**RSE 2019 Panel Presentation**

**RHETORIC & TIME**

*A Proposal for Two Complementary Panel Sessions*

**OVERALL INTRO for BOTH PANELS (1 min)**

Rhetoric is about time, and rhetoric takes time. In two interconnected panel sessions, the presenters take cue from this double perspective: that rhetoric is a practice where one of the main topoi is time, and that rhetoric is an evolving practice embedded in the texture of the temporal world. In the first panel, we investigate how time is used as a resource in rhetorical encounters and, in the second panel, we examine how the temporality of these encounters can be understood theoretically and critically. Together, we view time as essential equipment for theorising, practicing, and teaching rhetoric in a temporally-rich world.

**PANEL 1: “It’s About Time: Temporal Topoi in Rhetorical Practice”**

* Presenter 1: Frida Buhre (chair); Uppsala U, Sweden; [frida.buhre@littvet.uu.se](mailto:frida.buhre@littvet.uu.se)
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**PANEL 2: “It Takes Time: Rhetoric as Temporally-Situated Practice”**

* Presenter 1: Collin Bjork (chair); Massey U, New Zealand; [collinbjork@gmail.com](mailto:collinbjork@gmail.com)
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**INTRO to PANEL 1**

**“It’s About Time: Temporal Topoi in Rhetorical Practice” (2 min)**

Rhetoric is about time. Rhetors regularly invoke multifaceted imaginaries of time: a nostalgia to resurrect, a “timeless” ethical principle to adhere to, the better or worse future-to-come, the past as a burden in need of relief, or the present as perpetually on the verge of either emancipation or crisis. Although not a new topic—issues of time have been paramount to rhetorical theory at least since (and probably before) Aristotle delineated three different temporalities to the three genres of Greek rhetoric—this panel seeks to examine the political and cultural stakes of temporality as a key ingredient in contemporary rhetorical practice. It thus contributes to a growing scholarly interest in the multi-layered uses of time in political rhetoric, addressing not only visions of the future but also a fuller range of temporalities available as persuasive equipment.

To accomplish this task, the panelists each investigate a particular rhetorical encounter in which time functions as crucial equipment. Through case studies of the rhetorical practices of Greta Thunberg, Barack Obama and the Tea Party, and the EU, this panel provides critical, theoretical, and conceptual development to the subfield of rhetorical temporalities by showing how different temporal imaginaries sometimes combat one another, sometimes seek to abolish time altogether, and at other times intersect. In short, time is a topos with agonistic, identificatory, and persuasive potential.

**INTRO to PANEL 2**

**“It Takes Time: Rhetoric as Temporally-Situated Practice” (2 min)**

Rhetoric takes time. While the concept of *kairos* is crucial for helping rhetors respond to the exigencies of specific moments, privileging the here-and-now of temporality risks obscuring the ways that persuasive forces also accumulate over time, waxing and waning as they slip from one moment to the next. Kairotic moments, after all, do not exist in a vacuum. They are preceded by a series of other kairotic moments, and those collective histories seep—with varying degrees of rhetorical strength—into the present. Put differently, and in a rephrasing of John Donne: no rhetorical event is an island. Rather, time links them together. Rhetorical theory and criticism, however, have yet to fully account for these aspects of temporality.

In response, we attend to the ways that persuasive encounters linger and bleed into various rhetorical futures, sometimes accumulating force, other times folding back on themselves, and sometimes doing something else altogether. Together, the presenters go beyond kairos and investigate other ways of conceiving of the ongoing relationship between temporality and rhetorical practice. In the end, we highlight the stakes of understanding rhetoric as a temporally-situated practice, one that is not readily resolved in single moments but rather evolves unevenly over time.

“TIME, ETHOS, & THE TRIAL OF SOCRATES”

Collin Bjork

GLOBAL RHETORIC PODCAST: (1 min)

* What it is.
* When to expect it.
* How to get involved.

OPENING ANECDOTE

In Athens, 399 years before the common era, an old man was indicted and brought to trial. The septuagenarian’s accusers allege that he was guilty, among other vagaries, of “corrupting the young,” (*Apology*, 24b). After a dramatic public trial, this iconic figure of Athens was found guilty and sentenced to death. Shortly thereafter, this famous philosopher willingly drank a hemlock potion and died. (30 sec)

I open with this well-known narrative of Socrates’ trial and death because his story is, I believe, important for understanding the ways that certain aspects of rhetorical activity—such as *ethos*—can linger from one interaction to the next and, in so doing, grow into a powerful rhetorical force over time. (30 sec)

