

## Forum

### Richard Lanham's *The Electronic Word and AT/THROUGH Oscillations*

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Little did I think a sixty-something professor of classical rhetoric could be the one to sweet-talk me into hypertext . . . rich, complex, and utterly fascinating.

—Brigitte Frase, *Hungry Mind Review*

Unlike the reviewer in the epigraph, as a composition and rhetoric instructor I am not surprised that a professor of classical rhetoric has much to offer in terms of analyzing and interacting with texts. I am a bit surprised, however, to realize as I write this reflective essay how much a book first published in 1993 affected and still affects my teaching and thinking about computerized technologies. In 1993 the World Wide Web had not yet been launched, most schools did not have computers, there were no blogs or instant-messenger services, people could not check e-mail on airplanes or with cell phones, and *Google* was not yet a word, much less a verb. In terms of changing computerized technologies, 1993 seems an eternity ago. Yet Richard Lanham's *The Electronic Word: Democracy, Technology, and the Arts* (1993) still has much to offer humanists and teachers, and I think it will in the future as well.

Lanham focuses on the impact of digitization upon the Western arts, and he argues for the centrality of rhetoric for thinking about people's inter-

actions and perceptions of digital texts.<sup>1</sup> He addresses a number of issues in the ten essays that comprise the book (essays that can be read in sequence or individually), including the future of the book, potentially different ways for teaching canonical texts, revisions that may occur to university departmental organization, and the digital possibilities for democratizing the arts. There have been a number of more detailed examinations and reviews of *The Electronic Word* (e.g., O'Donnell 1994; Poggenpohl 1994; Lanham et al. 1995), so that is not my purpose here. Rather, I want to focus on the ways Lanham's text has influenced my pedagogy, specifically the ways his key concept of an AT/THROUGH bi-stable oscillation has affected and continues to affect my teaching and thinking about digital media.

I will first summarize the opening chapters of *The Electronic Word* in which Lanham repeatedly discusses the AT/THROUGH bi-stable oscillation—"a toggle to boggle the mind," he calls it (1993: 81)—and then I will examine how I have used this concept to reflect upon and to develop my own pedagogical approaches to engaging students (and myself) with digital texts. I close by proposing an expanded understanding of Lanham's concept, an understanding that enables more multiple approaches to analyzing and situating individuals' interactions, relations, and communications with computerized technologies within broader sociopolitical contexts.

### **A Toggle to Boggle the Mind**

In chapter 1, "The Electronic Word: Literary Study and the Digital Revolution," Lanham argues that as printing techniques evolved, the physical, constructed nature of printed texts took on the goal of unselfconscious transparency—to convey "unintermediated thought, or at least what seemed like unintermediated thought" (4). Rather than notice and question, say, the  $8\frac{1}{2} \times 11$ -inch paper and Times New Roman typeface, traditional print media (to be judged successful) often positioned readers to read *through* the structure of the text to the message being conveyed. But as Lanham repeatedly asserts, all text is, of course, mediated, and it is important for people to recognize the mediated nature of texts. Such a recognition is made easier by computers, Lanham claims, because with computers people can create malleable, interactive digital texts<sup>2</sup> in which "the textual surface has become permanently bi-stable. We are always looking first AT it and then THROUGH it, and this oscillation creates a different implied ideal of decorum, both stylistic and behavioral. Look THROUGH a text and you are in the familiar world of the Newtonian interlude. . . . Look AT a text, however, and we have deconstructed the Newtonian world" (5). Lanham goes on to note that "we

have always had ways of triggering this oscillation” (5)—as, for example, the work of the Futurists shows—but that digitization fosters a destabilization of the text that more easily enables “that characteristic oscillation between looking AT symbols and looking THROUGH them” (24).<sup>3</sup>

From his discussion of writing, Lanham then moves to the visual arts, examining in chapter 2 (“Digital Rhetoric and the Digital Arts”) a number of twentieth-century artists whose works trigger bi-stable oscillations. Lanham points out what he calls “the extraordinary way in which the computer has fulfilled the expressive agenda of twentieth-century art” (31), an agenda whose goal, he explains, is to destabilize the viewer and to prompt bi-stable oscillations between looking AT the work of art and looking THROUGH it. Lanham provides many examples, of which I will discuss four that stand out the most for me and that I’ve used to develop my pedagogy.

