

THE AMBIENT SPECTACLE

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Abstract: This thesis seeks to synthesize contemporary discourses on the agency of matter and rhetoric as an ambient force alongside more traditional theories of the epideictic branch of rhetoric. This “new materialist epideictic” is then utilized to revitalize Guy Debord’s theory of the Spectacle, itself an ambient epideictic apparatus, in order to articulate a theory of the “ambient Spectacle,” a rhetorical (and critical) theory that finds hegemonic ethical evaluations to be dispersed into ambient environs as they are both experienced and inhabited. This theory of the ambient Spectacle is utilized to explore the formation of communal subjectivity, the experience of hegemonic epideictic rhetoric via encounters with matter, and the masking of effects linked to the formation of precarious futures, taking the pervasiveness of plastics and the climate-footprint of animal-byproducts as two primary examples. This thesis closes by proposing the value of “radical reattunement,” a means of ceasing to identify with the ambient Spectacle, shifting existing entanglements, and, in reattuning to the existing ambience, forming an Other-community.

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“Things are the way they are because this is how we, the human race, want them. / This is how we want it.”—*Father John Misty*

“Acceptance of daily life as it is (as it develops in and through its changes)...involves much more than consenting to trivial acts: buying and selling, consumption, various activities. It implies a ‘consensus’: acceptance of society, the mode of production—in a word, a (the) totality. In this way, people (who? each and every one of us) condemn themselves to not desiring, conceiving, or even imagining possibilities beyond this mode of production!”—*Henri Lefebvre*¹

Introduction: Another Critical Theory on the Everyday—But This Time with Rhetoric!

The continuation of everyday life as it currently exists, in all its networked and distributed complexity, will serve to construct a space (socially, ecologically, &c.) far less inhabitable than the one within which we all now attempt to thrive, and this assertion is rather old hat. Stated otherwise: to imply an exigence for reconceiving how communal participants in hegemonic cultures perceive their relation to “everydayness,” or that which is hegemonically experienced as depoliticized routine, is not a new gesture. Countless critical thinkers from distinct histories, fields, and traditions have approached this task (e.g., Lefebvre, Marx, and Debord), and in far greater depth and scope than I will pursue in this thesis. However, I find an impetus for reengaging this line of thought as the conditions of human living have since undergone radical changes. While I will later draw significantly upon the work of Guy Debord, the world I inhabit today is something drastically distinct from the space within which he wrote (I cannot help but giggle when imagining how Debord would react to the notions of Facebook and Snapchat). Plastic particles litter the ocean, the planet is rapidly warming due to human activity, and traditional forms of political argumentation have begun to crumble as the

¹ See page 677.

image of governance comes to inhabit a position of post-truth entertainment (on all sides of the spectrum) more so than as a democratic sphere for public deliberation and decision making (if it ever really was such). Now as much as ever, the “everyday” is in need of being seen as a site for the political, a site we may benefit from viewing at foreign angles, problematizing the routinely familiar.

Framing my project with a reflection on my experience: During my first semester as graduate student in a “History and Theory of Rhetoric” course, I clearly recall scrawling marginal notes-to-self on the significant connections between Guy Debord’s *The Society of the Spectacle* and Aristotle’s theorization of the epideictic—both addressed a perpetual present as served as self-celebrating. However, it was not until encountering more contemporary works on rhetorical theory, particularly Thomas Rickert’s *Ambient Rhetoric* (a historical jump, indeed), that Debord’s work took on a new life. It was not that Rickert’s argument on the rhetoricity and agency of the ambient was a radically new concept, for, as I will argue in my review of literature, Debord’s work with the Situationist International (SI) attends to (though implicitly and without the much-needed theoretical vocabulary afforded by Rickert’s project) the rhetoricity of the ambient—its capacity to exist as an agential assemblage, an autonomously suasive force. Rather, it was the much broader opening that I saw forming for Situationist theory in rhetorical studies. What began as a desire to merely revive Debord via a synthesis with Aristotle’s antiquated rhetorical theories became an exigence for a different, less clear, yet seemingly more necessary, synthesis. Branching outward from Rickert, I began to encounter “new materialist” theories in the political philosophy of thinkers such as Jane Bennett who argued the importance of a distributed notion of agency, and the

philosophical insights of thinkers such as Judith Butler, grappling with the extent to which human being is a fragile (precarious as she might say) and often unevenly protected (via capital, a roof, or a governmental system) form of being—while all people are fragile, not all have access to the same means of protection and sustenance. It was here I began to clearly identify brief glimpses of a consensus emerging in disparate fields of study. The consensus appeared twofold: the development of our species is unfolding in untenable directions (ecologically, socially, technologically, academically), and it should not be out of the question to consider a mode of being otherwise. This thesis (knowingly) synthesizes such a wide range of scholarship (including rhetorical, philosophical, and new materialist inquiry) in the hopes of drawing out this consensus, making it visible as a current developing within (and without) academia, giving both a name to what it is resisting and a theoretical terminology for its sustenance. To this end I attempt a synthesis of Debord's Situationist theories, founded on a resistant to depoliticized notions of the "everyday," with discourses that seek to do so in more dispersed senses. My claim: existing (and emerging) discourses in rhetorical theory and philosophy already allude to an exigence for rupturing our identification with existing forms of everyday being, at some level asserting that if we know something to be harmful, whether to *an*-Other or to a mass of them, we should strive to act accordingly. A failure to do so is to, nevertheless, identify with, reinforce, and maintain (even, at some level, to participate in the celebration of) a community that sees this harm as negligible. I seek to reassert the radical power associated with the response-ability, to borrow Diane Davis' term, granted to being itself, the ability inherent to existing (as matter, animal, human, or otherwise) that

necessitates both the ability and the obligation to respond². My thesis will approach this task by articulating a theory of the *ambient Spectacle*. To be clear: there is nothing wholly new in a theory of the “ambience” of the Spectacle, such served as the very foundation for the Situationist International (a group that sought to disrupt the “ambiences” of everyday life composed by the Spectacle). If anything, this phrase is irreverently redundant. Rather, in the spirit of the Situationists, a theory of the ambient Spectacle gestures towards a *détournement* of existing theoretical discourses. It hopes that synthesizing the epideictic with the ambient and the rhetorical(/philosophical) with the Spectacular, can provide a framework for re-seeing our investments to our ambient and depoliticized forms of being.

As stated above, I claim Aristotle’s notion of the epideictic has much to offer a rhetorical reconsideration of the Spectacle. For Aristotle, the epideictic is “The ceremonial” branch rhetoric (he outlines two others—the deliberative and judicial³), that primarily “praises or censures” in order to establish, represent, or maintain the values of a given community (Aristotle 121). To this end, as it is the rhetorical manifestation of a community’s hegemonic system of morality, as it provides the rhetorical foundation for what it means be a member of a given community, the epideictic exists as the cohesive apparatus with which community members may rhetorically identify—that which binds the individual with the community. Though, while Aristotle focused on rhetoric as oratorical, more recent scholarship in the humanities, as Diana Coole and Samantha Frost

² This is a concept that, while remaining outside of the scope of this project, is wonderfully developed in Diane Davis’ *Inessential Solidarity*

³ As mentioned, Aristotle poses three branches of rhetoric, and epideictic is but one, the judicial and the deliberative being the other two, each functioning within a distinct *kairos*. According to Aristotle, the judicial pertains to the past, the deliberative deals with the future, and the epideictic concerns the present. Aristotle’s limited discussion of the epideictic (he tends to the deliberative and the judicial far more) have been extended by more recent rhetorical theorist (see, for example, Adams, Clark, Hauser, and Rosenfield).

contend, is exploring what they call a “new materialist” line of thinking, a mode of inquiry where “the human species is being relocated within a natural environment whose material forces themselves manifest certain agentic capacities and in which the domain of unintended or unanticipated effects is considerably broadened” (10). It is into this conversation (though not decidedly as a “new materialist”) that Thomas Rickert’s *Ambient Rhetoric: The Attunements of Rhetorical Being* argues for a conception of rhetoric that is aware of its ambient functioning, a conception of rhetoric that moves beyond subject-object dichotomies in favor of an approach to rhetoric that acknowledges the extent to which spaces inhabit individuals as much as individuals inhabit spaces—they are complexly intertwined and equally capable of suasion. I will take up the task of synthesizing existing theories on the epideictic into this ambient notion of rhetoric during the first chapter of this thesis. However, for now it should suffice to say that the epideictic can, in this theoretical frame, also exist ambiently; experiences, matter, and affects can all rhetorically assert communal values. Being itself, then, as an experience of (or as) the individual or material can rhetorically function as an epideictic unfolding.

Kenneth Burke, in a brief but significant moment during *Rhetoric of Motives*, alludes to the grand scope of the epideictic in relation to everydayness when claiming that “Modern life itself” exists as “a kind of epideictic oratory, wherein social display itself, rather than the malaise behind it, is taken as a basic motive” (129). Burke not only identifies a malaise flowing beneath the surface of everyday life, but also sees the experience (though never explicitly referring to it as an ambient encounter) of everydayness as an encounter with a hegemonic, self-justifying epideictic. Such a conception of the ambient experience of being within the everyday as epideictic attempts to grapple

with a very similar theoretical argument as Guy Debord in *The Society of the Spectacle*, as he finds the Spectacle to be the materialized ideological force that articulates and maintains a concept of community within the modernized world that is neither formed nor agreed upon by community members. As he asserts, “the spectacle epitomizes the prevailing model of social life. It is the omnipresent celebration of a choice *already made* in the sphere of production, and the consummate result of that choice” (13). It exists as an epideictic ambience, where “the ruling order discourses endlessly upon itself in an uninterrupted monologue of self-praise. The spectacle is the self-portrait of power in the age of power’s totalitarian rule over the conditions of existence” (19). I will take this synthesis, a theoretical gesture I will refer to as the ambient Spectacle, as the primary opening for my project, in considering the epideictic, ambience, and the Spectacle in their relation to contemporary predicaments and prevailing ethics (I will focus particularly on plastics and contributing factors to global warming, but there are countless other factors to consider). In order to assert the significance of considering a synthesis of rhetorical, new materialist, and Spectacular theories, I will attempt articulate this aim as a theory of the “ambient Spectacle,” a theory of the Spectacle as a breathing, epideictic ambience capable of shifting how individuals experience their experiences. Exploring the intersection of these fields and ideas will, ideally, open a theoretical space for identifying how the ambient Spectacle masks the “malaise behind” the conditions of life it creates, and the implications (rhetorical and otherwise) of such masking.

