Critiques of Knowing

Situated textualities in science, computing and the arts Lynette Hunter





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Critiques of Knowing

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Lorraine Code, York University

Lynette Hunter is Professor of the History of Rhetoric at the University of Leeds. She worked for a number of years as a biochemist and laboratory technician, and has recently become widely known for her performance art lectures. Hunter has published in the fields of critical theory, feminism, literary criticism, rhetoric and the history and philosophy of science. Her books include *Rhetorical Space, Modern Allegory and Fantasy, Outsider Notes: Feminist Approaches to Ideology, Writers/ Readers and Publishing.*

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Contents

	Acknowledgements	vi
Intr	oduction	1
1	The ethos of the nation state: ideology, discourse and standpoint	8
2	Rhetoric and artificial intelligence: computing applications in the sciences and humanities	28
3	AI and representation: a study of a rhetorical context for intellectual legitimacy	61
4	The socialising of context: methodologies for hypertext	86
5	Feminist critiques of science: from standpoint to rhetorical stance	124
6	A feminist critique of the rhetorical stance of contemporary aesthetics: alternative standpoints	162
	Notes	196
	Bibliography	222
	Index	239

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Introduction

This book will attempt to offer a study of textuality, particularly in the sciences and artificial intelligence in computing science which has cast itself in the role of a discipline which self-consciously examines the way that science represents knowledge. Textuality allows us to explore the ways we represent aspects of our lives within conventional systems. It also helps us understand how we articulate values that do not have representation. Like knowledge, textuality is bound into power, for textuality is both a mode of knowing and the way we articulate knowledge.

Knowledge and textuality are usually taken as neutral areas by analyses that work within an institutional structure that obscures the connections with ruling power. This is what I call the ideology-subject axis, which I explore in detail in Chapter 1, and an understanding of its rhetoric lies at the centre of my argument and my understanding of the recent development in standpoint theory of a concept of critical realism. Within systems of inquiry that foreground particular connections with ruling power, such as many discourse studies, knowledge and textuality are often taken as determined or constructed or constituted by an ideological system. These studies, implicitly at least, depend on the notion of a constituted subject, and some, with extraordinary insensitivity and blindness have come to define those people outside of the system as 'abject'. However, within the theory of situated knowledge and in standpoint theory, knowledge and textuality are taken as engaged in by groups of people working on negotiating questions of value and action among relations of non-ruling power, and between the non-ruling and the ruling.

In the process of studying the place of textuality within science, I am also concerned to look at what I call the 'gesture to the arts' made by both mainstream and standpoint critiques, and to explore the place of textuality in a number of disciplines. The final chapter of the book extends the standpoint critique in feminist science and technology studies into aesthetics. The insistent gesture to arts strategies of beauty or plurality as a possible resolution for science, does not understand that much recognised 'art' is just as systematic as science, that 'beauty', like the 'success' of science, is also an artefact. But aesthetics is also a field that is tied to the Greek root of the word, to

'feelings', which are generated by all disciplines, and I would agree with Alison Jagger that emotions or feelings are often unauthorised modes of knowing: the 'rational', for example, being an authorised emotion. Aesthetics and epistemology are closely intertwined, for without articulation knowledge remains tacit, and the main focus of the extension of standpoint theory into aesthetics, is to argue for an understanding of 'situated' textuality, analogous to situated knowledge. Situated textualities are where people work on words together to build common ground for the articulation and valuing of knowledge, and to argue for them I draw not only from contemporary social history of science but also from the history of rhetoric.

Standpoint theory argues that knowledge articulated from the standpoint of those excluded from ruling relations of power is particularly important. Because of the exclusion, the knowledge that is offered from that excluded position is quite different to that current within the ethical and ideological systems of a society and its culture, and is therefore a source of assessment and potential change and renewal. The theory is concerned with articulating situated knowledge, with retaining a concept of the real in the sense of critical rather than naive realism, and with re-defining the 'individual' to account for people who are not subjects, or to account for the not-subjected of people's lives. It is important to say, however, that situated textuality and standpoint theory are not special case strategies. All forms of knowledge may be analysed in these terms.

