous treatises that are known through their titles, none have been fully preserved. Only fragments of various lengths have come down to us – and of these only a fraction can claim the status of verbatim copies. Accordingly, most of these fragments are merely paraphrases of what this or that sophist is supposed to have said, and thus representations of representations, which in view of the negative assessment of the Sophist's (theoretical) practices must be considered with caution. To put it bluntly, we know about the deeds, words, and thoughts of the sophists through accounts provided by their adversaries, and chiefly via the writings of their fiercest enemy: Plato. The French sophistics expert, Barbara Cassin, summarizes the picture of sophistics that has arisen from this transmission situation as follows:

If we consider the Platonic dialogues as a whole, we can indeed discern the figure of sophistics, which will henceforth belong to the tradition. It is devalued on all grounds – ontologically, because the sophist is not concerned with being, but seeks refuge in non-being and what is accidental; logically, because he is not in pursuit of truth or dialectical rigor, but merely opinion, seeming coherence, persuasion, and victory in the oratorical joust; ethically, pedagogically, and politically: his goal is not wisdom and virtue, for the individual or for the city, but rather personal power and gain; the sophist is even devalued on literary grounds, since the figures of speech he makes use of, his style, are merely the bulges of an encyclopedic vacuity. If one makes use of the standard of being and truth in order to judge the teaching of the sophist, it must be condemned as pseudo-philosophy: a philosophy of appearances and a mere appearance of philosophy. [Cassin 2000, p. 106]

But how did the sophists acquire such a poor reputation? That is not easy to say, for the sophists in no way formed a philosophical school with a unified doctrine. Quite the opposite in fact. Strictly speaking, their different, even opposing philosophical and political views have only one common denominator: they were for the most part professional and well-paid teachers primarily of rhetoric, which they understood as the key instrument of a practical education. A few of them, however – but chiefly Gorgias – went so far in their estimation of rhetoric as to view artful and properly wrought speech as a “psychagogic charm.”¹¹ And it is this conception of *logos* that makes the Gorgian understanding of rhetoric of interest to my inquiry.

¹¹ “psychagogisches Zaubermittel” [Meister 2010, p. 154]. Unless stated otherwise, all the translations from German quotes were made by Benjamin Carter.

For considered closely, this understanding is not limited to the manipulative instrumentality suggested by the above designation.

The central passage on the efficacy of speech is found in Gorgias' famous *Encomium of Helen*:

The power of speech has the same relation with the arrangement of the soul as the arrangement of drugs has with the nature of bodies. For just as some drugs draw some fluids out of the body, and others other ones, and some stop an illness and others stop life, in the same way some speeches (*logoi*) cause pain, others pleasure, others fear, others dispose listeners to courage, others drug and bewitch the soul by some evil persuasion.¹²

This definition of the efficacy of speech cannot be explained with a representational understanding of language. Rather, it points to the performative function of speech – or, to use Gorgias' own term, its *dynamis*. The latter has been described “as a specific, *non-physical force* [...], albeit one whose dynamics approximate an external, bodily force.”¹³ However, there are also other passages in Gorgias in which one finds sufficient indications that he profoundly mistrusted the representational function of language. Thus, as we read in the third thesis of his treatise *On Nonbeing or On Nature*, which has only survived in later paraphrases: if there were an entity, and if this entity were to be an object of knowledge, this knowledge could not be communicated.¹⁴ Sextus Empiricus, to whom we also owe a commentary on this un preserved treatise, laconically notes that, in view of these Gorgian aporias, “the criterion of truth is swept away” – for where something neither is, nor can be known, nor communicated to someone else, naturally no such criterion can exist [Sextus Empiricus 1935, pp. 45, I, 87]. While the relativistic, even nihilistic coloring characterizing the paraphrases of his treatise is surely due in large part to Gorgias himself through his choice of theme and line of argument, it can only be fully maintained if one ignores or overlooks the positive

¹² τὸν αὐτὸν δὲ λόγον ἔχει ἢ τε τοῦ λόγου δύναμις πρὸς τὴν τῆς ψυχῆς τάξιν ἢ τε τῶν φαρμάκων τάξεις πρὸς τὴν τῶν σωμάτων φύσιν. ὥσπερ γὰρ τῶν φαρμάκων ἄλλους ἄλλα χυμούς ἐκ τοῦ σώματος ἐξάγει, καὶ τὰ μὲν νόσου τὰ δὲ βίου παύει, οὕτω καὶ τῶν λόγων οἱ μὲν ἐλύπησαν, οἱ δὲ ἔτερψαν, οἱ δὲ ἐφόβησαν, οἱ δὲ εἰς θάρσος κατέστησαν τοὺς ἀκούοντας, οἱ δὲ πειθοῖ τινα κακῇ τὴν ψυχὴν ἐφαρμάκευσαν καὶ ἐξεγοήτευσαν [Gorgias 2016b, pp. 178, 180, D26,14].

¹³ “als einen spezifischen *nicht-physischen Zwang* [...], der in seiner Dynamik jedoch einem äußerlichen, körperlichen Zwang nahekommt” [Franz 1999, p. 122]. See also the succinct presentation in [Strowick 2009, pp. 54–64].