My larger aim, however, in putting these otherwise distinct discourses into conversation is not simply to label the ambient spectacle with a grand amount of theorists and terms, but rather to imagine a way to formulate and consider spaces outside of the

ambient Spectacle. The utilization of numerous thinkers, to this end, serves to provide a catalogue of theoretical resources for discussing not only the ambient Spectacle, but also its components (epideictic and ambient) and its means of functioning (an aim I will take up in the final chapter of this thesis). And it is here, finally, that I see an opening into my concluding key term, or that which can theoretically stand as a tool for thinking outside of the ambient Spectacle's epideictic rhetoric, using what Judith Butler refers to in *Bodies That Matter* as disidentification (though my use of the term will remain slightly distinct from hers). Butler briefly utilizes disidentification as a conceptually beneficial politicizing tool, asking, "What are the possibilities of politicizing disidentification, this experience of misrecognition, this uneasy sense of standing under a sign to which one does and does not belong? (219). However, while I would like to reassert the significance of the unease associated with disidentification, I would like to further outline it as a rhetorically significant term, and would like to stress the feeling of non-belonging (dis-) over what Butler seems to put forward as a semi-identification more so than as a disidentification. If the epideictic, as I have just mentioned, is the apparatus with which community members may rhetorically identify, we might also consider that, according to Burke, "one need not scrutinize the concept of identification very sharply to see, implied at every turn, its ironic counterpart: division" (23). An Other-community, or a community outside the one within which any given individual exists, is always implied by the very existence of identification. As Chaïm Perelman and Lucie Olbrechts-Tyteca claim, the "very concept" of epideictic rhetoric "results in its being practiced by those who, in a society, defend the tradition and accepted values, those which are the object of education, not the new and revolutionary values which stir up controversy and polemics" (51). It is

in this sense that they find “the speaker engaged in epideictic discourse is very close to being an educator” in that, within both education and epideictic rhetoric, “whatever its object, it is assumed that if the speaker’s discourse does not always express truths, that is, theses accepted by everyone, it will at least defend values that are not a matter of controversy in the group which commissioned him [sic](52; 53). There is always an upholding, reinforcing, creation, or amplification of existing communal values occurring within the epideictic in order to keep the existing community together. It is in this sense that John C. Adams claims, “epideictic rhetoric as practiced does not serve an interest in change” (296). However, Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca also contend that one of the primary factors distinguishing between the epideictic and propaganda, a relation they see as distinct yet significantly close⁴, is that the epideictic “deals with topics which are not an object of controversy to” a particular community (52). Therefore, in seeing the noncontroversial, the routinely depoliticized, the everyday as something controversial, the individual opens a space to not only form an Other-community, but, in doing so, they engage in the process of *disidentification*, which is not merely the failure of a rhetorical identification’s effectiveness, but a deliberate foundational shift that *ceases to identify* with a given rhetoric. Disidentification is the process of purposely rupturing the foundation upon which an identification exists. Among my primary aims for this thesis, then, is to provide a frame and exigence for disidentifying with the rhetoric of the ambient Spectacle.

I find this to be a particularly necessary move, for the possibility of life’s continuation on earth, either in the future or as it currently exists, is no longer a stable

⁴ They give the example of attending a church service. If you are a part of the church, you see value in the service’s rituals and aims, yet if not, it may appear as mere dogma (52).

promise. Take, for example, the prominence of plastics today (an example I will take up in greater detail later—one repeated both for effect and to stress its generally unstressed severity). Most of these plastic products are either non-recyclable, not recycled, or are imparted to overwhelmed recycling plants where it is, nevertheless, not recycled⁵. The (generally) unquestioned and uncontested ubiquity of these plastics in day-to-day experience, however, says nothing of the plastic smog forming in our oceans. It is for this reason that I will close this thesis with, and am inherently driven by, a conception of being today that is highly sensitive to the presence of precarity, especially as discussed by Butler. I use precarity here in reference to a form of being that is unstable, whether this be due to an inconsistent access to means of sustenance (be they shelter or food and water), or exposure to conditions that endanger livelihood (wars, extreme weather, &c.). When precarious, being exists as an instability. As we watch the unfathomable quantities of plastic that are already in the ocean greet the newly produced plastic products, it would suit my aim in this project to see an implicit air of precarity here. We all know the way we live now is untenable—we cannot go on as we now do if we ever hope to see the next millennia. However, we also see a certain precarity imparted onto all future being on the earth, insofar as our actions today serve to leave behind a world far less secure than the one we have today inherited. This idea can gain clarity by borrowing Butler’s notion of “distributions of precarity,” a gesture that acknowledges the extent to which precarity *is* distributed. Identifying with a conception of the everyday normalcy of a hegemonic community is to consent to the uneven extent to which precarity is distributed, both in the present and the future. Here, again, I contend that disidentification is a useful theoretical

⁵ See, for example, the 5 Gyres institute’s discussion on recycling, which I will take up in greater detail during Chapter 2 (“The Truth About Recycling”).

concept in shifting from consent to dissent. Such an applied displacement is primary aim of my project, and as I see it, part and parcel to a theory of the ambient Spectacle. That is to say, I do not simply want to write a thesis and forge complex theories of life at the level of the word, but I also want to imagine a way forward. This way must acknowledge and respond to precarity through the practice of (or idea of) disidentification with the ambient Spectacle, seeing it as other, seeing the everyday as propaganda of a mode of life that is unlivable, unsustainable.

As mentioned, in the first section of this thesis, my review of the relevant literature will seek to present significant developments in theoretical conceptions of the epideictic and their relation to a new materialist approach to rhetorical inquiry, inevitably seeking to articulate a new materialist epideictic. It is upon this foundation I will relate the epideictic, as considered in a rhetorically ambient sense, to the Situationist notions of the Spectacle, itself a rhetorically epideictic ambience. The following chapter will then take up the idea of the ambient Spectacle, as outlined by the literature review's synthesis of the epideictic, ambience, and the Spectacle to theorize the ways in which the epideictic of the ambient Spectacle functions—through gazes, arranged dispositions, and the disparagement of these dispositions' significance (especially when considered in the context of precarity of being today). I will close by providing openings into the significance of disidentification, dissent versus consent, when contextualized by a theory of the ambient Spectacle.

Chapter 1: Review of Literature

“To praise a man [sic] is in one respect akin to urging a course of action”—*Aristotle*

Towards an Ambient Spectacle: New Materialist Epideictic and Situationist Theory

Recent explorations of rhetorical theory have moved beyond subject-object dichotomies, and, in the context of what is often called “new materialist” theory, have embraced both material and immaterial objects as having rhetorical agency (Rickert, 2013; Davis, 2010; Gries, 2015). However, this rich awareness of a distributed notion of agency has significant potential in revitalizing the implications of our traditional taxonomies of rhetoric that remains to be more deeply explored. Of Aristotle’s three branches of rhetoric, I put forward the epideictic, in particular, as deserving a new materialist revitalization; this is the branch of rhetoric that, as scholars such as Jefferey Walker claim, serves as the foundational bed of values, paradigms, beliefs, and practices, upon which all other forms of rhetoric are built. I will here attempt to theorize a “new materialist epideictic,” emphasizing the significance of the way beings relate to and inhabit (im)material spaces as a means of negotiating, constructing, and consenting to existing communal value-systems. I argue that, among the most significant applications of a new materialist epideictic is its ability to revitalize and rework Guy Debord’s theories of the Spectacle⁶ and, in turn, to re-politicize (or to some, hyper-politicize) new materialist rhetorics. Debord’s work, in light of a new materialist epideictic, can serve to reassert the rhetorical significance of being-among certain value-systems, as the very act of inhabiting a space can, itself, serve as a means of validating its discourse, its ways of seeing. It is for this reason that, moving through a brief history of theories on the often-neglected branch of rhetoric, I will assert the basic foundations for a new materialist

⁶ I will here use a capital “S” to reference both Debord’s theory as a cohesive argument, rather than implying numerous disparate “spectacles,” and to disambiguate it from other cultural or theoretical uses. While Debord himself never utilized the capital “S,” I find this useful in stressing the unified theory of a Spectacle made by Debord, distancing any fragmented perspective on localized or individuated “spectacles.”

theory of the epideictic, the epideictic's relation to the work of Debord, and the significance of this relationship for a politically attuned rhetorical theory in conceptualizing a theory of the ambient Spectacle.

The Traditional Theories on the Epideictic

Of the three traditional branches of rhetoric, Aristotle spends the least space theorizing the “epideictic,” the judicial and the deliberative branches receiving far more attention in the *Rhetoric*. Aristotle first theorized the epideictic function of rhetoric as an oration⁷ concerned with the present moment, rather than with the past for judicial or the future for deliberative. He argues that “The ceremonial oratory of display either praises or censures somebody...The ceremonial orator is, properly speaking, concerned with the present, since all men praise or blame in view of the state of things existing at the time, though they often find it useful also to recall the past and to make guesses at the future” (Aristotle 121). Epideictic rhetoric was, from its originary conception, a rhetorical branch of *display*, deployed as a means of praising a particular audience and the ‘present’ of the moment of oration. However, despite Aristotle’s focus on the praise-blame function and his general neglect to theorize epideictic rhetoric, more recent rhetorical scholars, from the turn to the “New Rhetoric” and onward, have attempted to revitalize the theoretical relevance of this branch.

Lawrence Rosenfield contends that, rather than via the praise-blame function first thought by Aristotle, epideictic rhetoric functions through a means of either

⁷ While later discussions will move beyond the reduction of a rhetorical agent to that of an orator or artifact (eventually seeking discussions of rhetorical ambiances), I will here utilize the terms respective to the ideas of the authors being discussed. Once their work has been synthesized into a more cohesive rhetorical theory of material epideictic, I will attempt to avoid such restrictive terms.

“acknowledgment” or “disparagement”⁸. Discussing the role of the audience or observer in epideictic rhetoric, Rosenfield asserts, “Moreover the epideictic auditor is not asked for a judgement of the present state of those matters, but to be a *theoros* (‘witness’) to the radiance emanating from the event itself. He [sic] is called to *see* it for what it is (through *nous*, as a shepherd of Being) rather than to impose on it some assessment (as though he were its purchaser and master) that might transform it” (“The Practical Celebration” 140; author’s emphasis). Of course, the “Being” of the epideictic rhetoric’s ‘radiant’ emanation is less inherent to the rhetorical event itself than it is contingent upon it’s community’s value systems. That is to say, in alignment with Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca’s theoretical arguments, what may function as epideictic or educational to one community may appear as propaganda to another⁹—the epideictic is made by and for a particular community (it cannot be universalized) and its reception dramatically changes within varying contexts. This is further problematized in Rosenfield’s assertion that the observer of epideictic rhetoric “is called to *see*” the object of the rhetoric’s acknowledgement or disparagement “for what it is,” as this may imply some implicit or necessary condition for being (140). Instead, considering Aristotle’s claim that the *kairos* of epideictic rhetoric is the “present,” we might say it asks an audience to observe the object of acknowledgement or disparagement¹⁰ for how it exists in a particularly situated ‘present,’¹¹ again asserting the non-universal nature of the epideictic (121). All these

⁸ Rosenfield also contends for a rather apolitical concept of Being and ‘epideictic radiance’ in accordance with his reading of Heidegger which, to eschew essentialism, I will not utilize here.

⁹ Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca further discuss the distinction between epideictic as education, presenting “topics which are not an object of controversy” to a community, and propaganda (see 52).

¹⁰ Contrary to the explicit nature of “acknowledgement” in epideictic rhetoric, disparagements can manifest as significant absences. While less identifiable, the failure or decision not to recognize something as worthy of acknowledgement or inclusion in a rhetoric is equally telling of the rhetoric and community’s values.

¹¹ In this light, as John C. Adams rightly asserts, “epideictic rhetoric as practiced does not serve an interest in change” (296). This is an important point to be touched upon in greater detail later.

disclaimers aside, Rosenfield rightly accentuates the role of audience as *witness* to the significance of the present, per the epideictic rhetoric, asserting the importance of the acknowledgements or disparagements made by the epideictic in the “radiance” it attempts to convey. As Gerard Hauser further discusses, this alludes to the role of epideictic rhetoric as a means of both representing and solidifying a community’s value system. Hauser contends that “By observing an epideictic performance, citizens experience the story of the golden mean as it is lived in their community. The mimetic function of the encomiast provides the moral story of the community... Epideictic offers instruction on recognizing virtue and thereby on retaining persuasion as an alternative to authority or force in the public domain” (16). For Hauser, epideictic is rhetoric that displays a community’s dominant concept of morality back onto itself. As he asserts, “epideictic occupies a unique place in celebrating the deeds of exemplars who set the tone for civic community and the encomiast serves an equally unique role as a teacher of civic virtue” (14). Similarly, Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca concede that “In epideictic oratory, the speaker turns educator” (51). Beyond a simple rhetoric in celebration of the present, then, epideictic is a dynamic means of reflectively representing (and constituting) a community or audience’s system of values through both rhetorical acknowledgment and disparagement—the orator teaches the individuals what they collectively believe. As these values are already the hegemonic structure of feeling¹², “The purpose of an epideictic speech is to increase the intensity of adherence to values held in common by the audience and the speaker” (52). Epideictic serves as a means of defining and binding a community.