One artist whose work Lanham describes is Claes Oldenburg, who used changes in scale to create a giant thirty-foot long Swiss Army knife that is both a knife and a Venetian gondola.<sup>4</sup> As Lanham watched this knife going around the courtyard of an art museum (41), his perceptions kept changing from knife to gondola and back, much the way our perceptions of the famous two faces/candlestick image keeps switching back and forth. This changing of perceptions made Lanham conscious of the act of looking: at the work of art, at knives and gondolas, and at the very act of looking itself. Another artist, Roy Lichtenstein, used changes in scale to paint giant renderings of comic books, thus creating a canvas that is, as Lanham explains, also “rendered maximally self-conscious” (43), causing viewers to look at the work of art *and* the actual comic book in different ways (just as Andy Warhol forever changed the way we look at soup cans).<sup>5</sup>

Twentieth-century artists, Lanham argues, have not simply helped people *look* AT art differently, but also to *interact* with it differently. The sculptor Jean Tinguely welded together metal scraps to create sculptures with which people can play, and his exhibits often include photographs of people interacting with the sculptures.<sup>6</sup> Lanham describes attending one of Tinguely’s exhibits and being immersed in “a symphony of sounds, the whangs, bangs, and whistles of the sculptures blending with the exclamations of the participants—for that’s what we were” (39). Leaving the noisy Tinguely exhibit and returning to “the reverential quiet of a conventional exhibit” (39) caused Lanham to experience the traditional silence of art museums in a new way. As he explains, “Might I suggest that these conventional galleries allegorize the printed text, as read in a digital age? They are still the same, and yet we listen to them in a different way, and hear silences we have not

heard before” (39). I will explore more fully this wonderful comparison in a moment.

Another artist, whom Lanham discusses at length, is Christo Javecheff (most commonly known as Christo), whose work, Lanham explains, encompasses human interactions across time and space. In his piece *Running Fence, 1972–1976*, Christo built a fabric fence twenty-four miles long that stretched from the hills of California to the ocean.<sup>7</sup> The fence, when it was built by 360 volunteers, stood for only a few weeks, but the fence itself was not the whole work of art. Rather, the work of art was the entire four-year process of getting the fence built—the court hearings, the drafting of the environmental impact statement, the work of the volunteers setting up and tearing down the fence, and the book published about the experience. As Lanham describes it, Christo took what are often unexamined bureaucratic processes (zoning meetings, for example) and “transformed them into self-conscious art. By subtracting the practical purposes, the enduring object—fence, pipeline, building, whatever—from the process, he has allowed everyone involved (and that includes all of us) to focus on, to become self-conscious about, the process involved, the process of human cooperation. To look AT it rather than THROUGH it” (70). Lanham then concludes his discussion of *Running Fence* by speculating that “I think we can use electronic text in the same way and for the same purpose” (50), a conclusion I also felt upon reading his example and one that I was eager to try with students in the composition courses I teach. That is, I was interested in using computerized technologies to facilitate a looking AT a wide range of human communication as well as THROUGH it.

But before I turn to discuss the impact of Lanham’s work on my teaching, I want to address one more point he makes in his book. Besides examining bi-stable oscillations in relation to written texts and the visual arts, Lanham also examines them in relation to rhetoric. In chapter 3, Lanham argues that rhetoric is resuming, in explicit ways, its centrality to all disciplines as AT and THROUGH oscillations are expressed and acknowledged in more fields. That is, as more fields recognize the constructed nature of knowledge and the understanding that symbols carry meaning through acts of illusion and allusion, then rhetorical education becomes evidently crucial because it enables people “to toggle back and forth between AT and THROUGH vision, alternately to realize how the illusion is created and then to fool oneself with it again” (81). Lanham takes a decidedly postmodern view that toggling between AT and THROUGH moves a viewer from various illusionary positions, and he frequently refers to bi-stable oscillations as bi-

stable *illusions* (and in places as bi-stable *allusions*). While I recognize that *illusion* captures the changing nature of our perceptions, I prefer the term *oscillation*, because from my critical perspective *illusion* does not emphasize enough the very real material impacts that looking and interacting both AT and THROUGH various positions have on discourse, pedagogy, individuals, and society.

### **AT/THROUGH Oscillations, Computerized Technologies, and the Composition Classroom**

I have not done justice in these few pages to the complex arguments Lanham builds (and I have only touched on the parts of his text addressing bi-stable oscillations), but I hope I have given enough examples of the various approaches to AT/THROUGH to provide a sense of why I find this bi-stable oscillation rich material upon which to build. AT/THROUGH serves two functions for me: (1) it enables a language through which to examine continually changing pedagogical practices, particularly vis-à-vis ever-changing technology (for example, this semester students in the peer-tutoring course I teach will be experimenting with conducting tutoring sessions using instant messenger); and (2) it provides a means through which to complicate my and my students' understandings of our individual and collective experiences working with computerized technologies. Although I have found AT/THROUGH useful in thinking about ways to incorporate a variety of computerized technologies in the classroom (chats, visual rhetorics, Web composition, new media projects), for the sake of space and because I would like to be able to describe the impact of AT/THROUGH on one area of my teaching more fully, I will focus my discussion here upon asynchronous communication forums.

