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Energy: Rhetoric's Vitality

Chris Ingraham 

From its outset in antiquity, rhetorical energy has been a protean concept: energeia concerning the vitality of speech, and the related enargeia referring to vivid description. Recent interest in affect, the Anthropocene, new materialism, and the more-than-human has only made “energy” more salient, yet more promiscuously evoked than ever. Notwithstanding the concept’s centrality to some major works of contemporary scholarship, the importance of energy to rhetoric has remained widely underexplored. This essay traces some of the quiet history that energy has played in the rhetorical tradition and charts some points of its ongoing importance.

Keywords: *affect, Anthropocene, energy, more-than-human, new materialism*

Whether referring to the *energy crisis* or an *energy drink*, the *energy in a room* or the *Department of Energy*, the term “energy” is now used in so many different ways and contexts that its meaning can be troublesome to ascertain. Often, the word stands in rhetorically for something that even those who use it can be hard pressed to articulate. Is it an aura? A resource? A force? Given “energy’s” rhetorical bandwidth, rhetoricians would seem like the perfect candidates to make sense of its polysemy. The trouble is that rhetoric itself has been understood as a kind of energy since people first started thinking about it two and a half thousand years ago. Which is to say, it will be difficult to understand how energy operates rhetorically if we cannot also understand how rhetoric operates energetically. The very endeavor leaves us tugging on the laces of a wicked knot: on one string, the rhetoric of energy, on the other, the energy of rhetoric. When each tug makes the knot still tighter, how do we begin?

My modest aim in this short inquiry is not to untangle either “energy” or “rhetoric” in some supposedly definitive way, but rather to think about some ways we might situate energy as a keyword of rhetorical studies, past and future. Part of this work is recuperative, part prognostic. While the relationship between rhetoric and energy has long been tacit in a study that has yielded a litany of more prominently discussed concepts and figures over the centuries, if recent scholarly

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trends are any indication, that relationship will merit more attention as we get further along in the political, ecological, and all-too-material challenges of the years ahead.

Of course, “energy” is hardly a keyword exclusive to the study of rhetoric—or even to science, where it might seem most at home. Others have noticed the referential elusiveness of energy, too. In his 1904 lectures on pragmatism, for instance, William James lamented that “the term ‘energy’ doesn’t even pretend to stand for anything ‘objective’” (83). Similarly, in a 1987 lecture on immaterialism, Vilém Flusser called energy “a term that defies definition” (219). Even as recently as 2017, the philosopher Michael Marder organized a whole book about energy around what he called the “absolute ambiguity” that has always made its meaning “unclarified *and* ... unclarifiable” (2, emphasis in the original). Although none of these scholars are coming from a rhetorical standpoint, the very ambiguity of energy they identify does turn out to have manifestations traceable to the very start of the rhetorical tradition—specifically, to book 3, chapter 11 of Aristotle’s *Rhetoric*.

It’s there that Aristotle expounds at some length on *energeia* as the energy or vitality of spoken expression. But what does he mean? Although our word “energy” is a cognate of the Greek “*energeia*,” we would be poor philologists to suppose our current use of the word is the same as Aristotle’s. Far from “energy” as we know it, within the wider scope of his philosophical system, Aristotle’s *energeia* is better understood as “actuality,” which pairs it naturally with another Aristotelian term, *dynamis*, in the sense of potentiality. Indeed, together, *energeia* and *dynamis*, actuality and potentiality, are conjoined ways of existence that show up not just in his *Rhetoric*, but throughout his philosophy. The resultant intertextuality of the *energeia* concept—what we might now call its interdisciplinary scope—has vested it, from the start, with the sort of ambiguity that comes with its versatility.

To make matters worse, as Victoria J. Gallagher and her co-authors have noted, Aristotle’s sense of *energeia* is often conflated with the more inherently visual rhetorical concept of *enargeia*, equally as old but pertaining rather to vivid or graphic description (30–31). It’s Longinus and Quintilian who most develop the idea of *enargeia* for the study of rhetoric. In Longinus’s thought, *enargeia* is the distinctively rhetorical (as opposed to poetic) clarity achieved through evocative and exciting visual description (chapter XV, para 2). And for Quintilian, *enargeia* was a quality that “makes us seem not so much to narrate as to exhibit the actual scene”—and in doing so, importantly, to stir an audience’s emotions (book VI, chapter 2, para 32). For both, *enargeia* is effectively an early form of the creative writing mantra, “show, don’t tell,” motivated in particular by the elicitation of emotion. Whether we are dealing with *energeia* or *enargeia*, then, it should be clear that rhetoric’s relationship to energy has been uncertain from the start.