¹⁴ “But even if they [= things] are knowable, how could someone, he asks, indicate them to someone else? For what one sees, how, he asks, could one say this by a speech (*logos*)? Or how could that thing become clear to someone who hears, but does not see it? For just as sight does not know sounds, so too hearing does not hear colors, but sounds: and someone who speaks utters a speech, but not a color or a thing” (εἰ δὲ καὶ γνωστά, πῶς ἂν τις, φησί, δηλώσειεν ἄλλω; ὃ γὰρ εἶδε, πῶς ἂν τις, φησί, τοῦτο εἴποι λόγῳ; ἢ πῶς ἂν ἐκεῖνο δῆλον ἀκούσαντι γίγνοιτο, μὴ ἰδόντι; ὥσπερ γὰρ οὐδὲ ἡ ὄψις τοὺς φθόγγους γινώσκει, οὕτως οὐδὲ ἡ ἀκοὴ τὰ χρώματα ἀκούει, ἀλλὰ φθόγγους; καὶ λέγει ὁ λέγων, ἀλλ’ οὐ χρώμα οὐδὲ πρᾶγμα) [Gorgias 2016c, pp. 226–227, D26,21].

and productive implications for speech that he also derives from his argument. The two surviving sources of the treatise do this in a more or less radical way. In the first, anonymous paraphrase at least (D26), there is hardly a trace of this productive aspect. In Sextus Empiricus, a few, possibly decisive, hints are to be found, even if they are not pursued systematically – the suggestion, for example, that “it is not the speech that presents the external thing, but the external thing that indicates the speech” [Gorgias 2016c, p. 241].¹⁵

Despite the problematic nature of the sources, there is little doubt that Gorgias did not want the functional analogy between drugs (*pharmaka*) and speeches (*logoi*) referred to above to be understood simply in the mode of a comparison or allegory, but as a real equivalence. In this sense, speech becomes an active substance in its own right, thus fulfilling the first two criteria of our activity search profile: speech itself and its *dynamis* take the place of the concrete and the real. As a result, this functional position does not, as in a semiotic understanding of language, remain subject to what the speech refers to or what it represents. As Thomas Buchheim notes:

Speech for him should under no circumstances be divided into sound form as the sensual aspect, and meaning as the notional content. [...] In the sought for space of development of speech, the sound character and signifying function of language are grasped together in a specific play of intensity and configuration.¹⁶

For the pragmatics and operativity of rhetorical efficacy (this corresponds to the third of our activity criteria), ancient rhetoric had its own category, and this is also already found developed in Gorgias' writings and fragments. The equivalence between drugs and speech mentioned above is at the basis of a distinct function: persuasion or *πειθώ*. As Wolfram Groddeck summarizes the related discussion in his foundational work on rhetoric: “in Gorgias, [...] *πειθώ* appears to have an original meaning: it means the active efficacy of speech, a force that posits reality through and in language.”¹⁷ The resulting power of speech is treated in large parts of Gorgias' *Encomium of Helen*. Here, Gorgias places speech in an equivalent operative set with violence and eros. Thus, according to his remarks on the fateful event, it is not improbable that Helen traveled to Troy as the result of the rhetorical persuasiveness of a speech – that is, it was perhaps by being “persuaded by words” (*λόγοις πεισθεῖσα*) that Helen followed Paris [Gorgias 2016b, pp. 170–171, D24,6]. This hypothesis is found literally at the center of Gorgias' speech, and it is given by far the most extensive

¹⁵ οὐχ ὁ λόγος τοῦ ἐκτὸς παραστατικός ἐστιν, ἀλλὰ τὸ ἐκτὸς τοῦ λόγου μηνυτικὸν γίνεται [Gorgias 2016c, p. 240].

¹⁶ “Was ihm Rede ist, darf auf keinen Fall zerlegt werden in Lautgestalt einerseits als sinnlichen Aspekt und Bedeutung andererseits als gedanklichen Gehalt. [...] In dem gesuchten Entfaltungsraum der Rede sind Lautcharaktere und Bedeutungsfunktion der Sprache amalgamiert in einem eigenen Spiel von Intensität und Konfiguration begriffen” [Buchheim 2012, pp. xii–xiii].

¹⁷ “Bei Gorgias scheint [...] *πειθώ* eine ursprüngliche Bedeutung zu haben; es meint das aktive Bewirken der Rede, eine Kraft, die Wirklichkeit durch und in Sprache setzt” [Groddeck 1995, p. 29].

discussion: it is treated in 7 of the 21 sections of the speech – and these are sections 8–14. In the eighth section, and thus the opening of the middle third of the speech, Gorgias narrows the related argument down:

But if it was speech that persuaded and deceived her soul, it is not difficult to make a defense with regard to this too and to secure acquittal from the accusation in the following way. Speech is a great potentate that by means of an extremely tiny and entirely invisible body performs the most divine deeds.¹⁸ [Gorgias 2016b, p. 175, D24,8]

Gorgias derives this efficacy first of all from poetry, which he defines as the first special form of speech: metrical speech, or in his own words λόγον ἔχοντα μέτρον, as he writes in the following ninth section. By means of this, the affects enter into the hearer – fearful shuddering, tearful pity, and mournful desire. Furthermore, poetry, according to Gorgias, enables one to sympathize with the affects of others. Shortly afterward, already in Aristotle, this becomes the central idea in the theory of tragedy. My first intention here, however, was to postulate that Gorgias took this detour via the special forms of speech in order to generalize its efficacy. That is to say that the efficacy of poetry should serve to illustrate the efficacy of speech as a whole. One finds evidence of this in the metaphor of the “entry” of the affects of speech into the hearer – the verb used by Gorgias, εἰσέρχομαι, also designates the entry of the chorus or the actor onto the stage. Just as the chorus and actors enter the stage as agents, so too do the affect-words enter as agents into the hearers of a speech. One should not then overlook the point that for Gorgias this faculty of language is at the basis of social behavior – it carries out what we would now designate with the term empathy. Following on from this, the tenth section invokes a division of speech effects that goes beyond the creation of affect. Here it is matter of physical effects: the summoning of pleasure, the dispelling of pain, and so on. To illustrate these speech effects, Gorgias selects incantation as a special form of speech: “For the power of an incantation, when it is conjoined with the opinion of the soul, beguiles it, persuades it, and transforms it by sorcery” [Gorgias 2016b, p. 175, D24,10].¹⁹ Hence, magic would be an additional and, according to common opinion, relatively dubious practice, whose efficacy is analogous to that of speech (perhaps only the extension of rhetorical *dynamis* to include things and/or teleaction). This middle part of Gorgias’ *Encomium of Helen* relating to the power and efficacy of speech concludes in the fourteenth section the abovementioned definition of speech as a *pharmakon*.

