

Electric Rhetoric: New and Challenging Ways to Re-Read Discourse

Book Review by **Noemi Marin**, Assistant Professor, Department of Communication, Florida Atlantic University (nmarin@fau.edu).

Kathleen E. Welch, *Electric Rhetoric: Classical Rhetoric, Oralism, and a New Literacy*. Digital Communication Series, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1999. 240 pp. Bibliographic references, and index. \$35.00 (cloth), ISBN 0-262-23202-2.

Kathleen Welch's *Electric Rhetoric* is a timely and intriguing articulation against traditional rhetorical venues for practicing discourse in American education. Clearly a manifesto for Sophistic rhetoric in the new era of Web literacy and visual or screen discourse, Welch provides ample deconstruction of the metaparadigms dominant as traditional practices of old rhetorical concepts in the classroom. Bridging, as the title announces, classical rhetoric, in particular, Isocrates' Sophistic rhetoric with digital communication in contemporary US practices of television and computerized screens, Welch enrolls in a rigorous rhetorical crusade. Her aim is to realign rhetorical practices of the old (and new) times to the novel challenges that electric literacy posits for students and educators alike. Basing her position on the experiences of Rhetoric and Composition Programs on writing in the American academic system, Welch's main focus is twofold. On one hand, as Welch reinstatiates Isocratic rhetoric as *thelocus* for new challenges of the 21st century, the author revises and "rehistoricizes" rhetorical concepts (to use her own term, as "it acknowledges the subjectivity of the writer and distances the writer and her writing from the still dominant history writing produces by purportedly neutral historian," p. 24). Meanwhile, she articulates on a side the limitations of Isocrates' views for complex, multiple rhetorical discourse in current times. On the other hand, Welch demonstrates that such a revisionist rhetorical perspective, where Ong's and Vygotsky's theories on orality of language are added to the "mix," benefits the current discourse today "as it is conditioned by literate, visual oralism/auralism" (p. 25).

The way *Electric Rhetoric* is structured reflects precisely the twofold claim of rhetorical revision and reinterpretation announced throughout the book. Part I engages the readers to visit the classical Greek literacy in Isocrates' times as pertinent to the Rhetoric and Composition Programs current views on the written word. Welch's proposal to reassess the above mentioned programs and the 'old' literacy reveals her interest to rearticulate Isocrates' concepts of "rhetoric," "philosophy," and "paideia" as contained in his work, *Antidosis*. Her major contention is that such reinterpretation, added to Ong's "second orality" theory and to Vygotsky's idea that "language and thought have different roots" (p. 67) strengthens not only Rhetoric and Composition writing programs, but also all Humanities disciplines altogether. Aside from providing insightful view on Isocratic concepts of rhetorical theory, Welch's work adds a brief yet powerful gender presentation of the rehistoricized discourse, including "the strange case of Diotima," a famous woman rhetorician within the oralism necessary for electric rhetoric (see in particular pp. 93-98).

Part II, entitled, "Logos Performers, Screen Sophism, and the Rhetorical Turn" puts into practice the theoretical claims made, calling again for a rhetorical pedagogy in the TV era while presenting challenging explorations of contemporary TV shows, web sites, and structural discussions on the oral features of visual discourse.

Particularly beneficial, and interesting in my view, are Welch's analyses offered in Chapter 5, *Technologies of Electric Rhetoric* (pp.137-191). Although the benefits of revisiting Isocratic rhetoric might provide salient claims to realign Sophistic rhetoric to pedagogical aims, for readers like me, the practical explorations of electronic discourse that Welch offers make the entire conceptual claims of the book valid. The author provides convincing rhetorical interpretation of contemporary "text" as she explores the rhetorical powers of electronic discourse, in particular *The NBC Nightly News with Tom Brokaw* or the *Website Histories of Feminist Rhetorics and Writing Practices* (<http://rossby.ou.edu/~femrhets>). It would have been more beneficial if Welch created a

more developed definition of "electric rhetoric," which appears throughout the book as "screen rhetoric," "next rhetoric," and "alternative rhetoric of oral/aural articulation" (see contents). For, while the author works through half the book on the purpose to reconstitute Isocratic rhetoric in order to articulate new literacy "that more meaningfully interacts with cultures outside the academy," (p.7) Welch does not address explicitly the dimensions and/or limitations of "electric rhetoric" so well practiced in the literacy analyses of chapter 5.

By viewing electric discourse as novel oral, aural and visual articulations of human discourse, Welch brings to the table important negotiations of complex and multiple meanings concepts like *literacy, rhetoric, language, and ideas* carry nowadays. Benefiting from such a read are educators, members of the American academia, but also historians, cultural studies and media scholars as well as students who intend to better understand how old and new traditions of thought and language come to partake in human discourse. Overall, *Electric Rhetoric* is an important and enticing read, a powerful revisitation of the traditions of rhetorical education, and a compelling argument in favor of multiple and de-centralized oral/aural/visual discourse facing students and educators in the computerized environment of the new millennium.