Our English word “energy” comes from the Greek *en-*, “within” + *ergon*, “work.” Etymologically, that makes energy that which is within work (perhaps “enworkment” or “being-at-work”), an inner force of sorts that can drive and impel work or

activity. In classical rhetoric, energy in this modern sense was a minor word, not a topic of focus. The more apposite classical analog to such a conception might have been “breath” or “spirit”—*pneuma* or *daimon*, respectively. But these variations do not fare well up against modern science, which in the main has moved the idea of energy away from its more metaphysical, quasi-mystical connotations. After all, in a modern context, physics is probably the field that has most laid claim to “discovering” energy and detailing the scientific laws whereby it operates. As Thomas S. Kuhn has famously shown, however, different scientific paradigms legitimate different versions of scientific practice and knowledge, which makes the so-called “laws” of energy susceptible to such paradigm shifts over time. The move from a physical world understood through Newtonian mechanics to one understood through Einstein’s theory of special relativity, for instance, pivots on fundamentally different conceptions of energy. Short of engaging these differences presently, we can at least observe that if “energy” is ambiguous in an absolute sense, as Marder suggests, it’s also ambiguously ambiguous: the very shiftiness of “energy” shifts across paradigms, time, and cultures.

Most seem to agree that in contemporary rhetorical theory the major shift in (and toward) energy at least has the certainty of a clear origin: George A. Kennedy’s 1992 article, “A Hoot in the Dark.” It’s there Kennedy sought to (re)vitalize rhetoric around, as he put it, “the emotional energy that impels the speaker to speak, the physical energy expended in the utterance, the energy level encoded in the message, and the energy experienced by the recipient in decoding the message” (2). These four types of rhetoric-as-energy (see [Figure 1](#)) imply that rhetoric precedes speech, coincides with speech, and follows speech. In fact, “speech” is not even necessary. We are instead in the biologically hardwired realm of pre-intentional survival mechanisms, those that are communicated through a perceivable code, yes, but not necessarily in symbolic messages governed by a semiotic regime of meaning. All at once, Kennedy’s provocations decentered the human, took intentionality off the table, and radically softened the near-ossified imbrication of rhetoric, symbolic action, and meaning. The suggestion that animals (and even vegetables) should be understood as rhetorical so wildly deviated from the standard understanding of rhetoric as the province of humans that, as Diane Davis recently noted, the field’s immediate reaction “was basically to wonder what Kennedy had been smoking” (“Some Reflections” 277).

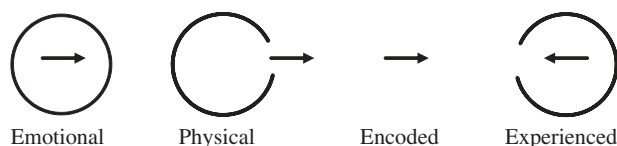


Figure 1 Kennedy’s four types of rhetorical energy.

The literary critic Sven Birkerts once wrote of Thomas Pynchon's *Gravity's Rainbow* that "the book exerts its influence even on those who have never read it" (72). Within contemporary rhetorical studies, the same could be said of "A Hoot in the Dark." Even when this scholarship does not cite Kennedy, attempts to decenter the human, to place all things on a more level ontological footing, and to consider our shared problems more relationally and processually (instead of autonomously and situationally) often evoke "energy" to do so. For example, in Jenny Rice's pivotal essay about rhetorical ecologies replacing rhetorical situations, she turns to energy as an explanatory metaphor. Rice (Edbauer in this publication) is concerned not to constrain a given rhetoric to the elements of its so-called rhetorical situation but to acknowledge that "a rhetoric emerges already infected by the viral intensities that are circulating in the social field" (14). In this model, it "is *not* the situation, but certain contagions and energy" that animate rhetoric's vitality (14, emphasis in the original). Energy is an organizing concept in related work by Catherine Chaput, who has argued that late capitalism in particular should lead us to think in terms of rhetorical circulation rather than situations, and to pay attention accordingly to "the rhetorical energies surging throughout the concrete sites of our contemporary world" (19). For Chaput, as it seems for Rice, these energies have an affective dynamism that cannot be translated into language without loss, although that makes them no less rhetorical.