Gorgias’ rhetoric promises to make the power of speech illustrated in the example operative. An echo of this promise is still found in the Platonic Gorgias, when in

¹⁸ εἰ δὲ λόγος ὁ πείσας καὶ τὴν ψυχὴν ἀπατήσας, οὐδὲ πρὸς τοῦτο χαλεπὸν ἀπολογήσασθαι καὶ τὴν αἰτίαν ἀπολύσασθαι ὥδε· λόγος δυνάστης μέγας ἐστίν, ὃς μικροτάτῳ σώματι καὶ ἀφανεστάτῳ θειότατα ἔργα ἀποτελεῖ [Gorgias 2016b, pp. 174, D24,8].

¹⁹ συγγινόμενη γὰρ τῇ δόξῃ τῆς ψυχῆς ἡ δύναμις τῆς ἐπωδῆς ἔθελε καὶ ἔπεισε καὶ μετέστησεν αὐτὴν γοητεία [Gorgias 2016b, pp. 174, D24,10].

answer to the question about rhetoric's effectiveness he remarks that it is "the greatest good, and a cause [...] of freedom to mankind at large" [Plato 1925, pp. 279, 452d].²⁰ According to Gorgias, τὸ πείθειν is the faculty that distinguishes the active matters of rhetoric from all other social forms of knowledge and praxis; for him, this gathers all the latter's powers under rhetoric's command. That might sound boastful if like Socrates one considers the articulations of speech merely as a cosmetic supplement to the content, and understands speech itself merely as the representation of a (mental) state of affairs instead of as a *pharmakon* that brings something into effect. In short, only when one presupposes the Platonic reprimand whereby rhetoric is accused of having ended up in the "role of the however perfect perfumer and decorator of a significant content"²¹ does rhetoric begin to lose its quality as a matter of activity.

4 Nature/*Technē*

The fourth analytical finding that I have incorporated into my search profile on the active matters of rhetoric appears to have slipped out of focus in the previous section. In the case of rhetorical system formation, a hybridity between nature and *technē* seems to be a rather improbable requirement – for both the human actors and the products. As we know, the sophists extended to a maximum the limits of what can be learned and practiced, and thus of what can be achieved through pedagogical discipline – indeed, in the opinion of its critics, overextended this.²² For the private and itinerant teachers mindful of their own profit that made up the majority of this richly heterogeneous group, this was offered for practical reasons alone. According to a criticism by Isocrates, however, they exaggerated – precisely with regard to the teaching of the *rhetorikē technē* – the learnability of the art of speech

²⁰ μέγιστον ἀγαθὸν καὶ αἴτιον ὅμα μὲν ἐλευθερίας αὐτοῖς τοῖς ἀνθρώποις [Plato 1925, pp. 278, 452d].

²¹ "Rolle des wie auch immer perfekten Parfumeurs und Dekorateurs eines bedeutenden Inhalts" [Buchheim 2012, p. xiv].

²² It is probably no accident that the Platonic critique of the sophists concurs structurally in an essential feature with the critique of writing in *Phaidros*: the sophists/writing want(s) to make all knowledge available to everybody without distinction, but without disposing of this knowledge themselves/itself. "Writing, Phaedrus, has this strange quality, and is very like painting; for the creatures of painting stand like living beings, but if one asks them a question, they preserve a solemn silence. And so it is with written words; you might think they spoke as if they had intelligence, but if you question them, wishing to know about their sayings, they always say only one and the same thing. And every word, when once it is written, is bandied about, alike among those who understand and those who have no interest in it, and it knows not to whom to speak or not to speak; when ill-treated or unjustly reviled it always needs its father to help it; for it has no power to protect or help itself" [Plato 1914, pp. 565–567, 275d–e].

and its efficacy to such an extent that they no longer paid any attention to the experience (ταῖς ἐμπειρίαις) and the natural abilities of their students (τῇ φύσει τῇ τοῦ μαθητοῦ). Instead, they attempted “to transmit the science of discourse as simply as they would teach the letters of the alphabet” [Isocrates 1929, p. 169].²³ Thus, it is not only due to its systemic position as a *technē* that rhetoric appears to stand fully and unreservedly on the side of the ‘artificial.’

In the history of rhetoric, however, this attribution is accompanied by a far less unambiguous attitude – indeed, one that questions the judgment of the artificiality or unnaturalness of this *technē* shared by partisans and enemies of rhetoric alike on the basis of this simple distinction itself. In the following, I can only outline in an exemplary way two articulations of this attitude, which can be encountered historically from the founding to the codification of rhetoric.

a) That Gorgias appears to have suggested an independent organ of perception and reception for speech, and in this way to have provided a physical basis for the *technē* that he had largely cofounded, has already been mentioned in the previous section. The passages in question are found scattered in the fragmentary sources, and are in much need of commentary. In the following, I will orient my discussion to elucidations provided by Buchheim. In the context of the third thesis of the treatise *On Nonbeing or On Nature* according to which even something known cannot be communicated, we find the question: what happens when we speak? The apparently tautological answer is: the speaker speaks (λέγει ὁ λέγων).