I first read *The Electronic Word* in 2000, the same year I first had composition students participate in the Intercollegiate E-Democracy Project (IEDP), a national collaborative where each semester hundreds of students from across the country discuss for several weeks various social and political issues in password-protected online forums. I realized that I wanted students to participate in these discussions because I was seeking to change the scale of the classroom—to take a discussion and expand it to include a national network (to create, in a sense, the giant comic book image or the thirty-foot Swiss Army knife).<sup>8</sup> I was seeking opportunities for students to use writing to communicate in more diverse contact zones (Pratt 1998 [1991]). But the discussions students in my class engaged in that first semester were not very productive, at least not in the sense of fulfilling my hope that they would

foster a greater depth and complexity of thinking about issues and that they would encourage students to use writing to reflect more fully upon public issues and their own understandings of these issues. Many of the students in my classes either got in shouting matches with others, quit the discussion altogether, and/or left more set in their views than when they started. I realized that despite my high hopes for the transformative experience of digital contact zones, I had not done enough to prepare students for engaging in online discussions, particularly for engaging in discussions of controversial subjects.

Studying (with institutional review board approval and student permission) the online transcripts of the discussion and conducting interviews with students, I realized that the electronic interface was affecting the discussion more than I realized it would. A number of students described how the faceless nature of the discussion helped them express themselves more directly and perhaps more honestly than they would in a face-to-face classroom, but because they couldn't see the other people and because of the asynchronous timeframe, they were also not always able to gauge what others meant by what they wrote. For example, one student who got angry with what another student had posted explained to me in an interview:

I wasn't able to see how her character was or how she was reacting . . . when you read this [versus talking face-to-face about it]—it's like one thing catches you. That's what makes you angry, so you go directly for it. You just start jabbing at it, jabbing at it. And maybe you don't really have to jab 'cause it's not really what you think it is, you know? . . . if I'm face-to-face, I'm saying that "That makes me angry because you said this-and-that." And then she could say, "But I don't *mean* that."

I realized I had expected students to be able to work THROUGH the electronic medium without my enabling their looking AT it as well and AT the changes it would require of both their reading and writing of electronic postings. While I had asked students to reflect in general ways about how online communication was different from face-to-face discussions, I had not explicitly discussed and developed with students strategies for communicating online, such as asking for explicit clarification before responding (e.g., "I think you said this in your post, is that what you meant?"), rereading an entire thread before jumping in and responding to just one post in it (perhaps a writer's point is in reaction to others' ideas, so it is important to have a fuller understanding of the context), and delaying the impulse to hit the send button (something I think everyone in this age of digital communication can

relate to, but it's an easy one to forget!). I now ask students throughout their participation in an online thread—not just after the fact—to reflect upon how the online environment shapes their discussions, affecting the rhetorical strategies they employ and their understandings of the posts (both their own and others').

But I also realized that students did not simply need to look AT the technology. They were discussing such topics as affirmative action, immigration, and gay marriage while looking THROUGH their own terministic screens (Burke 1966: 44–62). Obviously none of us can ever completely step around the terministic screens that shape our views and ways of being in the world, but we can try as best as we are able to examine our own self-positioning and the sociocultural factors (factors in relations to race, class, sexual orientation, geographic location, political views, etc.) influencing our perceptions and beliefs. In short, I needed to develop assignments that would enable students to look both AT and THROUGH their beliefs.

It is important for students to analyze their own individual and cultural positionings in relation to the issue(s) they are discussing, not only after the discussion is over (which is what I first erroneously had them do) but also *before* and *throughout* their participation in an online discussion. Upon reflecting about his experiences in a discussion of affirmative action, a student from that first semester told me he felt “naive” going into the diversity forum, because “my parents raised me so that I didn't really think about that sort of stuff” and he wished he had “thought more about race,” including “the way other people would react.” Another student—a white student who angered a number of students of color because in her posts she did not acknowledge or examine her own positioning in relation to race and unexamined white privilege—read a draft of my research report on the (mis)communication in the affirmative action thread (see McKee 2002b) and responded that “I also liked how you recommended that instructors ask their students what it means to be white. I have never been asked that before, and I think that it really would help [white] students to think about their race, so that they can go into the [discussion] with a better understanding.” Asking students to look AT their beliefs and not just THROUGH them is essential for fostering productive online exchanges where students are open to (re)examining their own views and the views of others, as a number of teachers and researchers in online communication have also found (see, for example, Romano 1993; Ma 1996; Meagher and Castaños 1996; Shamoon 1998; and Blair 1998).