Such articulations of rhetoric and energy are not the only ones. In Eric S. Jenkins's work on the circulation of memes, for instance, he treats rhetorical expression as what "actualizes the potential energy—the affects, feelings, intensities or tendencies—already circulating in the social field" ("The Modes" 458; see also Jenkins, *Special Affects* 7–8). Consider, too, Ralph Cintron's argument that rhetorical *topoi* are best understood as "storehouses of social energy" (100; see also Olson), or Carolyn R. Miller's compelling suggestion that "we think of agency as the *kinetic energy* of rhetorical performance" (147, emphasis in the original), and it's evident that there is some traction behind the notion that rhetoric and energy are integrally related. Over more or less the last decade, in short, we have seen "energy" being advanced by some of our finest scholars as an integral component of major concepts from the long study of rhetoric, including such stalwarts as the rhetorical situation, circulation, expression, *topoi*, and agency. All of which, of course, says nothing of the robust work on more scientific registers of energy by environmental communication researchers, including those with rhetorical proclivities (see, e.g., Cozen et al.; Endres et al.).

As these examples attest, if "A Hoot in the Dark"'s initial publication did not inspire quite the watershed moment of disciplinary self-awareness about the scope of rhetoric that Wingspread had in 1970, it has gradually spurred an equally consequential expansion of the field. To be sure, Kennedy's once-outlandish ideas have lately been more embraced. Debra Hawhee wrote in 2011 that, "'A Hoot in the Dark' is now timelier than ever" ("Toward a Bestial Rhetoric" 82), and her 2017 book on animal rhetorics makes good on that claim (*Rhetoric in Tooth and Claw*).

In *Ambient Rhetoric*, Thomas Rickert offers a definition of rhetoric that, he admits, “bears an affinity to George Kennedy’s important essay” (162). And Ehren Helmut Pflugfelder, similarly, noticed in 2015 that “rhetoricians have been moving in a direction similar to what Kennedy suggested” (450). Whether or not one finds these trends encouraging, it’s reasonable to say, echoing Spinoza’s claims about bodies, that we do not yet know what rhetoric-as-energy can do. Given that Kennedy’s prescient work is finally being validated, then it now falls on us to theorize it further, to differentiate variations of its underlying philosophical commitments, and to apply their implications to our objects of inquiry and critical practices. In what space remains, I would like to get us started by suggesting four strains of thought that underscore the promising salience of rhetoric-as-energy.

Affect Theory

As adapted for rhetoric, affect theory’s most compelling feature is its presumption that people are always in some sort of fluctuating affective state. Not only is there no neutral mood or disposition wherein the human subject is ever a *tabula rasa*,¹ there is also no isolable locus of this affective flux because it is not just within us; we are also within it. What this ambient and relational scheme suggests for rhetoric is more than the ages-old insight about the influential power tangled in that constellation of near-synonyms, feeling, emotion, *pathos*, affect. Emphasizing ambience and relationality suggests that any so-called “affects” themselves are less of the essence than a broader and prior *affectability*—those baseline moods, dispositions, and environs that establish the very background conditions constraining how we might be affected (or, if you prefer, *persuaded*) in any given encounter.² Rhetorical energy is paramount to affectability precisely because the dynamism at play in becoming differently affectable is so active and multilateral. *Here, rhetoric’s energy is an intensity*. That energy is not something active or inactive, like kinetic or potential energy. As intensity, it is always active; there’s no “on” or “off,” just variations in its force.

The Anthropocene

The concept of the Anthropocene denotes that the epoch of human life on Earth will be marked by a geological stratum of anthropogenic waste. Forget granite and gneiss; think cellphones and Crocs. Scholarly interest in the Anthropocene has arisen in tandem with evidence that the unchecked energy consumption of humans, and our exploitation of natural resources in its service, are global warming’s catastrophic cause. In this sense, the rhetoric of energy—how people talk persuasively about global warming, frame the energy crisis, advocate for environmental justice or policy, and so on—may be more crucial than any pontificating we

¹See Ahmed, Terada (13), Whitehead (153).

²For more on affectability, see Davis (*Inessential Solidarity* 2), Rickert (159).

can do about rhetoric *as* energy. Yet Anthropocenic thought also issues an important twofold challenge. First, it calls us to recognize that while no single person alone can cause or reverse global warming, the *collective* influence of humans on the planet is immense. Second, it invites our awareness that, even as a collective, humans are only a small part of an enormous planetary ecology; and, despite our apparent ability to throw that ecology wildly off equilibrium, it may well respond by wielding its power to kick us out. This co-constitutive power is a kind of rhetorical energy, both capable of influence and incapable of containment. *Here, rhetoric's energy is a resource.* If the entanglement of humans and their environments leads each to impact the other, we are all resources for one another.³