At least according to one of the surviving paraphrases of Gorgias’ text, however, this does not, as one might expect, amount to a distinction between senses and perceptions, in the way that, for instance, one might see things, or hear speech (remember, a representational understanding of language is not a concern of the sophists). “For on principle,” we read further – although in a passage that has come down to us in a fragmentary form – “someone who speaks’ does not say <a sound> or a color, but a speech.”²⁴ Thus, alongside sound and color, speech would be an object of perception in its own right, and therefore situated outside the distinction between natural and artificial. If, according to Buchheim, “all of man’s practical possibilities” are concentrated in the Gorgian *logos*, and Gorgias strives to turn this into “a kind of universal effective organ of man,” then this vanishing point of his theoretical and didactic efforts appears to be attributable to both a “physical” and a “cultural” anthropology of man.²⁵ Accordingly, Gorgias asserted in man something like an independent organ or faculty for the reception of speech, and thus “a sense specifically for speech” that, parallel to the extension of color and sound on the part of the perceptual materials referred to

²³ ἀλλὰ φασιν ὁμοίως τὴν τῶν λόγων ἐπιστήμην ὥσπερ τὴν τῶν γραμμάτων παραδῶσιν [Isocrates 1929, p. 168].

²⁴ ἀρχὴν γὰρ οὐ <ψόφον> λέγει <ὁ λέγων> οὐδὲ χρῶμα, ἀλλὰ λόγον [Gorgias 2016c, pp. 226–227].

²⁵ “alle praktischen Möglichkeiten des Menschen”; “einer Art universellem Wirkungsorgan des Menschen” [Buchheim 2012, pp. ix–x].

above, would join the eye and the ear.²⁶ In the *Encomium of Helen*, this sense is designated with the enigmatic catachresis “the eyes of opinion” (τῆς δόξης ὄμμα[τα]) [Gorgias 2016b, pp. 178–179, D24,12]. The paraphrase, which here uses the later term *doxa* vouched for by Aristotle, obscures the nuance that the passage refers to a specific but undetermined faculty of reception. As Buchheim has noted, the *logos* uses the *doxa* “as a link to man’s soul”:

Peitho seen from the *logos* is the same as the *doxa* seen from the soul; together they form a link, a bridge over which the powers of the *logos* flow into the soul. ψυχῇ-δόξα-πειθῶ-λόγος: on such building blocks, the *logos* establishes its power as μέγας δυνάστης.²⁷

Whether and how this receptive organ can be tuned for the reception of the *logos*, whether and how it *will* be able to be tuned for this, this dual function-related anthropological question is then pursued by Gorgias from the perspective of the efficacy of speech outlined in the preceding section.

b) Aristotle’s *Rhetoric* constitutes in many respects a counter-project to sophist rhetoric of the Gorgian type and its ‘pharmaceutical’ understanding of efficacy, as well as to the paradoxical, since self-contradictory, Platonic judgment of rhetoric as a non-art found in *Gorgias* (which I will pass over here, as it has nothing to contribute to my inquiry). That Aristotle appears at all as a protagonist of this paper may cause surprise, as he is generally considered the theoretical founder of a ‘passive’ understanding of matter, as well as the philosophical godfather of its transfer between metaphysics and physics. The result of positing and transfer alike is manifested in an abstract concept of matter whereby this is understood as the bearer, or at best medium, of form processes – in short, “as possibility (*dynamis*) of being formed.”²⁸ Michael Franz understands the organizational core of Aristotelian ontology as follows: “All becoming (*genesis*) takes place as a transition from *dynamis* to *energeia* to the extent that material becomes form: through nature (*physis*) or through art (*technē*).”²⁹ Thus, Aristotle thinks the relation between nature and art treated in this section as a strictly parallel one after all [Bartels 1965].

Is such a parallelism to be encountered in Aristotle’s understanding of rhetoric too? At first glance, the attempt at objectification and the systematizing intention of

²⁶ “daß es ebenso, wie es einen Sinn für Farben und einen für Laute, auch einen Sinn gibt spezifisch für die Rede” [ibid., p. xii].

²⁷ “geradezu als ein Bindeglied zur Seele des Menschen”; “Dasselbe, was die *Peitho* vom *Logos* aus gesehen ist, ist die *Doxa* von der Seele aus; zusammen bilden sie eine Klammer, eine Brücke, über welche die Wirkkräfte des *Logos* in die Seele hinüberfließen. ψυχῇ – δόξα – πειθῶ – λόγος, auf solchen Bausteinen gründet der *Logos* seine Macht als μέγας δυνάστης” [Buchheim 1986, pp. 21–22].

²⁸ “als Möglichkeit (*dynamis*) des Geformtwerdens” [Mainzer 1996, p. 15]. This short summary is naturally under complex. Cf. [Cohen 2012, pp. 205–226; Happ 1971; Gasser 2015], in particular the detailed overview of earlier research literature in [Happ 1971, pp. 2–49].

²⁹ “Alles Werden (*genesis*) vollzieht sich als Übergang von *dynamis* zu *energeia*, indem aus Stoff Form wird: durch Natur (*physis*) oder durch Kunst (*technē*)” [Franz 1999, p. 225].