¹² To borrow Raymond Williams’ phrase.

The ability to bond a community is as significant to the functioning of epideictic rhetoric as is its ability to represent it. As Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca argue, despite Aristotle's lack of attention, epideictic remains significant for theories of argumentation as, within a given community, "it strengthens the disposition toward action by increasing adherence to the virtues it lauds" (50). For, in epideictic rhetoric, "The speaker tries to establish a sense of communion centered around particular values recognized by the audience, and to this end he [sic] uses the whole range of means available to the rhetorician for purposes of amplification and enhancement" (51). Amplification, as a means of communal unification, therefore becomes another centrally significant function of epideictic rhetoric, as it attempts to identify the existing values of an audience or community and to represent and celebrate via amplification. This amplification is founded upon previously existing paradigmatic instances from within the community—which the epideictic then, too, uses as a future paradigmatic instance. John C. Adams argues the significance of such, when claiming, "Epideictic displays paradigm cases that embody presently operative, but contingent, concepts of virtue. As concrete and vividly depicted exemplars of the good drawn from the actual deeds of community members, they forcefully display virtue's reality" (296). Having established these cases via epideictic display, "the exemplar of virtue becomes a settled case employed as a point of reference in deliberations regarding the 'good' and its place as a motive—attributed or avowed—in judging the virtue of other actions the case typifies" (296). This previously contingent case, having been deployed by the epideictic, then becomes another future paradigmatic case for epideictic displays that have yet to come.

Rosenfield provides what is perhaps the most drastic reorientation for theories on epideictic rhetoric when undertaking an analysis of the Conservatory Gardens in New York's Central Park as an epideictic artifact, attempting "to read the park as a text whose web of significant meaning can be analyzed to disclose larger patterns cohering in culture and society" ("Central Park" 221-222). Rosenfield here claims the epideictic function of the Conservatory Gardens is "to engage the visitor's body and soul in the pleasurable rediscovery of the freedom that was natural to man [sic], and through this realization, to evoke in everyone a common civic pride and a sense of the satisfactions afforded by life in public institutions" (225). While this conclusion can (and should) be contested, Rosenfield's major contribution to epideictic theory in this line of thought is in pushing the concept of the rhetorical artifact beyond the traditional notion of orator-audience toward one of object-observer, a still-problematic distinction but with a more materially aware approach. More recently, Blake Watson has applied a similar approach when analyzing the epideictic rhetoric of "tactical urban design," a means of using unauthorized city gardening in sidewalk cracks and abandoned street corners, as a way of teaching. Watson claims that such materially epideictic displays "teach observers both to see banal public spaces as worthy of recognition and how to 'look with values' at public space." It is with this approach in mind, again reorienting rhetorical discourse from the importance of orality to materiality, that Watson claims, "Epideictic design is rhetorical not (or not merely) as a *proposal* for particular actions, nor as a *justification* for a set of policies, but fundamentally as a paradigmatic *civic education*, a demonstration of a way of valuing space/place." Here again, epideictic's means of representing, educating, and unifying a community's system of values is shown to be theoretically significant.

However, the epideictic here theoretically transcends the confines of both textuality and orality in favor of a more materially attuned sensibility¹³. Through such works, the act of inhabiting a space is shown to carry the potential for rhetorical influence—the epideictic can, therefore, be experienced, felt, inhabited.

New Materialist Rhetoric, Ambience, and the Epideictic

As mentioned previously, this work will take the recent new materialist turn in the humanities, particularly its impacts on rhetorical theory, as a starting point for the forthcoming theoretical discussion. However, contextualizing these ideas with the previously discussed theories of epideictic rhetoric, which only discuss material in a concrete sense, will show the ways in which a new materialist theory attempts to more widely open rhetorical inquiry. Attempting to lay the foundation for such openings, Diana Coole and Samantha Frost assert that through new materialist thought, “the human species is being relocated within a natural environment whose material forces themselves manifest certain agentic capacities and in which the domain of unintended or unanticipated effects is considerably broadened” (10). Matter, in new materialist theory, is no longer a passive recipient of human action or a passive signifier. Rather, matter, broadly conceived to include affects and environs alike, has the capacity to do things, both to other material agents and to human beings. Theorists such as Jane Bennett, particularly in her *Vibrant Matter*, are attempting to grapple with this very concept of “thing power,” as she phrases it (2). Coole and Frost further claim that “For new materialists, no adequate political theory can ignore the importance of bodies in situating

¹³ That is, with greater awareness to the subjects’ weddedness to their environments, both in their physical emplacement and affective investments. This is a term, and concept, to be explored more in the work of Thomas Rickert.

empirical actors within a material environment of nature, other bodies, and the socioeconomic structures that dictate where and how they find sustenance, satisfy their desires, or obtain the resources necessary for participating in political life” (19). This is to say that situated-ness, embeddedness, and embodiment are all receiving more significant attention as theoretical inquiry moves beyond conventional notions of matter and subject-object dichotomies. These, too, are gaining significance within rhetorical studies. However, this all remains to be directly applied to rhetorical theory, and, more specifically, epideictic rhetoric. Of particular interest to new materialist explorations of rhetorical theory are two recent ventures: Thomas Rickert’s *Ambient Rhetoric: The Attunements of Rhetorical Being* and Diane Davis’ *Inessential Solidarity: Rhetoric and Foreigner Relations*¹⁴. While neither pays particularly deep attention to Aristotle’s three branches of rhetoric, a brief discussion of their primary claims can provide a foundation upon which more recent scholarship on the epideictic can be both reoriented and reattuned.

As I will discuss Rickert’s *Ambient Rhetoric* in great depth later on, I will here only outline his primary arguments as relevant to the changes in rhetorical theory’s foundation. Rickert’s principal contention in *Ambient Rhetoric* is that, as the title suggests, rhetoric is ambient. Rickert asserts that ‘ambience’ in this sense “refers to the active role that material and informational environment takes in human development,

¹⁴ Another recent publication in this vein is Laurie E. Gries’ *Still Life with Rhetoric: A New Materialist Approach for Visual Rhetoric*. Given Gries’ focus on the visual, an approach too often reductively applied to Debord’s work, I will not utilize her work here. Gries also, interestingly, alludes to a new materialist utility of Debord’s ideas. However, she focuses particularly on his notions of psychogeography and the *dérive* as they relate to a new materialist approach to rhetorical research, concepts I will further discuss later.

dwelling, and culture, or to put it differently, it dissolves the assumed separation between what is (privileged) human doing and what is passively material” (3). In line with much new materialist theory, Rickert’s aim is to disrupt the subject-object dichotomy, as this neglects to acknowledge the potential for a more complex, yet rhetorically significant, entangled form of being. Expanding on this notion, Rickert claims, “First, ambience is what surrounds us as material, spatial, and environmental. Second, it conveys our affective investment and emplacement within an environs. Third, ambience itself has a kind of agency, or more precisely, ambience connotes the dispersal and diffusion of agency” (16). The concept of ambience prods traditional notions of the ‘rhetorical situation,’ oriented by autonomous individuals, passive situations, and molded texts, as an ambient rhetoric comes to take a more dispersed and entangled notion of rhetoric and rhetorical agents. In moving rhetorical theory away from the significance of “perception,” Rickert, instead, asserts the importance of “attunement” in order to consider “feeling, mood, intuition, and decision making” (8). As Rickert claims:

ambience involves more than just the whole person, as it were; ambience is inseparable from the person in the environment that gives rise to ambience. There is no person who can then be tacked onto the environment. Attunement is not additive. Rather, there is a fundamental entanglement, with the individuation of particular facets being an achieved disclosure. Thus, wakefulness to ambience is not a subjective achievement but rather an ambient occurrence: an attunement. (8)

This notion of “attunement,” this “wakefulness to ambience,” while incapable of grappling with an ambience in its entirety, attunes inasmuch as it, itself, is part of the ambience—it too is “an ambient occurrence” (8). Rickert’s reworking of the “chōra” and

“kairos” also attempts to work through the extent to which the individual can no longer be considered the only form of rhetorical agent. Instead, he claims, “minds are at once *embodied*, and hence grounded in emotion and sensation, and *dispersed* into the environment itself, and hence no longer autonomous actants but composites of intellect, body, information, and scaffoldings of material artifacts” (43). Rather than identifying concrete material as rhetorically significant, an ambient rhetoric approaches the very encounter of the material, in the specific situated-ness of its particularities, as itself entangled with an assemblage of noteworthy rhetorical agents, ambient constructs and creators.

Diane Davis’ *Inessential Solidarity* is another attempt to radically alter conventional discussions of rhetorical theory. In this work, one of her primary goals is to argue for and theorize “a more radically generalized rhetoricity, an affectability or persuadability that precedes and exceeds symbolic intervention” (19). Davis’ contention that rhetoricity precedes symbolicity is an idea taken up, in a larger and more object-oriented sense, in Rickert’s work. However, Davis’ reworking of Burke’s thought is especially significant to a new materialist theorization of the epideictic. Attempting to uncover some of Freud’s influence on Burke’s theories on rhetorical identification, Davis observes “that what I habitually call ‘my’ identity is the product of an identification with figures or symbols that reside outside myself, that the relation to symbolic structures precedes the relation to the self. Inasmuch as ‘my’ identity is an effect of ‘my’ inscription by this structure, I am always already other than myself, nonpresent to myself, inessential” (21). Resonating with Rickert’s claim that “minds are at once *embodied*... and *dispersed* into the environment itself” (43), Davis argues that implicit within Burke’s

theory of identification is an argument that rhetoric precedes symbolic interaction.

According to this reading of Burke, “Identification could not operate among self-enclosed organisms; it would have to belong to the realm of affectable beings, infinitely open to the realm of a radically generalized rhetoricity, then, an affectability or persuadability that is at work prior to and in excess of any shared meaning” (26). Of particular interest to a new materialist theory of epideictic is the extent to which, as Davis claims, if identification is founded on relations between “figures and symbols that reside outside of myself,” then “I” cannot be essentially reduced to either “my” body or mind, for, as Rickert claims, both are embodied and dispersed in environments themselves¹⁵.