New Materialism

Recent interest in materiality across disciplines has grown in part from a felt need to challenge the state of affairs whereby “language came to be more trustworthy than matter” (Barad 801). Certainly, rhetoric has always claimed language as the core of its purview, which makes its incorporation of materialist thought a tricky project. As Peter Simonson has noted, we are not likely to lose the “discourse-centered constructivism” of rhetorical studies any time soon; “we have too much invested in it, and it has paid too many dividends” (108). But, as one after another materialist rhetoric has attested over the last several decades, rhetoricians too are moving beyond language and “back” to matter itself. As Michael Calvin McGee argued in 1982, this move requires treating language itself “as material rather than merely representational” (19). The new materialist thought that has flourished since then would go still further: a rhetoric beyond representation also requires envisioning rhetoric not just as a realm of symbolic action writ large—that was the fruit of a Burke seed and Wingspread sprout. A new materialist perspective will also see rhetoric within the concatenation of material things as such, irrespective of their symbolic meaning or content. *Here, rhetoric's energy is a vitality.* Matter no more needs to be vitalized by some superadded element that “makes it” rhetorical than rhetoric needs to be vitalized by some superadded element that creates its force. Rhetoric's materiality and materiality's rhetoricity are vital energies in and of themselves.

The More-Than-Human

The most direct ramification of Kennedy's hooting into darkness has been greater acceptance that rhetoric is also at play among nonhuman animals. Although I prefer David Abram's heading of the “more-than-human,” this work clearly falls within the more popular framework of “posthumanism” and its opening of research into animals, plants, cyborgs, and automated technical processes. Thinking

³For more on energy as resource, see Cozen.

the more-than-human does more than just bring animals under consideration. It can also accentuate our emplacement in a world animated by enchanting and sensuous powers that human civilization makes it difficult to perceive. Debra Hawhee was onto something important (typical for her) when she once observed that “the notion of energy comes up repeatedly with discussions of sensation in the context of rhetoric” (“Rhetoric’s Sensorium” 3). To link energy with sensations—a body’s automatic and always operationalized interface with the world—highlights that unless a body’s sense-perception somehow shuts off, energy is never static because being itself means always being a sensory sponge of one’s surroundings: mental, physical, and emotional all at once. We are never not responding to new encounters and environments, to new ideas, new plucks on our heartstrings, not all of which may strike a chord, so to speak, because our corporeal responses are often beyond our consciousness. Our constant sensory response-ability means that all experience is a potential agent of change but also asks that we cede some influence to an agency other than our own rational will as we continually adjust to an environment perceived through a sensory apparatus beyond our control. *Here, rhetoric’s energy is a sensation.* It’s the intake mechanisms that compel perceiving, understanding, responding to the Other—and also adjusting and persevering accordingly.

I hope it’s clear that these four categories are not meant to be a comprehensive taxonomy charting the different and non-overlapping ways that energy is trenchant for rhetorical studies. Plenty of their individual characteristics merge and diverge, both within and between the categories I have proposed, and we could marshal other categories as well. That’s partly the point. As Nathan Stormer has argued, rhetoric’s ontological diversity calls for a polythetic—literally, a “multiply composed”—system of classification to accommodate its manyfoldedness. The ways Kennedy’s vision of rhetoric-as-energy has (and might still) expand rhetorical studies only affirms Stormer’s wisdom. One of the takeaways we might gain from the very preliminary polythetic categories I have offered here is a way to map Kennedy’s four kinds of rhetorical energy relative to recent trends in the field (table 1).

And yet, if energy is a keyword in rhetorical studies, our forward-looking impulse should be countenanced by looking backward as well. After all, Kennedy

Table 1 Mapping Rhetorical Energy

Kennedy’s Four Types of Rhetorical Energy	Four Salient Strains of Thought	Four Ways of Conceiving Rhetorical Energy
Emotional	Affect Theory	Intensity
Physical	The Anthropocene	Resource
Coded	New Materialism	Vitality
Decoded	More-Than-Human	Sensation

had offered hints of his energized thinking a year earlier than “A Hoot in the Dark,” in the introduction to his translation of Aristotle’s *Rhetoric*. “*Rhetoric*, in the most general sense,” he wrote there, “is the energy inherent in emotion and thought, transmitted through a system of signs, including language, to others to influence their decisions or actions” (1991, 7, emphasis in the original). It’s not too important that Kennedy had made the move to rhetoric-as-energy a year earlier than he’s often given credit for, nor even that he went on to modify his take on rhetorical energy over the next several years after that.⁴ But it is noteworthy that his basis for conceiving rhetoric-as-energy is one he links to rhetoric even before Aristotle. While the imbrication of rhetoric and energy offers provocative possibilities for all the work still ahead of us, in other words, it’s worth remembering the ways we have already been here before.

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⁴In the second edition of his translation of Aristotle, among the few changes Kennedy made to his introduction, one was a revision of what he had earlier written about rhetoric’s energy (2007, 7). And compare that with his slightly different definition in *Comparative Rhetoric* (14). I leave these curious changes as breadcrumbs for the hermeneutic detectives to investigate.

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