his treatise on rhetoric leave little room for hybridization. Already the first sentences of *Rhetoric*, for instance, make the decisive claim that this *technē* – which is designated as “a counterpart of Dialectic” (ἀντίστροφος τῇ διαλεκτικῇ) [Aristotle 1926, pp. 2–3, 1354a]³⁰ – should be understood as an elementary, foundational discipline. As such, it deals with “matters that are in a manner within the cognizance of all men and not confined to any special science.”³¹ So when at the beginning of the third book, in the discussion on elocution, the voice as its fundamental element is dismissed quickly and reluctantly with the remark that, as a matter of “natural talent,” it is rather alien to the domain of a *technē* [Aristotle 1926, pp. 349, 1404a], this appears to confirm the rigid division between nature and art/technics, and a decision to side with the latter. However, even if at this point Aristotle declares everything connected with the use of the “natural” voice to be irrelevant, and hence unsuitable for his *technē*, characteristic of the systemic pragmatics of his rhetoric is the fact that while strictly speaking he does not consider its cultivation to be right, he considers it useful, even necessary.³² Thus, while from a systematic point of view the modulation of affect by means of the voice is not one of the legitimate categories of rhetorical persuasion, to dispense with it would be senseless. This pragmatic relativization of the systemic limits to what lies outside the proper domain of *technē* can on closer inspection be seen everywhere. That means that nature, strictly speaking, has long become a playing chip of Aristotelian rhetoric itself. Therefore, in speech as a form of prose, Aristotle recommends, for instance, dissimulating the tricks of the style (*lexis*) used and also discussed in the third book of *Rhetoric*. As he points out in the introductory remarks of the third book: “those who practise this artifice must conceal it and avoid the appearance of speaking artificially instead of naturally [μὴ δοκεῖν λέγειν πεπλασμένως ἀλλὰ πεφυκότως]; for that which is natural persuades, but the artificial does not,” and he extends this advice in what follows to include lexical and grammatical specifications [Aristotle 1926, pp. 352–353, 1404b]. If one wants to generalize this maxim in all its paradox, that means that the *technē* of rhetoric, in order not to jeopardize its goal (the production of conviction), must conceal its artistry in the products made according to its principles. Obviously, however, the ‘natural’ clarity and objectivity of speech are not left unaffected by this maneuver; on the contrary, this is itself the most perfect product of the *technē*

30 The Greek formulation takes a clear stance against the provocative Socratic joke about rhetoric being “the counterpart to cookery in the soul” (ἀντίστροφον ὁψοποιίας ἐν ψυχῇ) [Plato 1925, pp. 320–321, 465d].

31 περὶ τοιούτων τινῶν εἰσὶν ἃ κοινὰ τρόπον τινα ἀπάντων ἐστὶ γνωρίζειν καὶ οὐδεμιᾶς ἐπιστήμης ἀφωρισμένης [Aristotle 1926, pp. 2–3, 1354a].

32 On this strategy, Christof Rapp notes: “That is a simple schema to expand the area of rhetoric, starting from objective methods found to be good and right, with extra-objective methods.” “Das ist ein einfaches Schema, um den Bereich der Rhetorik ausgehend von den für gut und richtig befundenen, sachbezogenen Methoden um außersachliche Methoden zu erweitern” [Aristoteles 2002, p. 814].

rhētorikē. As a result, in the case of rhetoric, a strategic complication of this relation appears in the functional position of the abovementioned ontological parallelism of *physis* and *technē*.³³

5 Return/Repetitions of Rhetoric?

“Gorgias transferred the style of poetry to political speeches, for he did not think that the orator is similar to ordinary people,” Dionysius of Halicarnassus is said to have remarked;³⁴ as I have just shown, Aristotle strongly advised against demonstrations of technical competence – at least its ostentatious display, to which Gorgias of course owes something of his legendary reputation. One can hardly avoid perceiving in these tactical suggestions a basic structural pattern that will be (re-)encountered many centuries after rhetoric’s founding in entirely different theoretical and historical settings. In the critical, if not openly anti-rhetorical, understanding of language of the modern period, this pattern will lead first of all to the distinction between a ‘natural,’ unformed, basic, or zero level of speech, possibly even a language of things themselves, and speech’s ‘artificial’ rhetorical reshaping.³⁵ Exemplary for this distinction, which is generally linked with a discrediting of rhetoric as a *technē*, is René Descartes’ theory of the power of reasoning (*raisonnement*) found in the first part of his *Discourse on Method*:

Those who have the strongest power of reasoning, and who most skillfully arrange their thoughts in order to render them clear and intelligible, have the best power of persuasion even if they can but speak the language of Lower Brittany and have never learned Rhetoric.³⁶

[Descartes 1973, p. 85]

The assumption that rhetorical *dispositio* (arrangement) and *elocutio* (style) should be understood as an overcoding of both conceptual clarity and “plain speech” are among the topoi of a critique whose objections “rendered the traditional practice

³³ Here it should be added that, to the irritation of many modern readers, despite the said parallelism, in ontology too the suspicion occasionally arises that the Aristotelian understanding of nature is excessively prefigured by the practice of art. Thus, for example, “generally recurring, the process of becoming is illustrated mainly by use of examples borrowed from areas of human activity and production.” (“allgemein wiederkehrend wird der Vorgang des Werdens überhaupt durch Beispiele verdeutlicht, welche dem Gebiete menschlichen Wirkens und Hervorbringens entlehnt sind” [Hertling 1871, p. 62]).

³⁴ Γοργίας μὲν τὴν ποιητικὴν ἐρμηνείαν μετήνεγκεν εἰς λόγους πολιτικούς, οὐκ ἄξιόν ὅμοιον τὸν ῥήτορα τοῖς ιδιώταις εἶναι [Gorgias 2016a, pp. 164–165].

³⁵ For a profound and critical examination, see: [Schüttzel 1996].

³⁶ “Ceux qui ont le raisonnement le plus fort, & qui digerent le mieux leurs pensées, affin de les rendre claires & intelligibles, peuuent tousiours le mieux persuader ce qu’ils proposent, encore qu’ils ne parlassent que bas Breton, & qu’ils n’eussent iamais appris de Rhetorique” [Descartes 1902, p. 7].

and doctrine of rhetoric obsolete” [Bender and Wellbery 1990, p. 22].³⁷ Resting on the same assumption was the conviction that all rhetorical tricks were dispensable for the speech forms of truth and sincerity; indeed, that rhetorical reshaping would even sabotage the reliability and integrity of such speech forms. This last critical stage changes the ‘quantitative’ idea that the supplementary surplus of rhetorical shaping would cover over the ‘plainness’ of zero-level speech into a ‘qualitative’ phantasm of distortion. In this now largely anthropologically and socially grasped threat scenario of deception, lies, and deceit, modern anti-rhetoric is able to draw on the ontologically and epistemologically grounded Platonic judgment of its enemy.³⁸

Second and more crucially, however, the modern(ist) refounding of the rhetorical – John Bender and David E. Wellbery have gathered this under the term ‘rhetoricity’ – may also be due in large part to this basic pattern. This has shown itself to be productive in two ways: first, by becoming the occasion for polemical rejection; second, as a result of its displacement into the structural architecture of language itself.