Taking a more materially attuned approach to the epideictic, Gregory Clark, in his *Rhetorical Landscapes in America: Variations on a Theme from Kenneth Burke*, briefly grapples with the significance of epideictic rhetoric in the contexts of Burke’s theories on identification and the rhetorical significance of landscapes and national spaces, moving beyond the smaller and more artifact-oriented epideictic rhetorics theorized by both Rosenfield and Watson. Clark introduces the importance of Burke’s identification in this context by claiming its “rhetorical power...resides in the individual experience that is rendered sharable by the narrative of a succession of salient images” (20). Taking images in a broad sense, as a general means of rhetorical representation, Clark claims, “To the extent that any rhetorical presentation presents a meaningful succession of symbolic images, it invites individuals to experience vicariously the commitments those images

¹⁵ Davis provides a useful metaphor on this front when reinterpreting the significance of Narcissus’ encounter with his reflection in the lake. According to Davis, “When Narcissus points to the manifestation of a face over and beyond form and exclaims ‘I am that one!’ he affirms that the ‘self’ is an irremediable exposedness unprotected by the borders of a figure—he affirms that the ‘self,’ in other words, is delimited neither by consciousness nor by the outline of a phenomenological *entity*” (50).

enact” (21). It is through this process, an image’s capacity to allow for identification and vicarious experience, that epideictic is also able to function:

if a succession of vicariously salient sensory images is experienced as a narrative, then a succession of direct, immediate encounters with the material origins of those images is experienced as something like an itinerary. My point is that itineraries, actual or vicarious, do the epideictic rhetorical work of representative anecdotes. Essentially, they direct private individuals to experience for themselves some of the stories that enact a public identity. (21)

Contextually, Clark claims that the material landscape of a country, in its ability to allude to a national identity in popular representation, via images or epideictic displays, allows for an individual’s experience of the actual material landscape to serve as an opportunity for rhetorical identification with, and a vicarious experience of, the public identity asserted in the nation’s epideictic rhetoric. The material landscape becomes a national referent to its epideictic representations, and the nation’s collective landscape itself becomes a collection, or itinerary, of potential experiences and identifications with this epideictic display. Moving theoretically beyond the limits of nationality, this more ambient conceptualization of the epideictic asserts that everyday experience, in both material and immaterial (e.g., affective) ways, can itself become a referent to a dominant epideictic discourse display. Being among what has been represented in epideictic can itself become the vicarious experience of a rhetorical message—an affirmation of a system of seeing and valuing through rhetorical identification. We might thus call the epideictic’s process of making an itinerary¹⁶ ‘itineration,’ insofar as the epideictic’s

¹⁶ This refers to a conventional material itinerary, as epideictic images can imbue matter with a rhetorical quality, and to an ambient itinerary, in that, as Rickert and Davis claim, the very experience of inhabiting

journey through deeds, places, and experiences, as a process of representation and display, creates an itinerary for a community to see as consubstantial with its collective identity. Although speaking in a context distinct from new materialist theory, Jeffrey Walker's thoughts on the character of epideictic here synthesizes well:

In this view, 'epideictic' appears as that which shapes and cultivates the basic codes of value and belief by which a society or culture lives; it shapes the ideologies and imageries with which, and by which, the individual members of a community identify themselves; and, perhaps most significantly, it shapes the fundamental grounds, the 'deep' commitments and presuppositions, that will underlie and ultimately determine decision and debate in particular pragmatic forums.¹⁷ (9)

In so far as a community has a means of creating and disseminating epideictic discourse, composite forces of everyday life within and without the community can become imbued with the ideological force of the community's epideictic rhetoric as they are integrated into it. The very act of experiencing, in all of its entangled complexity, provides the

places has rhetorical implications beyond any individual subjectivity or isolated concrete artifact. Jane Bennet's theory of the "agency of assemblages" is also useful here, considering no single artifact in a landscape becomes the rhetor-agent (20). Instead, the complex assemblage of forces, flows, and spaces that compose the landscape take on this epideictic agency, entangling the experience of encountering a landscape with the epideictic rhetoric itself. Furthermore, recall also John C. Adam's claims about the epideictic's use of contingent paradigmatic cases. While he claims that "Epideictic displays paradigm cases that embody presently operative, but contingent, concepts of virtue," we can also take this beyond the notion of displaying deeds and virtues to claim that the epideictic can display spaces, affects, and modes of experience that then, can themselves, become referents to and communal representations of the epideictic rhetoric of a community (296).

¹⁷ Rickert asserts that he does not see rhetoric as "only epideictic in Jeffrey Walker's expanded sense, where rhetoric derives from the poetic tradition, is not confined to argument or practical pursuits, and thrives equally in public and private life (viii)" (xiv). However, rather than seeing Walker's expanded notion of the epideictic as the only form of rhetoric, I find it, as Walker argues, the foundational of the three branches within a given community. Of course, regardless, Rickert's notion of ambient rhetoric is, in this sense, the a priori foundation even to Walker's epideictic.

opportunity to identify with, and vicariously experience the community's epideictic rhetoric, with all of the moralizing, educational, and cohesive faculties it deploys.

The Epideictic and Spectacle

Much theoretical discourse on epideictic rhetoric finds the term "spectacle" useful in grappling with its unique functions. As Christine Oravec asserts, "Translators and commentators have traditionally identified Aristotle's epideictic genre of discourse with *spectacle* or theatrical display" (162; my emphasis). Perlman and Olbrechts-Tyteca similarly discussed the relation between epideictic and its function as a display of spectacle. While in no way referencing the work of Guy Debord, these authors nevertheless explicitly theorize the proximity between the forms and functions of epideictic rhetoric and the spectator-based displays of spectacles. Debord, perhaps best known for his theoretical inquiry into the role of the spectacular in modern society, can here offer many insights into the epideictic's presence in everyday life, and, furthermore, our new materialist epideictic can serve to revitalize many of his claims in a rhetorical light. Debord's 1967 work, *The Society of the Spectacle*, theorizes in 221 theses what he refers to as the "Spectacle." While he never quite pins down what the Spectacle is in any definitive sense, a fact that may frustrate many readers, he inevitably attempts to revitalize, apply, and synthesize many of the ideas of Marx, Lefebvre, and industrialized society to argue the Spectacle is not merely "a collection of images; rather it is a social relationship mediated by images" (*The Society of the Spectacle* 12). While Debord's theory of the Spectacle is often reduced to an argument of images in modern society¹⁸,

¹⁸ See, for example, works such as Douglas Kellner's *Media Spectacles*. Works such as this focus solely on Debord's theories as they apply to images and new media, but could benefit from the rich complexity of networks, both personal, image-based, (im)material, and interpersonal, as they symphonically compose the Spectacle. It is crucial to note that Debord, himself, was hesitant to make explicit distinctions between

this is by no means his argument. For Debord, the Spectacle is a capitalist worldview “that has been actualized, translated into the material realm—a world view transformed into an objective force” (13). Moving beyond an emphasis on Debord’s thoughts on “images” in isolation, our theoretical discussions can be further enriched by Debord’s critiques of the networks and relations that these very images create. Dissolving the boundaries of significance between image-observer, it is more productive to enlist Debord as a theorist engaging in an ambient rhetorical criticism of a hegemonic, epideictic apparatus—as I will attempt to show, there is a clear relation between Debord’s critique of the Spectacle and the spectacularity of the epideictic as discussed by scholars such as Oravec, Perlman, and Olbrechts-Tyteca; the epideictic has historically been closely associated with rhetorics of display, as spectacular. Debord begins *The Society of the Spectacle* with the claim that “The whole life of those societies in which modern conditions of production prevail presents itself as an immense accumulation of spectacles. All that was once directly lived has become mere representation” (12). Debord here asserts, in alignment with Clark’s discussion of the itinerary and vicariously experienced epideictic, that the Spectacle deploys the very tool of “itineration” outlined above. In so far as we integrate ourselves into the society of the Spectacle, into its workforce, its streams of images, its representation and discourse of and on ‘everyday life,’ we ourselves become spectacular. As the Spectacle compiles and displays the “immense accumulation of spectacles” that coincide with a modernized and industrialized society, everyday experience no longer is experienced “directly,” but, rather as a referent

“image” and “reality.” As he rightly claims, “The spectacle cannot be set in abstract opposition to concrete social activity, for the dichotomy between reality and image will survive on either side of any such distinction. Thus the spectacle, though it turns reality on its head, is itself a product of real activity” (*The Society of the Spectacle* 14).

to, as an opportunity to identify with and vicariously experience, the Spectacle—the epideictic of (meta/post)modernity. Debord argues, in this opening thesis, that the epideictic apparatus of modernity and capitalism, the Spectacle, goes about this process of iteration, logging every facet of existence¹⁹ within its epideictic rhetoric to the extent that the act of being is no longer an encounter with mere things, but with things as they refer to an epideictic itinerary for negotiating and experiencing the prevailing system of values—the Spectacle. Debord’s later arguments further and more explicitly assert the epideictic form of the Spectacle, claiming:

the spectacle epitomizes the prevailing model of social life. It is the omnipresent celebration of a choice *already made* in the sphere of production, and the consummate result of that choice. In form as in content the spectacle serves as total justification for the conditions and aims of the existing system. It further ensures the *permanent presence* of that justification, for it governs almost all time spent outside the production process itself. (13)

This “prevailing model of social life” forms an eternal present²⁰, the self-perpetuating kairos for the epideictic (Aristotle 121). The Spectacle is, by its nature, celebratory and self-congratulating, for it is “By means of the spectacle the ruling order discourses endlessly upon itself in an uninterrupted monologue of self-praise. The spectacle is the self-portrait of power in the age of power’s totalitarian rule over the conditions of

¹⁹ Debord does, in a literal sense, mean that all aspects of being, not restricted to individual experience, have been logged to the Spectacle’s epideictic itinerary. As Debord argues, “The spectacle corresponds to the historical moment at which the commodity completes its colonization of social life. It is not just that the relationship to commodities is now plain to see—commodities are now all that there is to see; the world we see is the world of the commodity” (29). While relying particularly on commodities, Debord nevertheless here asserts that, insofar as all things, material and immaterial, have become potential commodities (e.g., molecules, thoughts, moments), the Spectacle has become ubiquitous with the ontology of (meta/post)modernity.

²⁰ See Debord’s *Comments on the Society of the Spectacle* for more on this claim (12).

existence” (Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle* 19). It is furthermore, a system of morals and values, acknowledgements and disparagements, that “manifests itself as an enormous positivity, out of reach and beyond dispute. All it says is: ‘Everything that appears is good; whatever is good appears’” (15). It is this all pervasive and omnipresent epideictic, both as a material and immaterial presence, and ambience, within which the modern subject finds themselves—it is these forms with which they can rhetorically identify.

Discussing and furthering Burke’s arguments on rhetoricity, identification, and the individual, Davis observes:

The ‘centrality’ of each individual nervous system can hardly be characterized as ‘divisive’ when it doesn’t manage consistently to distinguish between self and other; indeed, at the level of the organism, a rather astonishing condition of indistinction announces itself. It’s not only that ‘I’ appear to be hardwired to mime ‘your’ actions but, more disturbingly perhaps, that ‘I’ may *be* ‘your’ actions, that there may be no ‘me’ until ‘I’ perform ‘you.’ (24-25)

This extension of Burke’s logic on rhetorical identification, perhaps, becomes even more disturbing when applied to the rhetorical and epideictic function of Debord’s Spectacle. Arguing about a similar “condition of indistinction” between self and Spectacle, Debord asserts that “The spectacle’s externality with respect to the acting subject is demonstrated by the fact that the individual’s own gestures are no longer his [sic] own, but rather those of someone else who represents them to him [sic]. The spectator feels at home nowhere because the spectacle is everywhere” (23). In this sense, beyond merely experiencing inhabitation as a reference to the Spectacle, those social means of constructing identity

and interpersonal interaction also become an opening for the presence and dissemination of the Spectacle's epideictic rhetoric.

While Debord can often tend to privilege the importance of the "visual" and "appearances" in *The Society of the Spectacle*, exploring Debord's arguments from his time with the Situationists can serve to revitalize his attunement to the non-visual in light of new materialist rhetorics. As early as the Situationists' original publication of the "Report on the Construction of Situations and on the International Situationist Tendency's Conditions of Organization and Action," Debord had already begun theorizing the significance and importance of the ambient. In this 1957 assertion of the Situationists' aims, a claim I referred to also in the introduction, Debord states, "We now have to undertake an organized collective work aimed at a unitary use of all the means of revolutionizing everyday life... Our central idea is the construction of situations, that is to say, the concrete construction of momentary *ambiances* of life and their transformation into a superior passional quality" (my emphasis). This theory of "ambiances" was central to aims of the Situationists. The ambience they assert is in need of disruption is aligned with what Debord would later theorize as the Spectacle—the omnipresent self-justification for (meta/post)modern society. Two other significant theories central to Situationist practice put forward by Debord were that of psychogeography and the *dérive*. Respectively, Debord explains, "Psychogeography sets for itself the study of the precise laws and specific effects of the geographical environment, whether consciously organized or not, on the emotions and behaviors of individuals" ("Introduction to a Critique of Urban Geography"). This attunement to the ambient affects that can and do flow from one's embeddedness within a space asserts the often-disparaged idea that these spaces are

constructed by and for the existing society (they are experienced as epideictic and, in this context, Spectacular). To combat a desensitization to this awareness, Debord put forward the theory of the *dérive*. As he claims, “One of the basic situationist practices is the *dérive*, a technique of rapid passage through varied ambiances. *Dérives* involve playful-constructive behavior and awareness of psychogeographical effects, and are thus quite different from the classic notions of journey or stroll” (“The Theory of the *Dérive*”). Such arguments highlight the proximity of Debord’s claims and theories on and of an ambient rhetoric. Beyond the proximity of Debord’s Spectacle to both epideictic and ambient rhetoric, it may be necessary to close on the ways the spectacle has been argued as an encompassing force.