Since that first semester integrating online communication in the composition courses I teach, I have continually revised my curriculum. In the

most recent iteration of the course, I had students participate in online discussions with students from across the country for two months. I structured the class so that through ongoing written and oral analyses of the online discourse and their participation in it students had many opportunities to toggle continually between looking THROUGH and AT their online discursive practices and the factors influencing what and why they wrote and how and why they read others' posts. As much as I was able, I integrated the online discussions within the course curriculum. (Because asynchronous online discussions can occur outside of class it's easy—and sometimes tempting—to treat them as an “add-on,” something done in addition to an already packed face-to-face curriculum, but as my research and the research of others has shown, it is crucial that discussions be integrated fully into a course structure, whether for the one unit for which discussions are a part or throughout the course.) The complete course syllabus with all assignments is available on the course Web site (McKee 2002a), but here I will just highlight some of the assignments I used to facilitate students' critical examination and, as I will discuss, their *multistable* oscillations between AT and THROUGH.

I begin first by asking students to write about and to discuss in class the technology of communication because I think it's initially easier to look AT something that they may first perceive as more neutral (although as students soon discover technology is *never* neutral). Then about a week after they have begun participating, I ask students to write about and to discuss face-to-face in class such questions as:

- What issues have you raised or responded to for discussion?
- Why are these issues important to you? What experiences have you had with these issues? How do you think these experiences shape your views?
- Examining what you wrote, discuss a few aspects of your post(s), explaining why you wrote what you did. What effect or response are you hoping to achieve?
- Have you received any responses yet? If so, were they what you expected? Do you think your audience read your post(s) the way you intended them to?
- What are your goals for the discussion you are in?

While these questions are basic to any rhetorical analysis (examining purpose and audience), they are crucial questions to ask and they can sometimes be forgotten in the move to newer technologies.

Several times while participating in the thread and upon completing the discussions, I ask students to conduct thread analyses where they choose



posts from a thread (both their own and those written by others) and address such questions as:

- In terms of the ongoing threaded discussion, what do you see as the strengths and weaknesses of this post?
- How, specifically, do you see the writer opening up and/or closing down the discussion?
- How does the writer respond to and engage with the ideas of others?
- In what ways, if at all, have your opinions or perspectives on the issue(s) changed? Why?

Students bring these analyses and threads to class and we discuss in small groups and as a whole class various discursive strategies and why and how they work. From these class discussions and from discussions with colleagues with whom I collaborate, fellow IEDP faculty and I have compiled a list of discursive strategies (linked from the course Web site) that seem to be helpful for fostering productive online exchanges.

Besides conducting ongoing analyses and a final summative analysis, students also research one of the issues raised in the discussion and write an essay exploring—and this is key—*multiple* aspects of the issue. I ask students to use the multiple perspectives they encounter in the online discussions to write essays and create Web sites that do not oversimplify issues into pro/con. You can see this concern in my assignment guidelines:

- In a dialogic argument essay you can certainly still argue (in an academic sense) for a particular course of action or solution to a problem you've identified, but you will want to do so in such a way that you neither oversimplify the issue nor presume too much agreement between your perspective and your audience's. . . . In this case your audience will be your fellow IEDP participants whose posts you can read and analyze to determine how best to tailor your discussion to them.
- For this assignment, you will create a Web site based on the research and much of the writing you have done for essay #4. Just as with your essay, you will want to create a dialogic Web site that considers and presents multiple perspectives on the issue you have researched. (McKee 2002a)

By asking students to emphasize multiple perspectives and to conduct analyses of their potential audience(s), I hope to have them interact with argument and writing about public issues in a way with which some are not familiar. It is my hope too that by looking carefully AT the ideological and material

forces shaping the production of these online texts, students will also begin to look more critically at assignments that may seem more transparent. Thus, in leaving the noisy (multimedia) chaos of writing a multiperspective Web site, students might return to more traditional spaces of five-page printed essays with a new awareness of the structures and pressures shaping these (perhaps) previously transparent communicative acts, just the way leaving the clanging interactivity of Tinguely's sculpture exhibits caused Lanham to perceive the previously unexamined quiet of traditional galleries in new ways.<sup>9</sup>

The emphases I place on multiple perspectives, audience analysis, and self-reflection (emphases that online spaces facilitate perhaps more easily than face-to-face classrooms because of the diversity of participants and the obvious impact of the medium upon communication) ask students to examine discourse and their place in discourse from ever-changing angles—linguistic, sociocultural, rhetorical. For this reason I realize that it is not *bi-stable*, but *multistable* oscillations that I am trying to foster in students' (and in my own) perceptions. I realize that I am trying to get students to see that people's views on issues and on discourse do not occur in vacuums. That is, just as the fence alone is not the complete work of art, so too is online communication not simply an act of typing a message and hitting *send*. The whole experience—the classroom context, the electronic medium, individuals' prior experiences, broader sociocultural ideologies—all bear down on their points of utterance, shaping not only what they say, but how they say it, and how it will be interpreted.