In science, where standpoint has been explored at length, there is in recent debate and as the later chapters discuss, a critique of scientific objectivity based on its self-limitation resulting from the exclusion of, among other things, women's knowledge. In politics, there have been critiques of the curious doubleness of the autonomous yet universalist man constructed by the liberal democratic social contract, because the necessary isolation of that individual obscures the situatedness of their lives. In philosophy, we find the critique of value-free assumptions in both empiricism and idealism, because the notion of 'value-free' denies history. And in the social sciences, there has been the debate between quantitative and qualitative methodology, the latter arguing that verisimilitude, repeatability and enumeration evade the contextual pressures of living.

In each case, the obscured, evaded, denied, excluded situated knowledge is without authority, often if not usually, without words. The critiques delineate tacit knowledge of various kinds, and all recognise the need to work on words to bring those tacit knowledges into communication. In nearly every case the pathway out toward agency that the critiques offer, is through story, narrative or poetics, yet there is no parallel critique of the aesthetic constraints on these materials. The result is a philosophical hiatus that gestures toward the arts but with no concept of the situated textuality needed to articulate situated knowledge, its contexts and its value.

Rhetoric is a field that insists on the bringing together of textualities, society and politics. It has traditionally been concerned with social context, and has always distinguished between the situated, the systematic and the authoritarian. It is also concerned with different approaches to truth: truth as certain, as plausible and as negotiated or probable. And rhetoric is also concerned with the ways individuals and groups wield power, the ways they limit and extend the possibilities of human interaction. Throughout the book I turn to writings on rhetoric from the classical period, and particularly to the texts on rhetoric by Plato and Aristotle. Much of the elaboration of the political structure of democracy is bound up in those rhetorics, as is the development of epistemology and attitudes to value. This infusion of the classical throughout many discourses has led to virtual images of Plato and Aristotle that are formed in each historical place and time, answering to its needs. All of the ensuing discussions return to these classical texts, partly to help dismantle unhelpful screens in earlier metadiscourses, and partly to rebuild alternative versions more appropriate to today. Much of my reading of Plato and Aristotle affirms and lends rhetorical weight to situated knowledges and standpoint theory. In bringing a refreshed tradition to a contemporary need articulated in feminist theory, the rhetorical analysis also moves the theory from epistemology into aesthetics, both in my critique of the aesthetics of different disciplines and in my exploration of different kinds of textuality: textuality as inadequate and hence merely a code, textuality as (in)adequate and hence transgressed and transcended, and textuality as necessarily limited by the materiality of language and therefore the ground for common work on words.

Standpoint theory comes close to discourse studies in many of its concerns, yet the concern for critical realism separates the two. Discourse studies are profoundly caught up in the constitution of social systems, and find it difficult to deal with the notion of the 'real', for reality is messy and requires that systems relax and get snarled up in the nets of living. Yet each does vital work: standpoint theory in its focus on non-ruling relations, and discourse studies in their focus on the constraints of ruling power that constitute individuals. To distinguish between ruling and non-ruling relations, is to distinguish between areas that need different kinds of rhetoric, that manifest themselves not only in different kinds of knowledge but also in different kinds of textuality. And explicit through the book is the political context of the liberal democratic social contract that underwrites the dominant modes of knowledge and textuality with which I live, and which it mediates through the rhetoric of the ideology that represents many western nation states to their subjects.

The first chapter of this book analyses the ideology-subject axis and its rhetoric, in order to assess the connections of knowledge and textuality with ruling power. I argue that ideology is the ethos of the nation state. The strategies of this ideology are common to plausible rhetoric as defined throughout the history of recorded rhetorics. They include: the assumption

of common grounds rather than active discussion and agreement to them; the veiling, hiding and obscuring of the constructed status of these common grounds; the isolation of the system to protect grounds from question and change; and the procedure of arguing always within the system, always from the accepted common grounds. When one knows that this set of strategies is happening, the rhetoric can be recognised as an expedient rhetoric that is often successful.

At the centre of the rhetorical stance of ideology is the assumption that representation can be adequate to a lived reality rather than a set of negotiations around the limitations of language. It implies that communication, here political communication between the individual and ruling power, cannot be negotiated differently, only shifted to greater adequacy. The practice of this assumption develops into the concept of the isolated, autonomous subject, increasingly constituted by ideology as the state acquires the stability necessary to its legitimation. Further, as it develops stable representations, it leads to a focus on visual accuracy and repeatability that underwrites the concept of objective knowledge. The ideology of the nation state is common to both politics and science.