Unlike many contemporary legal cases where the details of a single kairotic event hang in the balance (e.g. Did he kill his opponent at this time in this place, or not?), Socrates’ accusers pin his alleged misconduct on a series of recurrent civic activities. Rather than identifying evidence of a single specific event when Socrates broke the Athenian law, they speak generally about how his repeated behaviours in the *polis* threaten Athenian civic life. For instance, as proof of corrupting the young men of Athens, they identify the many dialogic lessons that Socrates held in the Lyceum. As an example of his irreverence to the gods, they point to the series of questions about wisdom that Socrates asked the politicians, poets, and craftsmen of Athens. And as an illustration of Socrates’ iconoclastic behaviour, they claim that he has ongoing conversations with unknown spirits or demons. Strikingly, none of these pieces of evidence refers to one single moment when Socrates broke a law. Instead, his accusers identify an amalgam of events that, in their view, pose a cumulative threat to the social order. In making this argument, his accusers eschew a kairotic notion of criminality and implicitly adopt what I call a “*chronos*-based” notion of time that locates Socrates’ threat to the polis in the accumulated force of his repeated actions over time. (2 min)

In particular, the accusations of impiety levied against Socrates underscore the ways that a cumulative notion of time can inform conventional notions of rhetorical character, or ethos. Socrates’ accusers do not view his irreverent character as a mere discursive fabrication that is deliberately moulded and re-moulded for individual rhetorical engagements. Rather, they indicate that Socrates’ impious ethos has an extended and increasingly dangerous effect on the city of Athens. His accusers seem to fear that the longer Socrates spends teaching and questioning the citizens of Athens, then the greater influence his character will have over its people. If they give Socrates more time, the power of his character may grow. But if they limit Socrates’ time in the polis, then they believe that they can minimize the rhetorical impact of his ethos on the youth of Athens.

The case of Socrates, therefore, highlights the stakes that a cumulative sense of ethos can have for both a community and an individual life. It also positions rhetorical character as something that accretes or erodes in strength as it slips from one rhetorical moment to another. In the end, this theoretical perspective aims not only to reframe our understanding of the trial of Socrates but, more importantly, to provide a model for better understanding the remarkable—and dangerous—rhetorical work that ethos can accomplish over time. (2 min)

THEORETICAL FRAMING

In the West, there is a long history and cultural acceptance of the idea that ‘character builds over time.’[[1]](#footnote-1) And while people may not mean rhetorical character, or ethos, when they utter that phrase, some rhetorical scholarship nevertheless *implicitly* shares that same assumption about the ongoing relationship between ethos and time. Isocrates, for instance, gestures toward the accretive aspects of ethos when he claims that “[A]rguments acquire more authority when they come from one’s life than from mere words” (*Antidosis* 278). Or, for a more recent scholarly example, Nedra Reynolds argues that ethos “shifts and changes over time, across texts, and around spaces” (326). The idea that ethos seeps from one rhetorical situation into another is, therefore, not new. Indeed, as these quotations suggest, both ancient and contemporary rhetorical scholarship points toward the temporal fluidity of ethos. (1 min)

Nevertheless, rhetorical scholarship has yet to fully attend to the nuances of the ever-evolving notion of rhetorical character that Reynolds describes. Instead, much research on ethos tends to rely on two temporally-bifurcated understandings of rhetorical character: an ephemeral ethos that is deliberately and discursively crafted for specific occasions; and a static ethos that derives from a speaker’s subjectivity and social position (Aristotle, trans. Kennedy, 1991; Amossy, 2001; Crowley and Hawhee, 2011). In terms of time, the first kind of ethos is a kairotic response to fleeting exigencies, whereas the second kind of ethos appears timeless and immutable. These complementary understandings of ethos are undoubtedly useful tools for comprehending the rhetorical work of character in the world. But instead of focusing my investigation on these two well-examined poles—on the fleeting and the fossilized ethos—I aim to shed more light on the temporal middle ground, on the ways that ethos seeps from one rhetorical situation to the next giving it the potential to accrue, over time, a powerful rhetorical force. (1 min)

TECHNOLOGY & SOCRATES

Of course, the relationship between ethos and time does not occur in a vaccuum. Rather, ethos is mediated by various technologies, including, for example, language, writing, photographs, music, and social media, to name only a few. Those technologies, in turn, structure the degree and duration of ethos’ temporal persistence. As such, comprehending the evolution of character over time requires understanding the technologies that mediate ethos. And the trial of Socrates speaks to this need by allowing me to compare two fundamental discursive technologies: orality and writing. (30 sec)

As I suggested earlier, the oral transmission of Socrates’ provocative ethos had such a profound effect on the young men of Athens that it led to his trial and subsequent execution. And as I will explain in the following section, the written circulation of Socrates’ ethos in Plato’s *Apology* is later contested by Xenophon’s written account of Socrates’ ethos in the same trial. That these two authors took the time to write competing pictures of Socrates’ character suggests that they both recognized the power of a written ethos to accumulate force over time and to affect subsequent generations of humanities students, even into our contemporary moment.

Socrates is, of course, not the only person to have a deeply complex ethos that evolved over time via both oral and written media. Many famous figures—both historical and contemporary—fit this description. But focusing on Socrates situates this study in the foundational texts of Western rhetorical history and also positions this project within the cultural context from which the terms *ethos*, *techne*, and *chronos* (an ancient Greek word for time that I employ elsewhere in this project) emerged. Thus, while today’s digital technologies may have a more rapid or dramatic impact on the evolution of one’s ethos, the story of Socrates reminds us that the relationship between technology, ethos, and time has a long and storied history. (2 min)

WRITTEN ETHOS (Plato vs Xenophon)

Two written accounts of Socrates’ trial survive to today: Plato’s *Apology of Socrates* and Xenophon’s *Apology of Socrates to the Jury*. Both authors were dedicated students of Socrates. Beyond minor formal differences, the primary distinction between Plato’s popular text and Xenophon’s subsequent (and shorter) version lies in their representation of the philosopher’s character.