In *The Society of the Spectacle*, Debord claims that the Spectacle takes two primary forms, that of the “concentrated” and that of the “diffuse” (41). Debord associates the “concentrated” form of the Spectacle with “bureaucratic capitalism,” as it “imposes an image of the good which is a résumé of everything that exists officially” (41-42). He further claims that “The diffuse form of the spectacle is associated with the abundance of commodities, with the undisturbed development of modern capitalism. Here each commodity considered in isolation is justified by an appeal to the grandeur of commodity production in general—a production for which the spectacle is an apologetic catalogue” (42). Debord argues that the Spectacle tactically utilizes either form to “at once deny and sustain” itself (41). Later, however, in his 1988 *Comments on the Society of the Spectacle*, Debord would argue that, instead of adopting disparate forms, the Spectacle would be better theorized as “integrated,” maintaining both the forms of the concentrated and diffuse simultaneously (9). As he claims, the Spectacle “has integrated

itself into reality to the same extent as it was describing it, and... was reconstructing it as it was describing it. As a result, this reality no longer confronts the integrated spectacle as something alien...The spectacle has spread itself to the point where it now permeates all reality” (9). This articulation of the Spectacle remained Debord’s final claim, as the *Comments* were his final publication on the Spectacle before his death. Desiring a more contemporary theorization, however, Steven Best and Douglas Kellner put forward their 1999 article, “Debord, Cybersituations, and the Interactive Spectacle.” Best and Kellner suggest moving beyond the “integrated” Spectacle, proposing, instead, a theory of an “interactive” Spectacle²¹. They claim that this “interactive” Spectacle “comprises new technologies (unforeseen by Debord) that allow a more active participation of the subject in (what remains) the spectacle. The subject of the new stage of the spectacle is more active, and new technologies like the computer, multimedia, and virtual reality make possible more participation, albeit of limited and ambivalent types” (145). Despite their claims on the interactive Spectacle’s potentials for new forms of subversion, however, they further argue that:

contemporary forms of the interactive spectacle are not as emancipatory and creative as many cyberdigerati [sic] claim. Whereas we are ready to concede a more interactive dimension to the current stage of the spectacle and a more energetic role of the subject, we also see something of a collapse of the distinction

²¹ They also argue for a theory of “Megaspectacles,” to articulate “a significant escalation of the spectacle in size, range, and intensity” (135). However, I would argue that this errs on the reductive and redundant. Debord’s theory of the Spectacle already was quite “mega” insofar as it permeates all lived experience within (meta/post)modernity. Furthermore, the pluralizing of “spectacles” here also creates an illusion of a disparateness that Debord does not maintain throughout his work. Instead, his assertion of “the” Spectacle (my capital “S” being highly intentional here), argues for a theory of a more cohesive (and, yes, “mega”) hegemonic structure.

between subject and object occurring, with disturbing implications, as individuals implode into an ever denser technological network. (145)

We can here see an early recognition of the shifts in discourse that would, though form a distinct history and tradition, make way for work such as Rickert's, which does indeed embrace this collapsed subject-object dichotomy as the foundations of its rhetorical theory. While it is necessary to revitalize Debord's theories in light of new digital developments, our conversations miss an opportunity to fully engage with the ambient, rhetorical, and radical energy of his theories when we make the Spectacle further fragmented (i.e. occasionally interactive). Debord very consciously did away with his tendency towards such fragmentary thought when theorizing an "integrated" Spectacle. Instead, I find it imperative, in this context of the individual's implosion "into an ever denser technological network," to theorize the extent to which extant theories of ambience do not acknowledge the logics functioning within and profiting from this ontological shift.

The literature, therefore, seems to open the space for a theory of what I would like to call the "*ambient* Spectacle," the omnipresent, ontological, fluid, self-justifying, and self-perpetuating epideictic apparatus that allows the "everyday"-ness of (meta/post)modern life to continue as though a natural course. In many ways, there is little new in this theory; writing about the ambient spectacle is more a work of performance art than an articulation of a new way of thinking. A theory of the ambient Spectacle appears to me as a *détournement* of existing theories—placing contemporary rhetorical theories attuned to the ambient alongside older theories on the ambience of Spectacle to reassert the significance of an originary ontology that incessantly claims the

need for its own existence. More specifically, however, a theory of the ambient Spectacle claims that being, insofar as it is aligned with the epideictic of the Spectacle, its ways of seeing, thinking, feeling, and valuing, validates and empowers the narratives and claims of this hegemonic, epideictic apparatus; all being in the ambient Spectacle has the potential to serve as a justification for its own narrative, its own omnipresent existence. It is for this reason that, moving forward, I will strive to identify the ways in which the epideictic of the Spectacle disperses into the ambient, the ways that the epideictic forms it manifests as a foundation of (and justification for) its own existence, and the kinds of tactics it deploys in maintaining these structures.

Sudden changes in our understanding of ‘modern’ life have pushed recent scholarship towards a more explicit awareness of matter’s investment in our being. As micro-plastics become more abundant than the ocean’s krill, as ocean levels begin to rise, and as new technology are developing to become permanent fixtures in our surrounding environments, new materialist scholarship attempts to articulate the peculiarities of our embeddedness within our increasingly volatile environments—the way both we and our surroundings mutually inhabit and affect each other. It is into this conversation that I would like to place a theory of the ambient Spectacle, particularly in exploring the tenability and sustainability of Spectacular being in light of the drastic geopolitical dangers we now see looming. If the Spectacle’s epideictic claims that it will see us through such crises, a theory of the ambient Spectacle will draw out the ‘ways of seeing’ associated with accepting this narrative. If, for example, contemporary being is riddled with byproducts, from plastics to carbon, then participation in this Spectacular network, even when done hesitantly or from a cynical distance, is an acceptance and affirmation of

a particular valuation of the future—that is, in participating in these structures we consent and contribute to the degradation of irreversible ecological conditions that future inhabitants of the Earth will inherit. This disposition disparages what can be seen as the future, and renders certain lives that have yet-to-be as non-grievable. In the following chapter, I will take up this challenge of mapping the form and function of the ambient Spectacle. I will do so by drawing on a wide array of theorists and vocabularies to, again, provide new language for considering our investments to these depoliticized forms of being, striving to grapple with the vitality of the ambient Spectacle (its ability to gaze, interpellate, and breathe an atmosphere into being), its utilization of the force of assemblages (whose effects are glossed by its epideictic), and the evaluations on the value of life (what is grievable and what precarious forms of being are worth acknowledging) inherently to its epideictic. A theory of the ambient Spectacle will take value systems such as this as central to its analysis of the ways the ambient epideictic of the Spectacle alienates individuals from their ability to shape values in favor of our desire to be-with-others. It will, furthermore, argue the importance of creating new dispositions, of radically disidentifying, or reattuning, in order to construct new rhetorical opportunities, new situations, in which counter-values and an Other-community can be negotiated, put forward, and enacted.

Chapter 2: Theory

“In a certain sense the coherence of spectacular society proves revolutionaries right, since it is evident that one cannot reform the most trifling detail without taking the whole thing apart.”

—Guy Debord²²

“[There is] a great song by the Doors called ‘Riders on the Storm’...so control is being a rider on the storm. It doesn’t mean you’re not doing things. You are, but you’re not in

²² Comments on the Society of the Spectacle (80).

complete control of them and part of what you consider control is adapting to what emerges as the situation evolves... ‘Into this house we’re born. Into this world we’re thrown’”

—Thomas Rickert²³

The Ambient Spectacle: An Exigence for Radical Reattunements

Contemporary being is marked by uneven economies of privilege and precarity. To exist today is to partake in these economies and distributions. I firmly agree that rhetoric is, as Thomas Rickert argues in his *Ambient Rhetoric*, ontological. However, I would like to extend this idea by arguing that the ontological nature of rhetoric is deployed by the existing (Spectacular) ambiances, the uneven economies of privilege and precarity previously mentioned. Such economies compose and orchestrate the ambient Spectacle, insofar as they promote its thriving and disparage its effects. These ambiances foster a form of being tied to non-inclusive structures of assuaged precarity, and in this sense, they seek to disparage their “unevenness.” The most effective means of establishing and maintaining such a community is via epideictic rhetoric, the present-focused branch of Aristotle’s originary triad that functions to establish, maintain, and celebrate the existing values and ways of seeing within a given community. Furthermore, rhetorical theorists such as Rickert are pushing the field away from subject-object distinctions and into materially attuned theories that strive to account for the extent to which the material and individual discursively co-construct their being, a turn often referred to (not without issue) as new materialist theory. In this line of argument, as I have more deeply explored previously, I find the notion of a “new materialist epideictic” useful in making more visible the very skewed systems of precarity I have mentioned, emphasizing the significance of the ways beings relate to and inhabit (im)material spaces

²³ See 21:23-22:09 of Cushman and Rickert.

and ambiances as a means of negotiating, constructing, and consenting to existing communal value-systems. Furthermore, as I have been arguing throughout this work, an ambient consideration of the epideictic on a hegemonic scale, finds a theoretical counterpart in Guy Debord's theory of the Spectacle, an ambient, epideictic force that asserts: "Everything that appears is good; whatever is good appears" (Debord 15). It is in this sense, an ambiently aware epideictic on the hegemonic-global scale finds itself grappling with the same illusive force as Debord, a fruitful synthesis I referred to as the *ambient Spectacle* at the of my literature review. While rhetorical theories on the ambient, theories on the epideictic, and theories on the Spectacle all exist, it is my hope that re-contextualizing and collaging them in the form that I have, alongside examples from "everyday" experience and scientific acknowledgement of the predicaments within which we all now find ourselves²⁴, can help highlight new significance in these seemingly disparate theories. To refer again to Rickert's claim then, if we are to consider rhetoric as ontological, a theory of the ambient Spectacle extends this to consider the value-systems linked to existing epideictic ambiances—ontology is, while rhetorical, Spectacular. A theory of Spectacular ontology (as the foundation of the ambient Spectacle), therefore argues that default modes of being in this context are attuned to the Spectacle, to its system of values and ways of seeing. However, this ontological disposition is in no way a necessity, as individuals retain agency in their ability to identify or disidentify with existing hegemonic, epideictic rhetorics. A theoretical vocabulary for articulating the form and function of the ambient Spectacle, considered as

²⁴ I here focus particularly on the looming catastrophes linked towards plastics and animal consumption, though there are doubtlessly many other examples.

a breathing gazing force, can assist in identifying the effects materially networked to the dispositions it prefigures, the effects its epideictic disparages.

