

## **Rhetoric and the Humanities: New Perspectives on Culture, Arts, and the Media**

Nora Berning

**Abstract:**

In his 2013 monograph *Modern Rhetoric in Culture, Arts, and Media* (de Gruyter), Joachim Knape develops a modern theory of rhetoric that sheds light on the communicative and cultural aspects that have thus far been neglected by scholars of rhetoric. Knape concentrates on selected fields of application (literature, music, graphics, feature films) that allow him to demonstrate that rhetorical studies are of increasing relevance for the humanities and for society more generally. Though Knape's work is firmly grounded in rhetorical approaches, his book opens up portals for dialogue between rhetoric and poetics as well as between rhetoric and visual studies or media theory, to name but a few examples. Knape's case studies can thus serve as starting points for further research on goal-directed and strategic communication across the disciplines.

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Joachim Knape's *Modern Rhetoric in Culture, Arts, and Media* is a comprehensive monograph of thirteen essays that provide the reader with a solid basis for rhetorical studies in various fields of research, such as cultural studies, literary studies, and media studies. In view of the media-saturated environment of the twenty-first century, a modern theory of rhetoric cannot solely concern itself with linguistic forms of communication. Rather, it has to acknowledge the fact that strategic and goal-oriented communication takes place in various cultural and artistic realms. Literature, music, graphics, and film, the fields of application that Knape has selected, are certainly not the only ones worth studying, but definitely make for an interesting read – for both newcomers to the field and well-established scholars of rhetoric.

On the basis of a wide range of fields of application, Knape sets out to develop a scientific theory of rhetoric that "concentrates on specific questions and problems of communication involved in the persuasive action of humans" (2). Knape's theory is rooted in two fundamental assumptions: The first is grounded in his definition of rhetoric as "the communicative method by which a change (metabole) of opinion in a society or group can be peacefully achieved" (1); he argues thereby that a modern theory of rhetoric is necessarily also a theory of communication. The second underlying assumption of Knape's book is that precisely because communication is deeply enmeshed with culture, rhetoric is, moreover, part and parcel of social and cultural theory.

Knape discusses the disciplinary triangle of rhetoric, communication, and culture. He does that through the lens of a series of comprehensive case studies, with the help of which he demonstrates the meaning and function of rhetoric in culture, arts, and the media more generally. For literary studies scholars, chapters 6-8 are of special interest, because it is in these chapters that Knape establishes fruitful portals for dialogue between rhetoric and literary communication. By drawing on medieval chronicles, a short story by the Austrian novelist Thomas Bernhard, and a novel by the American author Katherine Anne Porter, he emphasizes that particular synergy.

Knape argues that these hybrid texts in which the worlds of fact and fiction merge display "components of cognitive influence" (16), which, following Aristotle, could be called the rhetorical factor in literature. Given the focus of these chapters on literary communication under the aegis of rhetoric, it is quite surprising that Knape does not engage with James Phelan's rhetorical theory of narrative: though it is not primarily concerned with hybrid genres, it would have certainly enriched the theoretical framework of his study.

Chapters 10-13, which deal with intersemiotic rhetoric and media rhetoric, should attract the attention of cultural and media studies scholars. In these chapters, Knape sheds light on interesting rhetorical aspects of communication that have thus far been neglected by musicologists (viz. rhetoric of music), visual studies and film scholars (viz. rhetoric in images and feature films). "The starting point of all these discussions", Knape writes in the introduction, "is the question of whether rhetoric can exist outside of verbal language at all (e.g. in other acoustic and optical systems of signs)" (17).

This question, when reformulated in such a way that the word 'narrativity' takes the place of 'rhetoric', is also at the centre of current research in trans- and intermedial narratology. In my own work, *Towards a Critical Ethical Narratology* (WVT, 2013), I have shown that it is possible to conceive of non-fiction novels, photographs, graphic novels, and hypertexts as literary manifestations of ethical and political communication. They can be analysed with the help of an overarching narratological framework that brings together the branches of ethical, cultural, and transmedial narratology.

If Knape had elaborated more on the theoretical interfaces between poetics and rhetoric in general and the issue of narrativity more specifically, he could have provided an even richer modern theory of rhetoric that is not hermetically sealed off from already existing research. Knape's reluctance to engage with theories, models, and methods that have emerged in his main areas of interest is irritating: rather than pointing out the limitations of these frameworks, and thereby offering constructive criticism, Knape puts forth unproductive claims such as "media theory is in the process of sinking into terminological and systematic chaos at universities around the world" (19) or "these approaches [rhetoric in images as one finds it in visual studies; N.B.] still lack a convincing foundational theory" (17).

While it is beyond the scope of this review to identify and discuss prominent counter-examples, it should be noted that both media theory and visual studies have undoubtedly a lot to offer for scholars of rhetoric. Any other insight would have been not only a pathetic display for the aforementioned fields of research, but also for Knape's study itself. It would have automatically turned into a largely self-referential discourse, which it is fortunately not.