On the first point: When, in the winter semester of 1872/1873 at the University of Basel, Friedrich Nietzsche read “The Rhetoric of the Greeks and Romans” before two intrepid listeners, he added to his expositions oriented to the customary *partes orationis* a paragraph on a foundational topic: namely, on the relation between language and rhetoric, which he formulated with maximum concision as “language is rhetoric,” thereby annulling precisely the idea of the distinction between original/‘natural’ and rhetorical/‘artificial’ language and speech events [Nietzsche 1995, p. 425].³⁹ As we know, Nietzsche owes his thesis not to the tradition or the founding history of rhetoric itself, but to the reading of a now-forgotten philosopher of language, Gustav Gerber [Meijers 1988; Meijers and Stingelin 1988]. Nietzsche had come across the first, just-published volume of Gerber’s *Sprache als Kunst (Language as Art)* at the university library in the autumn of 1872, and thus during the immediate preparations for his lecture. Here, one could find passages that might indeed make one think of a

37 Alongside the mentioned ideal of transparency and objectivity, for Bender and Wellbery four additional factors contribute decisively to this delegitimation: the transition from the literary-aesthetic system to the paradigm of subjective expression; the liberal idea of a political discourse understood as “communal exchange”; the replacement of a predominantly oratorical model of communication (forum, pulpit, court, etc.) with printing and the press; the nation state as a political model of governance that replaces ideas of the polis and the court [Bender and Wellbery 1990, p. 22].

38 And it does this even though such an ethical framing of the Platonic critique was entirely alien. One should not forget that Plato’s *Politeia* adhered of all things to the social steering function of rhetorical performing arts. Even in the ideal polis, deception remains an indispensable pedagogical instrument (see in particular the distinction between τὸ τῷ ὄντι ψεῦδος and τὸ ἐν τοῖς λόγοις ψεῦδος, 382a–383c). If it issues from a regime of truth, the Platonic Socrates generally has little to oppose to the pragmatics of deception [Latour 1999, pp. 216–265 (chaps. 7 and 8)].

39 The full sentence is: “*language is rhetoric*, because it desires to convey only a *doxa* [opinion], not an *epistēmē* [knowledge]” [Nietzsche 1989, p. 23] (“die Sprache ist Rhetorik, denn sie will nur eine δόξα, keine ἐπιστήμη übertragen” [Nietzsche 1995, p. 425]).

reactualization of Gorgian rhetoric within the theory of language: "All words are sound images and, in relation to their meaning, are, in themselves and from the beginning, tropes," Gerber pointed out, and in this way took up again the thesis of discontinuity found in the treatise *On Nonbeing or On Nature*.⁴⁰ Only, he used this insight relatively specifically in order to correct modernist, or naturalist, notions of meaning: "Just as the origin of the word was an artificial one, it also changes its meaning essentially only through artistic intuition. There are no 'proper words' – i.e. prose – in language."⁴¹

Nietzsche's radicalization, however, no longer confines itself to the repudiation of the linguistic common sense of the time but expands and converts rhetoric into a "methodological instrument of a linguistically grounded epistemology."⁴² How exactly this is to be understood is shown by the paper "On Truth and Lying in an Extra-Moral Sense." Leaving aside for the moment all its anthropological ramifications, the text's extended 'fable' can simply be read as the story of a canceling of rhetoric's material activity in favor of a stable conceptual architecture:

As the Romans and Etruscans carved up the sky into rigid mathematical sectors and assigned a god to each delimited space as in a temple, so every nation has such a mathematically divided conceptual sky above it and understands by the demand for truth that each conceptual god must be sought only in *his* own sphere. In this respect man can probably be admired as a mighty architectural genius who succeeds in building an infinitely complicated conceptual cathedral on foundations that move like flowing water; of course, in order to anchor itself to such a foundation, the building must be light as gossamer – delicate enough to be carried along by the wave, yet strong enough not to be blown apart by the wind. As an architectural genius, man excels the bee; for it builds out of wax which it collects from nature, while man builds out of the much more delicate material of the concepts, which he must fabricate out of his own self. In this respect he is quite admirable, but not because of his desire for truth, for pure knowledge of things.⁴³ [Nietzsche 1989, p. 251]

40 "Alle Wörter sind Lautbilder und sind in Bezug auf ihre Bedeutung an sich und von Anfang an Tropen" [Gerber 1871, p. 333 (emphasis spaced out in the original)].

41 "Wie der Ursprung des Wortes ein künstlicher war, so verändert es auch seine Bedeutung wesentlich nur durch künstlerische Intuition. 'Eigentliche Worte' d.h. Prosa giebt es in der Sprache nicht" [Gerber 1871, p. 333 (emphasis spaced out in the original)].

42 "methodische Instrument einer sprachkritisch fundierten Erkenntniskritik" [Kopperschmidt 1994, p. 42].