The Spectacle Lives!: Gazes and Exhalations

I would like to begin here by investigating the form and function of the ambient Spectacle—how it constructs itself as an ambience and how it presents us with its epideictic rhetoric and mythologies. To start, I will briefly borrow Alev Çinar’s theory of the Spectacular “gaze” and its “interpellative function,” before applying Walter Benjamin’s theory of the “aura” to the notion of an ambient Spectacle. My aim in this initial theorization of the ambient Spectacle is to grant it a vitalized agency (by focusing on its ability to gaze and interpellate) and to provide a vocabulary for grappling with its ambience-composing and object-disposing²⁵ abilities (by focusing on the rhetorical exhalations—auras—that surround its particulars and compose it as an ambience, an exhaled atmosphere).

The Spectacular Gaze and its Interpellative Function

Çinar’s discussion of Habermas’ “public sphere” takes a decidedly critical approach, as she sees this, in contrast to “the Habermasian celebration of inclusion” as the space where, in the process of “gaining public visibility” in the public sphere, “the body is subjected to power and control” (Çinar 38). For Çinar, inclusion in the public sphere is inclusion in the process of subjugation. The public sphere transitions from the space of democratic deliberation to the locus of the hegemonic formations of subjects. As she claims:

²⁵ I here use “dispose” as a reference to dispositions.

The authoritative presence of the public subject is established not only through a voice, but also, and more so, through a disembodied *gaze*. The media do not only speak the public subject into presence by assuming its voice, but constitute it by becoming its gaze...By categorizing bodies in accordance with the marks of recognition that they bear, the public gaze enjoys the authority and privilege of naming and hierarchically positioning various identity categories in the public sphere while maintaining its own visibility and inaccessibility. (40)

In the “spectacle”²⁶ of the public sphere, “a subject position emerges, imagined as the public” (39). Çınar proposes that this process is most visible when news publications use the rhetorical “we” in their headlines (and a quick search of “we” in Google News shows there is no shortage of mass-media outlets doing so today). However, who comprises this “we”? Çınar claims that here “the public subject itself remains unmarked, yet gains presence by marking its others” (39). It is only in distinguishing those who are not “us” that a “we” is able to form. Furthermore, though, Çınar claims that a theory of a public gaze “reveals that the ‘public’ is not a neutral space of debate and dialogue, but is a subjectivity, often represented by the media, with a particular, privileged, yet unmarked identity” (Çınar 39). The visible gaze of the Spectacle, “in combination with the arrangement of space and objects and the positioning and clothing of bodies, functions so as to call into being an observer” (44). Utilizing Louis Althusser’s “interpellation,” the act of being hailed as a subject of power or ideological apparatuses, Çınar claims this is “the interpellative function of the gaze” (44). Which is to say “any type of display or

²⁶ While Çınar directly discusses “the media” and “the spectacle,” she makes no explicit reference to the work of Debord. Nevertheless, given the similarity between her theoretical arguments about “spectacle” and the work of Debord, I will treat them as arguments on *the Spectacle*.

spectacle, by virtue of presenting itself to an audience, evokes an observing subject, regardless of whether there is an actual audience present or not. Furthermore..., a spectacle can interpellate not only a generic observer, but a particular subject with a particular identity” (45). According to Çinar, the Spectacle, then, gazes and subjugates, via interpolation, “the public subject with a particular identity. If the medium of the public sphere is everyday life as a continually reproduced spectacle of bodies and places, this spectacle evokes the public subject as the invisible observer on a daily basis” (45).

As I have argued, however, the Spectacle’s epideictic mythology exists ambiently, beyond a simple image, headline, or object. A theory of the ambient Spectacle, therefore, asserts that, given Çinar’s argument, Spectacular matter has the capacity to return our gaze, and—perhaps more disconcertingly—it has the capacity to interpellate “us” as subjects of the ambient Spectacle’s omnipresence. Take the prevalence of Walmart retail centers, for example. As of the beginning of 2017, there are currently 5,332 locations in the United States alone (“Our Locations”). As a conventional new-media based inquiry into the Spectacular construction of a public subject, such as Çinar’s, focuses primarily on “media” and news headlines, it might inquire into the ways Walmart’s ads and slogan, “Save money. Live better.,” formulate a consumerist subject who equates saved money with overall well-being. An ambient inquiry into this matter, however, might also investigate the extent to which, even a cynical consumer quickly running through the store to buy a carton of cheap almond-milk, while navigating the cases of plastic water bottles, the stacks of packaged ground-meats, the scents of the deli, the underpaid staff, and the soft pop-jingles, is addressed as a subject of Walmart’s consumeristic “we.” The “we” becomes those who identify with the acceptability, value,

or importance of having such spaces abundantly available throughout the nation (5,332 and counting). Even those who decline to provide patronage, nevertheless, see the “we” of Walmart’s constructed subject (though, to be clear, it’s a subject that consumerism has long before outlined) take shape. In driving past the retail center on the highway, I am addressed as a potential participant in this place-of-plenty. Even if I cease to identify with this interpellative act of subjugation, the construct of this subject position remains as a force outside myself. Turning to Walter Benjamin’s notion of the aura can here clarify how it is that these seemingly disparate gazes and forces, embodied by and exuded from matter, can compose a more cohesive ambience.

The Object’s Aura as Exhalation: Composing an Atmosphere, an Ambience

While Benjamin’s concept of the “aura” is traditionally read as reference to an air of authenticity that is lost in the age of mechanically reproduced art, I aim to gain further utility out of this term by acknowledging, as Miriam Bratu Hansen does, that throughout much of his work, Benjamin maintains a much broader notion of the “aura.” I will therefore gesture towards a use of the term “aura” in reference to that space agentially *exhaled* into being by a rhetorical artifact, where individuality, subjectivity, and identity become enmeshed. I find Benjamin’s aura to be useful in theorizing how the ambience of the Spectacle is composed. Metaphorically: the air exhaled by individual rhetorical objects composes an atmosphere, an ambience. I find this gesture useful in thinking of how the particulars of the ambient Spectacle’s assemblage of objects (co)exist in an attempt to ground my project via examples—I could not adequately apply a theory of the ambient Spectacle to the experience of inhabiting a Walmart (as I will) without the theoretical vocabulary necessary for navigating the rhetorical significance of particular

facets and artifacts. In his own terms, Benjamin theorizes the aura as the “projection of a social experience of people onto nature” where our “gaze is returned” (“Central Park” 41). As Hansen claims:

The aura is a medium that envelops and physically connects—and thus blurs the boundaries between—subject and object, suggesting a sensory, embodied mode of perception. One need only cursorily recall the biblical and mystical connotations of breath and breathing to understand that this mode of perception involves surrender to the object as other. The auratic quality that manifests itself in the object...cannot be produced at will; it appears to the subject, not for it. (Hansen 352)

The aura is the space in-between where matter, mythology, rhetoric, and my subjectivity intermingle and come into being. If an ambience is a distinctive atmosphere, then the aura is the process of substance breathing into being—it symphonically composes ambience. If ambience is the rhetoricity of an assemblage, the aura is the rhetoricity of an object. An ambience is comprised of an assemblage of auras. Among Benjamin’s original claims was that “First, genuine aura appears in all things, not just in certain kinds of things, as people imagine. Second, the aura undergoes changes, which can be quite fundamental, with every movement the aura-wreathed object makes...[,and] the characteristic feature of genuine aura is ornament, an ornamental halo [Umzirkung], in which the object or being is enclosed as in a case” (*On Hashish*, Benjamin 58). All things, then, have the capacity to, in their exhalation, where our previous experience and dispositions intermingle, maintain an aura. This aura is fluid, changing with and as our experience. Benjamin would later go on to qualify his theories on the aura when claiming that

“Experience of the aura thus rests on the transposition of a response common in human relationships to the relationship between the inanimate or natural object and man [sic]. The person we look at, or who feels he [sic] is being looked at, looks at us in turn. *To perceive the aura of an object we look at means we invest it with the ability to look at us in return.* (“On Some Motifs in Baudelaire” 190; my emphasis) Beyond simply exuding an aura, then, matter here is again imbued with the capacity to gaze back at us. As Çinar argued, this again reaffirms the interpellative capacity of an ambient Spectacle. The ambient Spectacle exists as a seeing, breathing, epideictic force.

Let us here return to the Walmart-goer example. The Spectacular ambience encountered in this situation is by no means a priori. Rather, as I encounter the cases of plastic water bottles, the stacks of packaged ground-meats, the scents of the deli, the underpaid staff, and the soft pop-jingles, each exudes its own Spectacular epideictic—they all are surrounded by an air that calls on both my previous experience and their current disposition to maintain the message central to the Spectacle: “Everything that appears is good; whatever is good appears” (*The Society of the Spectacle*, Debord 15). It is a nonlocal message, and as Benjamin notes, “its aura undergoes changes, which can be quite fundamental, with every movement the aura-wreathed object makes” (*On Hashish*, Benjamin 58). Generally, however, there remains a hegemonic system of values, epideictic acknowledgements and disparagements linked with each aura. Though not explicitly referencing Benjamin’s “aura,” Lawrence W. Rosenfield, when theorizing the epideictic, claims that the epideictic serves “to let us gaze at the aura glowing from

within”²⁷ (135). Christine Oravec, similarly observes that “The epideictic orator, then, faces a most difficult test, because the values of his discourse depends not upon the audience’s faculty of choice concerning things which are already past or are to come but upon their common and present experience of the praiseworthy object’s distinctive quality” (173). The auras encountered in everyday being are all encounters with forms that seek to praise things as they are—the Spectacle. Their aura is rhetorically epideictic. For example, the epideictic aura of the case of plastic bottles will acknowledge convenience and the “sustainability” of recycling, disparaging the effects of plastic pollution, and the smells of the deli will strive to be acknowledged as scents of nutritive luxury, hiding any gruesome horrors behind the industrialized slaughterhouse. These auras then, in their assemblaged conjunction, serve to compose the ambience particular to Walmart—and so too for the larger Spectacular ambience. Each aura, being a space for the articulation of a non-local epideictic, serves to reaffirm and co-construct the pervading epideictic atmosphere or ambience. In what follows I will attempt to articulate the significance of such gazes and auras when contextualized within an assemblage, its effects and function within epideictic ambience.

Assemblages and Effects: The Ambient Spectacle in Action

I have thus far utilized Çinar and Benjamin to show the living vitality of the Spectacle, using Çinar’s discussion of the interpellative gaze of the Spectacle and Benjamin’s ideas to represent its aural ability to compose atmospheres. Here I turn to Jane Bennett’s notion of the “agency of assemblages” to pan outward, from the epideictic

²⁷ While Rosenfield’s notion of epideictic is here referring to the process of uncovering “men’s [sic] notable deeds,” I still find his rhetorical use of the term “aura” useful, for his general theory of epideictic is applicable beyond a theory of nobility and centralized epideictic.

aura to the fully-functioning assemblage in action. This not only serves to outline the significance of an ambiently composed epideictic, then, but also to provide the necessary scaffolding to explore and utilize Bennett's theoretical notion of the cascade. I will, then, return a focus again to my main aim in this project, to open a space for problematizing the depoliticized "everyday" by utilizing Bennett's ideas on the Chinese term "Shi," the potential effects implicit to a particular disposition of things, by briefly applying these arguments to examples of "ordinarily" inhabited ambiances. Both the cascade and Shi will prove necessary additions to this project as they allow for discussions on the potential effects inherent to the disposition of an ambience and that which can be masked (via disparagement) by the epideictic rhetoric of the ambient Spectacle.