A constant thread through all the chapters, is the recognition that much recent political theory takes science as the 'best-case' for politics. And, as I examine in detail in the last two chapters of the book, feminist standpoint theorists in the social studies of science offer direct critiques of the political systems that support it. Science is appealing to analysts of the representative democratic state, since it works with a stable set of parameters that enclose its grounds, isolate its community and allow it to be subject to a rational logic that achieves its success by gaining legitimation from the structures of the system that generates it. Hence issues of legitimation, and how science or political systems justify themselves to their constituents, become central. Modern science has achieved this stable state through increasing involvement in industry and in commerce that need stable technology to maximise profit. Industry and commerce also need stable politics, and since the seventeenth century capitalist nation states have achieved this stability though ideology. Chapter 1 outlines the rhetorical stance of ideology, which stabilises the representation of those in power as well as the identity of individual citizens who become subject to that power. I argue that the stance purposively excludes some social relations and most communities in order to remain stable, and constructs an axis of representation, relating ideology to the subject.

Aristotle describes exactly this phenomenon of communication in his discussion of the rhetoric appropriate to 'science', by which he means the conceptual knowledge developed within a small group of people, rather than an experimental method that could be used by many. He spells out the strategies and devices that are used to construct stability and repeatability, but he also says that such rhetoric is not appropriate to social interaction because it is enclosed, and hence obstructs negotiation and the discussion of differences necessary to political action. Hence expedient rhetoric aimed

at success is not appropriate for politics because of its potential for coercion, demagoguery and force. What is interesting is that with the development of ideology in the modern period of western history, politics assumes a rhetorical structure similar to that of Aristotelian 'science', and for the same reason. For three centuries, the politics of western liberal democracies was a club culture, with an extremely small proportion of the population representing a slightly larger number, ruling the whole, inevitably from their own experience and regretfully in their own interests because there were no permitted competing views. Aristotle was not so worried about this because the dominance of the oral medium meant, to him, that the powerful would not stay long in power. But the rhetoric does not work out that way in a period of nation state consolidation with capital, and with the print media and other technologies distancing discussion and stabilising representation.

Central to the argument of this book is that both ideology as representative of the state, and the language that represents scientific practices, use similar rhetorical strategies and devices but for different reasons. The experimentation at the heart of modern science, which has come to define the 'natural sciences', is in effect the primary medium of scientific textuality and should locate its aesthetics. But in conveying the activity of that textuality, science uses language to communicate to other people. However, modern science developed during an historical period when theories of language were attempting, unsuccessfully, to achieve full adequacy to the real, and since language is always different to reality, it appears always to be inadequate. The response of science to this dilemma, which is discussed at length and in detail by scientists during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, is to use verbal language as a code, and to employ mathematical language, which of course appears to be more exact because it operates wherever possible within a predefined terrain. Other scientists can understand that there is a real world with which the experiment engages, but for the large part of the population which is unfamiliar with experiment, the secondorder code of language is the reality of science.

In Chapter 2, I argue that today, this understanding of science is exacerbated by the recent development of computing science and particularly of artificial intelligence (AI). Neither computing science nor AI deal immediately with the natural world; they are, not surprisingly, often linked with mathematics and philosophy. However, the rhetoric of the textuality of computing mimics that of the second-order code of science and takes language as inadequate to reality. The widespread use of computers throughout the modern nation states of Europe, North America, Australia and Japan, at the least, has given weight and practice to this understanding of science. Hence also, many analyses from political philosophy, in their reference to the scientific model of language and rhetoric, are taking an artefact as a best-case example. They tautologically use an ideological structure to justify the structure of ideology. By way of a rhetorical analysis of the textual representations

that science uses, most distinctively demonstrated in computing science and especially in AI, Chapters 2–4 offer a critique of the techniques frequently used for representing what science does. At the same time, using the example of humanities computing, these chapters study the pervasiveness of the belief that these techniques are indeed what science has to offer. The commentary suggests that the persuasion is particularly effective when adopted by the arts and humanities where textuality is not used as second-order code but as primary material, albeit within an aesthetic system which also treats language as (in)adequate and strives always to transgress or transcend it. It has to be said that many people working in the arts and humanities have rejected computing precisely because it mimics the set of epistemological conditions that they challenge, but with hypertext, which seems to offer different strategies, some of that resistance has begun to break down.