43 "Wie die Römer und Etrusker sich den Himmel durch starre mathematische Linien zerschnitten und in einen solchermassen abgegrenzten Raum als in ein templum einen Gott bannten, so hat jedes Volk über sich einen solchen mathematisch zertheilten Begriffshimmel und versteht nun unter der Forderung der Wahrheit, dass jeder Begriffsgott nur in *seiner* Sphäre gesucht werde. Man darf hier den Menschen wohl bewundern als ein gewaltiges Baugenie, dem auf beweglichen Fundamenten und gleichsam auf fließendem Wasser das Aufthürmen eines unendlich complicirten Begriffsdomes gelingt; freilich, um auf solchen Fundamenten Halt zu finden, muss es ein Bau, wie aus Spinnfäden sein, so zart, um von der Welle mit fortgetragen, so fest, um nicht von dem Winde auseinander geblasen zu werden. Als Baugenie erhebt sich solcher Maassen der Mensch weit über die Biene: diese baut aus Wachs, das sie aus der Natur zusammenholt, er aus dem weit zarteren Stoffe

In the very “drive to form metaphors,” however, which Nietzsche’s short text understands as a “fundamental desire in man” [ibid., p. 254],⁴⁴ one recognizes without difficulty the four activity criteria formulated at the beginning: the self-movement of “the mass of images that originally gushed forth as hot magma out of the primeval faculty of human fantasy” [ibid., p. 252];⁴⁵ the dynamic emergence of the primary “intuitive metaphor[s]” of which each “is individual and unique and therefore always eludes any commentary” [ibid., p. 250];⁴⁶ a twofold pragmatics – on the one hand, that of a primary behavior whose “most universal effect is deception” [ibid., p. 246], on the other, the stabilizing “peace agreement” [ibid., p. 247] of conceptual suspension;⁴⁷ a hybridity, finally, that already illuminates the coupling of drive and metaphor formation.

Nietzsche’s considerations on rhetorical epistemology received attention only later and ultimately as the effect of a second, even more improbable reconfiguration of rhetoric. This second, let us call it structuralist, repetition of rhetoric did then indeed lead to a renewed engagement with the (founding) history of rhetoric. Thus, in his précis of “old rhetoric,” Roland Barthes is able to distinguish between a “rhetoric of the syntagm” (“rhétorique du syntagme”) and a rhetoric “of the feature” (“du trait”): “There are, by and large, in a complete art of rhetoric [...] two poles: a syntagmatic pole (the order of the parts of the discourse, *taxis* or *dispositio*) and a paradigmatic pole (the ‘figures’ of rhetoric, *lexis* or *elocutio*)” [Barthes 1988, pp. 17–18].⁴⁸

Barthes lets this unfolding begin with Gorgias, who introduced “a code immanent to prose (though borrowed from poetry)” into the structuring and mapping of speech, and thereby – by means of “words of similar consonance, symmetrical sentences, antitheses reinforced by assonance, alliteration, metaphor” – opened up a “paradigmatic perspective” to the *logos* [ibid., p. 18].⁴⁹ One easily sees how the double pattern of rhetorical shaping is reactualized in this systematization, and to which

der Begriffe, die er erst aus sich fabriciren muss. Er ist hier sehr zu bewundern – aber nur nicht wegen seines Triebes zur Wahrheit, zum reinen Erkennen der Dinge” [Nietzsche 1973, p. 376].

44 “Jener Trieb zur Metapherbildung, jener Fundamentaltrieb des Menschen” [Nietzsche 1973, p. 381].

45 “einer ursprünglich in hitziger Flüssigkeit aus dem Urvermögen menschlicher Phantasie hervorströmenden Bildermasse” [Nietzsche 1973, p. 377].

46 “Während jede Anschauungsmetapher individuell und ohne ihres Gleichen ist und deshalb allem Rubriciren immer zu entfliehen weiß” [Nietzsche 1973, p. 376. Engl. trans. *Friedrich Nietzsche on Rhetoric and Language*, p. 250].

47 “Seine allgemeinste Wirkung ist Täuschung”; “Friedensschluss” [Nietzsche 1973, pp. 370, 371].

48 “Il y a en gros dans l’art rhétorique complet [...] deux pôles : un pôle syntagmatique : c’est l’ordre des partis du discours, la *taxis* ou *dispositio* ; et un pôle paradigmatique : ce sont les ‘figures’ de rhétorique, la *lexis* ou *elocutio*” [Barthes 1970, p. 176].

49 “un code immanent à la prose (bien qu’emprunté à la poésie)”; “mots de même consonance, symétrie des phrases, renforcements des antithèses par assonances, métaphores, allitérations”; “perspective paradigmatique” [Barthes 1970, p. 176].

linguistic approach it is due. Appearing in the place of the referentialist distinction between a 'zero-level' utterance and a rhetorical reshaping – and thus of a two-layer model – is a biaxial system of syntagm and paradigm. The theoretical source of this rereading is Roman Jakobson, who, as Barthes notes, "[o]ut of all rhetoric [...] retained only two figures, metaphor and metonymy, making them into an emblem of the two axes of language" [ibid., p. 46].⁵⁰ If I insist on the distinction between the layer model and the axis model, this is because Jakobson's communication model could itself easily result in the misunderstanding that both are logically equivalent. Does the relay not offer the 'poetic function' for this, owing to which the paradigmatic "rhetoric of the figure" can be converted into that of the syntagm? One would then rediscover the basic pattern outlined at the beginning of this section – only that it is now no longer named with the distinction between 'proper' and 'rhetorically shaped' speech, but is concretized in one between 'grammatical' and 'poetic' speech. However, such a change of name would be the result of an unduly reductive reading of Jakobson's modeling. Indeed, if we read the relevant sentence in his paper "Linguistics and Poetics" more attentively, another picture emerges: "The poetic function projects the principle of equivalence from the axis of selection into the axis of combination" [Jakobson 1981 (1960), p. 27].⁵¹ Thus, it is by no means a question of tipping the paradigmatic axis of the figure as it were onto the syntagmatic, but rather of *projecting* the principle of equivalence from one into the other. The function, not the ontology, of speech forms is negotiable; in other words, the 'poetic function' measures the "operative degrees of freedom" of the relation between syntagm and paradigm;⁵² it does not designate a status of speech, as in the two-layer model the figured speech in relation to 'plain speech' for instance. That such models are of little use analytically had, incidentally, already been emphasized by Jakobson himself in the 1930s when he described them sarcastically as "equations with two unknowns" [Jakobson 1981 (1933/34), p. 743].