While Jane Bennett's *Vibrant Matter* goes to great lengths to argue the agency of matter, as mentioned, I would like to focus, more specifically, on her theory of the "agency of assemblages." Bennett outlines her notion of the "assemblage" as "an ad hoc grouping...[,] a living throbbing grouping whose coherence coexists with energies and countercultures that exceed and confound it...[,] a web with an uneven topography" that is "not governed by a central power," and, lastly, as a construct that "is made up of many types of actants: humans and nonhumans; animals, vegetables, and minerals; nature, culture, and technology" (Bennett 445). As she goes on to claim, the agency of assemblages is "the distinctive efficacy of a working whole made up, variously, of somatic, technological, cultural, and atmospheric elements. Because each member-actant maintains an energetic pulse slightly 'off' from that exuded by the assemblage, such assemblages are never fixed blocks but open-ended wholes" (447). Regarding a "distributed notion of agency," Bennett claims that "Instead of honing in on a single

effect, it pays attention to a linked series of them, for an unstable cascade spills out from ever ‘single’ act. To take the cascade as the unit of analysis is to locate intentions within an assemblage that always also includes their wayward offspring. An intention becomes like a pebble thrown into a pond, or an electrical current sent through a wire, or a neural network: it vibrates” (Bennett 457). Bennett’s “cascade” is, I find, a very useful tool for analyzing the linkage of actions—within one act, intention, or gesture, outpours a “cascade” of effects, all linked to the original assemblage in the *potentiality of disposedness*, the extent to which dispositions open and close potential effects. Bennett discusses this concept using the Chinese term “Shi.” As she claims:

Shi helps to ‘illuminate something that is usually difficult to capture in discourse: namely, the kind of potential that originates not in human initiatives but instead results from the very disposition of things’ Shi is the styles, energy, propensity, trajectory, or élan inherent to a specific arrangement of things...shi names the dynamic force emanating from a spatiotemporal configuration rather than from any particular element within it. (461)

In this context, Shi also helps to make visible the potential effects (generally self-reinforcing) inherent to the dispositions composed by the ambient Spectacle. That is, try as I might to avoid contributing to global warming by riding my bike, the electricity of my residence remains linked to a CO₂ emitting power-plant. Furthermore, in deciding to drive my car, I contribute to a cascade of future effects. While experienced as an “ordinary” act of “everyday life” it is a contribution to the unfolding of a particular chain of events. However, my ambient experience was already disposed in such a way to hide or disparage the significance of such cascade-contribution—I still see full parking lots

everyday and gas stations keep a continuous flow of customers. A disidentification with the ambience of the Spectacle, however, maintains a heightened awareness of the extent to which such dispositions are linked to potential effects, to the epideictic that glosses over the Shi of the ambient Spectacle.

As Jane Bennet claims, while a theory of the agency of assemblages distributes blame and does not localize it, we still remain capable of gravitating toward and avoiding particular assemblages: “Perhaps the responsibility of individual humans may reside most significantly in one’s response to the assemblages in which one finds oneself participating—do I attempt to extricate myself from assemblages whose trajectory is likely to harm? Do I enter into the proximity of assemblages whose conglomerate effectivity tends toward enactment of nobler ends?”²⁸ (464). It is for this reason that I will argue for a rhetoric of radical reattunement²⁹, which is to say a rhetorical theory attuned to the political power of the ambient, the omnipresence of the Spectacular, and the agency that remains within disposition as an incessantly dynamic force. While an “agency of assemblages” posits human intention as a mere “pebble thrown into a pond” (457), a pebble, nevertheless, changes the volume of the pond, even if only to a minute degree. However, the ambient Spectacle thrives via this affective pebble-izing process.

Take, for example, the newly developing understanding of microplastics’ presence in the world’s oceans³⁰. Such research argues that our plastic fixation will (if continuing uninterrupted) radically disrupt the ocean’s (and likely the world’s) food

²⁸ NB I favor for the latter.

²⁹ I will define this at greater length in the conclusion to this work.

³⁰ See, for example, work such as that of H. Auta et al., Hans Bouwmeester et al., Jean-Pierre Desforges et al., and N. Hall et al. who all find that the pervasiveness of microplastics in today’s oceans are entering the food chain via small organisms and coral reefs who confuse the microplastics with food. The negative side effects of microplastic consumption are also discussed.

chains (especially since recycling is now known to be rather ineffective³¹). And yet, when I pass the free-trade café, I still see plastic lids (non-recyclable Polystyrene) abound, and even when I avoid it at all costs throughout the day, my grocery trip still yields a block of tofu sold in a plastic carton (I could, of course, make my own tofu, but I assume the soy beans would be packaged similarly—besides, making everything at home would be a real hassle, right?). *This* is the ambient Spectacle. All these inherited gestures and practices, from buying a morning cup of coffee to buying groceries pre-packaged, allude to a system of values, a way of seeing, an epideictic, that nods to the gravity of its impacts (e.g., by making more recycling bins available to allow a select few consumers to feel less complicit) and yet makes a moral evaluation that privileges the convenience and significance of the present over the skewed distribution of precarity its decisions impart on the future. It provides an ambience of material-potential attuned to its value systems, and, in doing so, adds each individual as an agent in its assemblage-force. It structures the assemblage (though never wholly) and, therefore, posits individuals as actants in its goals and implications. It composes this atmosphere of complicity with the omnipresence of plastic fortune-cookie wrappers and plastic garbage bags (my plastic retainer too), attempting to naturalize and depoliticize its pervasiveness and to create a space where individuals can identify with the moral evaluations that have already been made (its paradigmatic, epideictic examples³²). In identifying this ambience as natural, non-

³¹ The 5 Gyres Institute, an organization of scientists working to document the presence of plastic in all five of the world's major gyres, explains that even though "300 million tons of new plastic is produced annually" there is still "less than 10%" being recycled. Even so, "Much of the plastic dropped in recycling bins isn't even recycled" as only certain types of plastics are recyclable (as I will discuss, most coffee cup lids are Polystyrene, #6, and are not recyclable) and many overwhelmed recycling plants in the US resort to exporting their excess waste, where it never enters the recycling process ("The Truth About Recycling").

³² Recall again here John C. Adam's claim that "Epideictic displays paradigm cases that embody presently operative, but contingent, concepts of virtue. As concrete and vividly depicted exemplars of the good

political, ordinary, we become consubstantial with the Spectacle; we consent to the uneven spread of precarity (both in the present and future) inherently linked to continuity of the ambient Spectacle. In this sense, Bennett's Shi and cascade assist in providing a theoretical vocabulary with a heightened awareness of effects and their complex relation to objects and assemblages as they exist in disposed (Spectacular) ambiances.

Precarity and Potential, Future Others

My aim to this point has been to make visible (or at least more so) the means through and by which the ambient Spectacle comes to be—its air, gaze, depoliticizations, and dispositions. This, however, serves as the theoretical foundation for my primary goal: to show the values functioning within the ambient Spectacle's epideictic. While I have thus far attempted to give language to how the Spectacle constitutes the communal subject via both its gaze and its epideictic, how it composes an atmosphere or ambience via epideictic auras, and the ways in which these forces function in-action via moving and dynamic assemblages, I here move (as my final theoretical inquiry in this chapter) to articulate and explore the 'ways of seeing' and moral systems implicit to an identification with (or a complicit existence among) the ambient Spectacle; I attempt to here articulate the ethical implications of the aforementioned forces when contextualized within the moral-evaluations implicit to the ambient Spectacle's epideictic. To do so, I will draw upon the work of Judith Butler and Debord to explore both the epideictic of the ambient Spectacle, its untenability, and to, ideally, open an exigence for disidentification, or what I will call radical reattunement.

drawn from the actual deeds of community members, they forcefully display virtue's reality" (296). It is in this context that "the exemplar of virtue becomes a settled case employed as a point of reference in deliberations regarding the 'good' and its place as a motive—attributed or avowed—in judging the virtue of other actions the case typifies" (296).

A theorization of the ambient Spectacle attuned to value flows should first draw from some Debord's earliest statements on its functions. For Debord, among the most prominent roles of the Spectacle "is the concrete manufacture of alienation" (23). The Spectacle "is founded on isolation; at the same time it is a circular process designed to produce isolation" (22). Furthermore, within it "Spectators are linked only by a one-way relationship to the very center that maintains their isolation from one another. The spectacle thus unites what is separate, but it unites it only *in its separateness*" (22). The first section to Debord's *The Society of the Spectacle* is entirely dedicated to this notion of "Separation Perfected." It is these processes of alienating the individual from their labor, from authentic engagement with Others, and from their world-shaping powers that allow the ambient Spectacle to perpetuate its own existence. However, I claim that these processes have become such a totalizing force that we are no longer simply isolated from Others or our labor, as Debord primarily focuses. More significantly, we are alienated from any considerations of our *potential, future Others*. That is, in our daily actions, being linked to other individuals only in our "*separateness*," we are alleviated of the social responsibility of caring for others. Contemporarily, this translates to an ambience attuned to the disparagement of negative effects that eminently "cascade," to use Bennett's term, from the participation in particular assemblages. Judith Butler's arguments on "precarity" and "grievability" too can here help to ground and outline the significance of such a development in so far as they ground these ideas in the human. Rather than considering the human an vegetable as actants within an assemblage, Butler can here highlight the unique precarity, the uncertain, unstable, and unguaranteed nature, of our being.

Judith Butler's *Precarious Life* dedicates several chapters to discussing "precarity," a general lack of stability or security for self-sufficiency (from an inability to secure a regular means of nourishment to existing within an unstable governing body—it generally refers to struggling with a precarious existence). As she explains, however, precarity is not neatly and evenly ordered, for "There are ways of distributing vulnerability, differential forms of allocation that make some populations more subject to arbitrary violence than others" (xii). It is in this context, of unevenly distributed precarity³³ that Butler considers "how certain forms of grief become nationally recognized and amplified, whereas other losses become unthinkable and ungrievable"³⁴ (xiv). The notion of "grievable" deaths according to national discourses' habits of acknowledgement and disparagement alludes to the epideictic functions of such rhetorics. Writing counter to Aristotle's assertion that the epideictic is focused merely on praise and blame, Lawrence Rosenfield claims it can be better thought of as involving "‘acknowledgement’ and ‘disparagement,’ the recognition of what *is* (goodness, grace, intrinsic excellence) or the refusal to so recognize in a moment of social inspiration" (133); the epideictic is the display of a community's moral systems—evaluations already made (often without the say of the community members). Regarding the notion of grief in national epideictics, Butler goes on to explain, "Some lives are grievable, and others are not; the differential allocation of grievability that decides what kind of subject is and

³³ The verb "distributed" is of great significance here, as it implies an agent that (unevenly) distributes precarity.

³⁴ Here we might also consider Perlman and Olbrechts-Tyteca's claim that the epideictic "tries to establish a sense of communion centered around particular values recognized by the audience, and to this end...uses the whole range of means available to the rhetorician for purposes of amplification and enhancement" (51). Amplification, in epideictic rhetoric serves "to increase the intensity of adherence to values held in common by the audience and the speaker," which is the very purpose of the epideictic according to Perlman and Olbrechts-Tyteca (52).

must be grieved, and which kind of subject must not, operates to produce and maintain certain exclusionary conceptions of who is normatively human: what counts as a livable life and a grievable death?” (xv). That is, a hegemonic epideictic rhetoric can serve to structure what forms of life are and are not worth a community’s grief—it is inherently linked to the moral systems and ways of seeing inherent to a community, which are themselves shaped by the pervading epideictic discourses. Gerard Hauser observes as much when claiming that “epideictic occupies a unique place in celebrating the deeds of exemplars who set the tone for civic community and the encomiast serves an equally unique role as a teacher of civic virtue” (14). In her more recent work, *Frames of War*, Butler discusses this problem of grievability as the “differential distribution of precarity,” which she sees as “at once a material and perceptual issue, since those whose lives are not ‘regarded’ as potentially grievable, and hence valuable, are made to bear the burden of starvation, underemployment, legal disenfranchisement, and differential exposure to violence and death” (25). Extending these ideas beyond notions of national discourse, I find these theorizations of the “distribution of precarity” and “grievability” can help to articulate the ways of seeing that function within the ambient Spectacle’s epideictic.