In Plato’s *Apology*, Socrates speaks defiantly before the court. He refuses, for instance, to deny the accusation that he speaks with spirits. And although it was common in ancient Greece to discount your accuser’s argument, Plato’s Socrates goes a step further and publicly ridicules his opponents before a jury of five hundred of their peers. Unsurprisingly, this behaviour risks damaging Socrates own character and, in so doing, undermining the persuasiveness of his case. (1 min).

From Xenophon’s perspective, Socrates’ behaviour in Plato’s account is not only “ill conceived” (1), it is also out of character with the ethos that Socrates had built over time through his oral teachings in the Lyceum. Xenophon writes, “knowing as I do the man’s wisdom and nobility of character, it’s impossible for me to forget him or to remember him without praising him” (34). Thus, at the outset of his account, Xenophon positions his narrative as a corrective to Plato’s rendition. He explains that Plato’s Socrates appears too unhinged because he never rationalizes why he deliberately weakens his case by being so confrontational. In response, Xenophon ascribes a motive for Socrates’ actions: “when he realized it was better for him to die than to carry on living, he showed no weakness in the face of death—any more than he turned his back on any other good thing—but accepted it, and went to meet it, in good spirits” (33). Xenophon thus re-positions Socrates’ combative ethos during the trial as a willingness to confront death that demonstrates “the strength of his character” (33). According to Xenophon’s written account, Socrates ethos exemplifies courage, not fatalism; and his strategic insubordination during the trial is honourable, not miscalculated. Unlike Plato’s Socrates who appears to speak brazenly without reason in the court, Xenophon’s Socrates speaks with purpose. His picture of Socrates is rational, principled, and deliberate. (1.5 min)

For both of these authors, the written accounts of Socrates’ ethos have important stakes that will linger well into the future. From Xenophon’s perspective, Plato’s portrayal of Socrates’ ethos not only stains the philosopher’s character but also risks having a negative effect on subsequent students of philosophy. Xenophon seems to worry that later pupils might view Socrates’ teachings through the lens of this trial and, in so doing, see his lessons as less credible. Recognizing that Socrates’ perceived character influences the persuasiveness of his teachings, even after his death, Xenophon composes another account of the trial to alter the lingering effects of the philosopher’s ethos on later generations of students.[[2]](#footnote-2)

These two competing versions of the trial thus highlight how writing, as a technology, facilitates the continued circulation and impact of Socrates’ ethos beyond his death. Even today, after navigating centuries of translations and reprintings, Socrates’ rhetorical character still ebbs and flows, gaining and losing suasive force as his ethos remains a contested but no less influential part of Western training in the humanities. The accumulated force of his ethos does not, however, reach us unmediated today. Instead, it is sifted through the sieve of culturally situated compositional tools and practices. Whether analog or digital, these technologies make possible the lingering existence of rhetorical phenomena, like ethos, beyond the life of any single individual. (1.5 min)

CONCLUSION

In sum, the story of the trial of Socrates (and its competing retellings) underscores the fact that momentary “Aristotelian” displays of character are not the only kind of ethos that matters to rhetoric. Indeed, the cumulative power of ethos as it moves from one situation to the next can also play an important role in shaping ever-shifting rhetorical ecologies. In fact, the ability of ethos to function trans-situationally may be one of its most compelling attributes. Unlike other argumentative strategies that may be selectively deployed in response to specific exigencies, ethos is one of the few aspects of rhetoric that is ever-present. While ethos may sometimes be downplayed or masked in a given rhetorical situation, no rhetorical encounter is without ethos, or at least not without implications for one’s ethos. For researchers interested in rhetoric and time, therefore, the omnipresence of ethos thus becomes a provocative site to consider how a rhetorical feature can—when filtered through various technologies—bleed from one rhetorical engagement to the next, accumulating or eroding in suasive strength over time. (1min)

LARGER PROJECT

For context, this presentation is part of a larger research project of mine that charts the different ways that *ethos* accumulates rhetorical force over time. To do this work, I pay special attention to **historical changes in the technologies of rhetorical production that mediate *ethos* and structure its brevity or longevity**. In a series of case studies ranging from ancient Greek water clocks to twenty-first century social media, this project highlights how shifting technologies impact the rhetorical and interrelated workings of character and time.

1. Cite sources as needed in slide show. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Much of Xenophon’s other writings extol the virtues of aristocratic men with the aim of training other young men to behave in a similar manner. In this vein, Xenophon’s retelling of Socrates’ trial allows him to wield Socrates’ character as an exemplary case study aimed at mobilizing Greek youths to virtue. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)