It is precisely due to this functionality, too, that the improbability of a structuralist reconfiguration of rhetorical matters of activity is slightly reduced, but without it disappearing altogether – for obviously a theory of language and communication that wants to build on the foundation of linguistic invariants will hardly be able to be brought in line with rhetoric's situational and performative understanding of language. Even if Jakobson criticized Ferdinand de Saussure's strict suppression of the pragmatic dimension of language (*parole*) early on, he never doubted the precedence of structure (*langue*). And when he decrees that "the speaker, as a rule, is only a word-user, not a word-coiner" [Jakobson 1971 (1956), p. 242], then on a systematic level this idea and the underlying understanding of language diverges fundamentally

⁵⁰ "De toute la rhétorique, Jakobson n'a retenu que deux figures, la métaphore et la métonymie, pour en faire l'emblème des deux axes du langage" [Barthes 1970, p. 195].

⁵¹ Original in italics. Cf. on this [Simon 2018].

⁵² "operative Freiheitsgrade" [Kammer and Krauthausen 2020, p. 40].

from the Gorgian “wor(l)d-coiner” as well as from his or her Nietzschean double. Should one therefore be concerned about the active matter search profile of my reading of rhetoric?

What cannot be disputed at any rate is the hybridity that plays a literally central role in Jakobson’s structuralist understanding of language, and doubtless appears more prominently than in the models of “old rhetoric.” “Language straddles nature and culture” Jakobson remarks. Linguistics is seen as a “link between science and the humanities.”⁵³ Starting from this hybrid point (in the architecture of Jakobson’s model, this can be designated positively: the phoneme [Jakobson 2002 (1939)]⁵⁴), the biaxial structure model is now suddenly set in motion as a dynamic machine of both structure formation and articulation. Language, according to Jakobson, is a structure in motion. The task of linguistics will be delineated in a correspondingly kinetic fashion: “Linguistics is concerned with language in all its aspects – language in operation, language in drift, language in the nascent state, and language in dissolution” [Jakobson 1971 [1956], p. 239]. But what is the material of this activity? The point of Jakobson’s theory of language consists in the fact that these materials of a moving structure are mobilized as well. To describe this, he uses the biaxial model that he opposes to the stasis of Saussure’s understanding of language. Thus, beginning with the irreducible starting point of the phoneme, all linguistic entities can become the object/agent of a dual operation themselves: “Speech implies a *selection* of certain linguistic entities and their *combination* into linguistic units of a higher degree of complexity” [ibid., p. 241]. The differential unity of contiguity and remoteness that determines the relationship mode of combination, and which Jakobson associates with the trope of metonymy, also delineates all aspects of language – from the communication structure between addresser and addressee to the syntactic, ‘horizontal’ linking of the sentence elements and the textual integration of the latter. The second differential unity of similarity and contrast – which Jakobson associates with the trope of metaphor – keeps the processuality of the dynamic language machine running by adding to the ‘horizontal’ axis of the code the ‘vertical’ axis of the context. The reason for Jakobson’s choice of the aphasic as the test case of his theory of language is because the latter exemplifies the coupling of these two constitutive axes as it were *ex negativo*,

53 “Die Sprache sitzt rittlings zwischen Natur und Kultur”; “Bindeglied zwischen den Natur- und den Geisteswissenschaften” [Jakobson 1970, p. 33].

54 The phoneme is the founding element of a “science of form” (“Formwissenschaft” [Jakobson 2002 [1939], p. 281]) in which “the meaning-conferring act but by no means the meaning-fulfilling act is given” (“der bedeutungsverleihende Akt, keineswegs aber der bedeutungserfüllende Akt gegeben [ist]” [ibid., p. 292]). The biaxial model of language is also developed in the two Copenhagen lectures delivered in 1939 – conceived temporally and to break through the Saussurian dichotomy of *langue* and *parole*: “Just as the linguistic structure as a whole, the linguistic signs in particular are also two-dimensional” (“Wie das Sprachgebilde im Ganzen, so sind auch die Sprachzeichen im Besonderen zweidimensional” [ibid., p. 307]).

and is therefore able to expose their fundamentally physiologically/psychologically grounded emergence:

Thus every level of linguistic units [i.e. phoneme-morpheme-word-sentence-utterance] presents a different relationship between code and context, and these differences are of great consequence for the various problems of linguistic structure and especially for the study of aphasia.

[Jakobson 1971 (1955), p. 234]

Consequently, aphasics suffer from “similarity disorder” when the context-forming interconnection of the levels of language becomes impossible, and from “contiguity disorder” when they are incapable of the syntagmatic linking of linguistic elements [ibid., p. 238].⁵⁵

Thus, it is no longer the gods – and no longer veiled speech, poetry, or meta-language – that are enthroned over the speech events determined by this “bipolarity” [Jakobson 1971 (1956), p. 259]. While the Aristophanean Socrates wanted to consign the control over the powerful dynamics of speech to the divine triumvirate of *Chaos*, *Tongue*, and *Clouds*, the secular governing authorities of structure-opening sound events, the structuring dynamics of speech, and the structure-stabilizing two-dimensionality of paradigm and syntagm have superseded Aristophanes’ unruly divinities. The touchstone of the *rhetorikē technē* was a parsimonious farmer; the touchstones of Jakobson’s dynamic understanding of language are similarity- or contiguity-disturbed aphasics. In the meantime, rhetoric’s active matters continue to play under this new patronage.

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55 For a more detailed discussion, see Jakobson [1971 (1956), pp. 244–254].

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