I realize that I have taken Lanham's notion of AT/THROUGH away from his original emphasis upon textual and aesthetic decorum and moved it into more critical and cultural studies fields, but that is why I find AT/THROUGH so enduring a concept. It is adaptable to so many situations, not simply digital technologies, but all teaching experiences. The deceptively simple terminology of AT/THROUGH enables students and instructors to discuss and engage with the complex, multiple technologies and experiences shaping their communicative acts and their understandings of those acts. No matter how technologies evolve and how pedagogies change we will all—students and teachers alike—always need frameworks through which to examine and to articulate our experiences. Richard Lanham's AT/THROUGH oscillations provide one such framework.

## Notes

1. Lanham's Western bias is evident throughout his book. Almost all of his examples are of American or European authors and artists, and when discussing how digitization may affect the teaching of literature, he writes: "Electronic text blows the limitation [of the Western canon] wide open. It offers new ways to democratize the arts, ways of the sort society is asking us to provide. If groups of people newly come to the world of liberal learning cannot unpack the Silenus box of wisdom with the tools they bring, maybe we can redesign the box electronically, so that the tools they have, the talent they already possess, will suffice. We need not necessarily compromise the wisdom therein" (1993: 105). Lanham's emphasis on using electronic texts to change how we teach the canon, not to change the canon itself, while somewhat affirming of diverse ways of knowing, is still limiting in that he does not envision using digital texts to change the very nature of the canon.
2. It is important to note that the malleable, interactive nature of digital texts is also an illusion, as Matthew Kirschenbaum (2003) has recently argued in his chapter "The Word as Image in an Age of Digital Reproduction." He writes, "The aesthetic transformations that make digital objects so eloquent are themselves always subject to the functional constraints imposed by the material variables of computation. These include algorithms, functions, filters, file formats, data standards, memory, hardware capabilities, and user interface conventions. . . . The notion that digital texts and images are infinitely fluid and malleable is an aesthetic conceit divorced from technical practice, a consensual hallucination" (154).
3. Users of digital texts and interfaces can also ignore and thus look THROUGH a digital text's shaping structures, a point Cynthia Selfe and Richard Selfe (1994) make when urging computer users to reexamine computer interfaces and to ask questions about the hegemonic values implicit in such things as the office metaphor, the use of file folders, and the whiteness of the hand when the cursor is over clickable items. More recently, Anne Wysocki and Julia Jasken (2004), after examining the ways textbooks and guides often ignore the rhetorical nature of interfaces, offer suggestions for ways teachers and students can interact with and develop more critically aware interfaces.
4. An image of Oldenburg's knife/gondola is available at [www.guggenheimcollection.org/site/artist\\_work\\_lg\\_121\\_3.html](http://www.guggenheimcollection.org/site/artist_work_lg_121_3.html).
5. An image of one of Lichtenstein's giant-sized comics is available at [www.guggenheimlasvegas.org/artist\\_work\\_lg\\_885.html](http://www.guggenheimlasvegas.org/artist_work_lg_885.html).
6. An image of people interacting with Tinguely's exhibits is available at [artstream.ucsc.edu/art8of/History%20of%20Electronic%20Art/sld029.htm](http://artstream.ucsc.edu/art8of/History%20of%20Electronic%20Art/sld029.htm).
7. An image of *Running Fence* (and information about a movie documenting the whole multiyear process) is available at [www.acmi.net.au/christos.jsp](http://www.acmi.net.au/christos.jsp).
8. For more information about the Intercollegiate E-Democracy Project (IEDP), including information about joining the faculty Listserv or having classes participate in the online forums, visit [www.trincoll.edu/prog/iedp/](http://www.trincoll.edu/prog/iedp/).

9. Whereas I asked students to revise a print document for the Web, Donna LeCourt (1998) describes how she had her students compose hypertexts and convert them into print documents. Her students had great difficulty shaping their hypertext material into the print conventions. LeCourt argues that hypertext helped them to become more aware of genre conventions and thus potentially more able to critique them.

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