The third chapter turns to a study of what mainstream philosophy of science that is concerned with computing and AI, says about the representations used by science. The argument here suggests that these philosophers of science, with a few exceptions, underwrite a notion of textuality that explicitly draws on the (in)adequacy of language and results in representation either as second-order code or as transcendence/transgression. These philosophers also frequently gesture to beauty or plurality as a possible resolution for science, and do not understand that much recognised 'art' is just as systematic as science. However, this misunderstanding is not surprising, since many critics and intellectuals who comment on art do not themselves recognise the systematic structure of 'beauty' nor the ideological construction of plurality. Indeed the one is frequently offered as a resolution to the other, in an essentialist-relativist standoff that is redoubled by political and aesthetic debates about authenticity as identity politics as against multiculturalism.

Chapter 4 works from a rhetorical critique of dominant theories of language and textuality as (in)adequate, to suggest that there are different kinds of first-order textuality or textuality as primary material, and that the different textualities posit different kinds of legitimating practices for knowledge, different ways for people to represent value and to value representation. The critique returns to computing and to a case study from hypertext methodology to emphasise that no technique is enclosing, isolating and reductive, or exploratory, contextualising and flexible, in itself; nor is either authenticity or self-reflexiveness in itself enabling. Communicative texts from all disciplines need a rhetorical analysis of stance, which will position the techniques and strategies historically, politically and socially. Such an analysis situates the textuality, and in doing so situates the knowledge.

The concept of language as (in)adequate to the real is also central to theories of aesthetics and criticism in the post-Renaissance period. Chapters 5 and 6 move through a standpoint critique of science to a critique of aesthetics. Within the modern nation state, the artist is cast as the allowed or permitted transgressor of ideological enclosure, and intellectuals or critics are those who articulate to the state the kind of transgression being enacted. Art itself

is perceived to be activity that attempts to transcend the inadequacy of ideological limitation. In doing so it produces beauty as it wrests some element of social reality from ideological obscuring into cultural articulation. At the moment of articulation such work produces intense joy, and partly because it sits so neatly into the interstices of ideology it is often called 'truth'. Yet none of these designations account for the personal and individual work on words and other media carried out by artists. As I argue in Chapter 5, these designations are critical theories of reception and intervention by and for an art that is produced by licensed citizens of the nation state.

What is missing from these critiques, and what this book will move toward, is a critique of the critical and aesthetic discourses for talking about communication, textuality and the arts generally. Without a standpoint critique of the arts, the gesture toward art's strategies made by commentators working in other areas, implicitly takes all those strategies as a good thing, whereas anyone working in the arts knows that some are more appropriate than others. Furthermore, on the whole, the arts themselves are uncritical about the way they present themselves to the public, and without a better understanding of what the arts do in terms of textuality, the understanding of situated knowledge will come to a standstill.

Without an understanding of rhetorical stance and the situatedness of textuality, standpoint can and has been dismissed as identity politics. Yet with a concept of situatedness that rhetoric can offer both to knowledge and text (and to other areas beyond the scope of this book, such as sexuality), personal experience can be positioned with respect to conversation, decision, action and value, within specific groups of people having specific needs. A rhetorical understanding of that situatedness also makes it possible for communities to negotiate with other communities in a larger political field.

Rhetoric argues that language is inexorably different to the real world, which is why language has to be worked on in specific contexts of negotiation over communication or in situated textualities. As a result, I present this analysis as one also based on my own experience as a practising biochemist from 1968-78, as a humanities computing teacher and user from 1980-95, and as a writer and artist all my remembered life. The structure of the book is interspersed with stories, anecdotes and accounts of my personal engagement with these disciplines. The interspersals are at first abrupt as they erupt through the density of memory, and are most fully told in the final chapter. There I speak about my current teaching, in which, with the help of others, I try to educate other people in strategies for conversation and common action with other texts, other knowledges and other people, of quite different needs and positions. The concluding discussion begins to ask what science and computing might be like, what the recognised arts might be like, and indeed what politics might be like, if they engaged more substantially with rhetorical negotiation, probability and community.

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