Debord rightly claimed that the Spectacle functions to concretely manufacture alienation. However, echoing my earlier arguments, I claim that, in its rhetorically ambient manifestation, the Spectacle alienates us not only from Others, but also from *potential, future Others* and the precarity our participation in particular assemblages can impart on their existence. We might here recall Bennett’s theory of the “cascade,” the effects that outpour from a particular assemblage, which is further complemented by her idea of Shi, or “the dynamic force emanating from a spatiotemporal configuration rather

than from any particular element within it” (461). We might say, then, that the ambient Spectacle continues to function insofar as the Shi beneficial to its flourishing, which disposes the cascading of those effects necessary to it flourishing, is consented to, remains uncontested and consubstantial with communal identity. Referring back to one of the epigraphs for the introduction to this work, I might here highlight Henri Lefebvre’s observation that:

Acceptance of daily life as it is (as it develops in and through its changes)...involves much more than consenting to trivial acts: buying and selling, consumption, various activities. It implies a ‘consensus’: acceptance of society, the mode of production—in a word, a (the) totality. In this way, people (who? each and every one of us) condemn themselves to not desiring, conceiving, or even imagining possibilities beyond this mode of production! (677)

The ambience of the Spectacle’s epideictic, is therefore reproduced in the very continuity of its own existence. As Hauser claims, the epideictic serves to “*display*” systems of values “at the level of praxis” (15). John C. Adams similarly claims that:

Epideictic displays paradigm cases that embody presently operative, but contingent, concepts of virtue. As concrete and vividly depicted exemplars of the good drawn from the actual deeds of community members, they forcefully display virtue’s reality...Once memorialized through epideictic display, the exemplar of virtue becomes a settled case employed as a point of reference in deliberations regarding the ‘good’ and its place as a motive—attributed or avowed—in judging the virtue of other actions the case typifies. (296)

It is for this reason that Richard Gilman-Opalsky, in his revaluation of Debord's work in *Spectacular Capitalism*, claims, "The ultimate irony of the spectacle is that, through our complicity, we choose and reaffirm this society as it is, and we remake the spectacle every moment we accept it" (Gilman-Opalsk 76).

The ambient Spectacle, then, is epideictic insofar as the assemblaged ambience(s) of potential it composes, its Shi, exudes a rhetorical aura from each of its components that remains naïve to, disparages, its potential effects, its eminent cascades. Referring to my earlier example—I sit in my local coffee shop surrounded by plastics and animal based food products (creamers, sandwiches, and so on)³⁵. However, it is not merely the existence of these products sure to cascade into contributions of ocean micro-plastics and ozone depletion. It is also their naturalized disposition. They exude an aura that, via an epideictic encounter, disparages the actuality of the ambience's Shi, the cascade of effects that their assemblage links them to. And in their uncontested presence (while I sit in the shop no other patron stands on the table to furiously explain the horrors of these artifacts—though I often come close), they become the paradigmatic examples of virtue discussed by Adams. Their naturalized and uncontested existence serves as a justification for their future existence and reproduction. Though, it is the violent potentials they hold

³⁵ As the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations' Livestock, Environment, and Development (LEAD) Initiative claims in its 2006 report, *Livestock's Long Shadow: Environmental Issues and Options*, "With rising temperatures, rising sea levels, melting icecaps and glaciers, shifting ocean currents and weather patterns, climate change is the most serious challenge facing the human race. The livestock sector is a major player, responsible for 18 percent of greenhouse gas emissions... This is a higher share than transport" (Steinfeld xxi). They observe, furthermore, that with the drastic increase in population expected by 2050, and the significant increase in livestock byproduct consumption expected, "The environmental impact per unit of livestock production must be cut by half, just to avoid increasing the level of damage beyond its present level" (xx). Veganism is by far the simplest (and most empathetic) approach to addressing such a crisis. It should also be noted that other studies such as Robert Goodland and Jeff Anhang's "Livestock and Climate Change: What if the key actors in climate change are...cows, pigs, and chickens?" claim that the LEAD report is highly conservative in its findings, at the actual greenhouse gas (GHG) emission total for the animal-industry is at least 51 percent of annual worldwide GHG emissions" (11).

that the epideictic keeps at bay. The rhetorical subject it addresses is isolated from the distributions of precarity that are inherently linked to the ambient Spectacle, that will inevitably cascade from its very being. Furthermore, it is not merely these two forms of objects (plastics and animal products) that compose and manifest the moral logics of the ambient Spectacle; it is also the people who watch as others utilize them, and the air that surrounds them, the cars that drive past the café windows as I think this very thought (emitting CO₂, albeit less than the animal industry) and the sensations and affects that gave rise to the aforementioned thought itself. Through the very act of being among the ambient Spectacle, I am interpellated as a potential subject of its epideictic system of thought. The Spectacle is everywhere. It is ambient. Hope remains, however, insofar as it is a rhetorical ontology, meaning we are free to identify with or reject the imperative to identify with its epideictic community. Herein lies the significance of the ideas of “reattunement” and “disidentification.”

Conclusion: Reattuning to an Other-community

In many ways, I have strived in this work to incite an angst-ridden sense of disillusionment in the reader. More explicitly: I have here attempted to collage critical theories that inspect our complicity in the development of some of the world’s major crises alongside rhetorical theories on the radical power of our agential ability to respond to the world as it exists—to shift existing entanglements, to gravitate towards and reject particular assemblages. While conclusions to academic work conventionally gesture towards where new openings to further research exist, I find this the most appropriate moment to convey my hesitance toward maintaining such conventions, for, a theory of the ambient Spectacle asserts that no further research on its theoretical contours and

effects is truly necessary. It, instead, calls attention to the significance of our agency and response-ability, as well as *the exigence for responding to such in the face of the ambient Spectacle*. And yet, a master's thesis written for an audience of one may, in many ways, have failed to achieve my primary aim. As this thesis too is rhetorically situated, it remains a work composed in tandem with cups of free-trade coffee, MacBook keys, gallons of gasoline used to drive to and from thesis-meetings, and countless drafts printed on (now recycled) pages of paper. This work is, like everything else that exists, complexly enmeshed in the ambient Spectacle. And yet I remain content in this project's development as it remains a distinct form of theory among rhetorical and new materialist discourses.

Prior to writing the conclusion to this work (after having completed the rest of the project) I had the honor of attending a seminar titled "Rhetoric and the New Materialisms" at the Rhetoric Society of America's 2017 Institute. This seminar was led by Diane Davis and Thomas Rickert, two scholars who had a profound impact on laying the theoretical foundation for this work. However, my presence here, to be frank, was experienced as a disillusioning process, of sorts with existing academic discourses. While I have struggled to ground a justification for this work throughout the writing process, it was while sitting in the seminar-circle of 40 other academics interested in the development of "new materialist" theory, from Ph.D. candidates to tenured professors, that I realized my real purpose in writing this work. Specifically, it was when looking around the room to see almost all participants (Rickert and Davis included) speaking on the groundbreaking agency of matter while drinking from plastic cups, plastic water bottles, and Styrofoam, while listening to a room (at least) half-full of carnivores discuss

Derrida's *The Animal That Therefore I Am* who would proceed to consume flesh at the Plenary Luncheon, that my aim became clear. The ambient Spectacle is, of course, not merely an eco-critical theory (yet, much like images to Debord's work, the ecological is the most easily identifiable manifestation). While I've focused here on plastics and animal products, this theory could very easily have been applied to other social ills—the prominence of abhorrent racial inequalities (this too was materially manifest in the seminar, as the room was filled with not a single scholar of color) or of classist commodities (fancy suits, or name brand handbags also littered the room, and not one computer out of the 40 present was a non-Apple product). Nevertheless, it is into this kind of conversation that I would hope to (theoretically, for this, of course, is work read by a limited audience) *throw* my work into. Again, I am hesitant to suggest for further research, as it seems a radical praxis is called for more so than supplementary radical theories—we have enough of those. This thesis, then, hopes to say, while it indeed is difficult to alter one's attunement to the ambient Spectacle, if an Other-community is to ever be materially possible, this is the means through which its foundation will be laid.

A new materialist epideictic claims that value systems and ways of seeing can be materially constructed in the spatiotemporal ambiances we come to inhabit. A theory of the ambient Spectacle, furthermore, reasserts the claim that particular moral evaluations about what is acceptable, consentable, or just is already inherently inscribed into our epideictic, ambient experience of the everyday. It is for this reason I have stressed the implications of rhetorical identification in the context of Jane Bennett's theory of assemblages and Judith Butler's theory of distributions of precarity, in the hopes of creating an exigence for disidentification with the ambient Spectacle, or, to participate in

an act of radical reattunement (radical, in this sense, gesturally referencing a disidentification with existing ambient structures of morality, and “reattunement” I will define shortly). A theory of the ambient Spectacle can guide our inquiry (rhetorical, philosophical, and otherwise) into these moral structures and modes of consent. A theory of the ambient Spectacle, therefore, is a repoliticizing exercise, creating a new place for conversation, a new *situation*. Regarding the notion of “attunement,” Rickert, in *Ambient Rhetoric*, claims:

ambience involves more than just the whole person, as it were; ambience is inseparable from the person in the environment that gives rise to ambience. There is no person who can then be tacked onto the environment. Attunement is not additive. Rather, there is a fundamental entanglement, with the individuation of particular facets being an achieved disclosure. Thus, wakefulness to ambience is not a subjective achievement but rather an ambient occurrence: an attunement. (8)

If, as I have been arguing, the Spectacle is an ambient rhetorical apparatus, then in our participation and entanglement with it, we are de facto attuned to the Spectacular—it inhabits us, and we it. It is for this reason, however, that I argue for the viability of “reattunement” as a theoretical concept in our discussions of ambient rhetorics, where reattunement refers to an agential shift away from existing, ambient entanglements. Given the ambience of the Spectacle, perhaps the best thing we can do, our most significant power, is to alter our disposition to our ambient environments, seeking, again, a radical disidentification or rejection of epideictics whose ends prey upon the precarity of other lives for the benefit of our own. That is to say, in disposing ourselves differently, otherwise, against the existing moral structures in an attempt to create our own, we

change the ambience itself (for, as Rickert claims—our disposition or attunement is part of the ambience itself). A work such as Rickert’s *Ambient Rhetoric* might claim that a reattunement would not be “re-” at all, in so far as the existing ambience would already be entangled in any agential shift that responsively unfolds, for “Attunement is not additive” (8). However, if the ambient Spectacle, as I have been arguing, is theorized as a form of material epideictic, then the values of an Other-community exists as merely a specter, present only in their absence. While Burke claims that “one need not scrutinize the concept of identification very sharply to see” that “division” is “implied at every turn,” this division, this possibility for disidentification or the formation of an Other-community, merely exists as an implication or a lingering possibility (23). The aim of a theory on the ambient spectacle is to make this more materially manifest in the hopes of dissenting to the potential futures the ambient Spectacle has presented as possible. The process in achieving this aim is via radical reattunement, or by making the values of an Other-community, which are already lingering as threats and fractures in the ambient Spectacle, a part of the existing ambience, contributing them to existing entanglements by rejecting the existing epideictic. Reattunement, then, is yet another theoretical détournement. In seeing the everyday as propaganda for a future which cannot and never did exist, we give life to the air of possible Other-ness that we are radically capable of *responding* into being itself. The question is, will we, reader(s) and author included, move forward with subtle but reinforcing concessions to the possibilities to these futures (e.g. Styrofoam cups at conferences and coffee with creamer (with Polystyrene #6 lids)), or will we re-attune, and live *Other-wise*.

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