

“academic freedom” is defined. I wonder if dialogue about definitions, including critical investigations of the cultural work accomplished by those presumably apolitical meanings assigned to words/concepts, might provide some common ground for productive scholarly and public discussion about the twenty-first-century university’s *raison d’être*.

In the end, Deborah L. Rhode’s *In Pursuit of Knowledge: Scholars, Status, and Academic Culture* reads like both a critique and an apologia for the rising corporate university. Yet, overall, the twenty-first-century university Rhode imagines exerts the power to sanction a hegemonic and monolithic version of knowledge. This university emboldens critics of higher education who presume that knowledge is universal, uncontested, and discoverable in “the best that has been written.” This university posits exclusive understandings of knowledge as the unailing mechanism by which to differentiate those who pursue true knowledge from those who pursue gratuitous status. This university employs generalized versions of accountability rhetoric to cleave, once and for all, true scholarship from sly ideology, useful knowledge from non-knowledge. In the end, Rhode’s contribution to the recent spate of edicts calling the university to accountability leaves me with these unanswered, indeed unarticulated, questions: how shall “knowledge” be defined? Which/whose contributions shall count as legitimate pursuits of knowledge? For whose good shall knowledge be pursued?



The Economics of Attention: Style and Substance in the Age of Information, Richard A. Lanham (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 2006. 312 pages).

Reviewed by Derek Mueller, Syracuse University

If the information age has ushered in a new relationship between style and substance, as Richard A. Lanham contends in his latest book, *The Economics of Attention*, universities in general and rhetoric education

more specifically will undergo a profound reconfiguration. On a larger scale, the new dynamics emphasized by Lanham mean that the capitalist free-market economy long grounded in industrial manufacturing has turned on its head, becoming ever more definitively the information economy anticipated by Peter Drucker in the late 1950s. Lanham explains that we are now immersed in an attention economy, a parallel, if not primary, economy in which human attention is the scarce resource. Enlisting a series of dichotomies reminiscent of the classical split between form and content, Lanham argues that style and substance have traded places, turning topsy-turvy as emerging digital communication technologies change the ways information circulates. Lanham explains this reversal in the first chapter, “Stuff and Fluff,” adding that the attention economy shakes up the traditional university as well. Because style (“fluff”) finds its niche in the arts and letters while substance (“stuff”) makes its home in the sciences, their reversal prompts a generous reappraisal of humanities disciplines. The transposition of style and substance and the new arrangement’s bearing on rhetoric education are the focal concerns in Lanham’s *The Economics of Attention*.

To more deeply understand the paradoxical ties between fluff and stuff (that is, between style and substance), Lanham suggests the concept of *oscillatio*, a perceptual toggling between two extreme purviews, one chiefly concerned with material constitution, and the other attendant to rhetorical constructedness. Oscillation, for Lanham, is a “central contemporary trope” (125); it is synonymous with what he calls (in *The Electronic Word*) a bi-stable way of seeing, a disposition that is at once focused on the thing itself, in an objective, substantive sense (stuff) and also cognizant of its style or ornamentation (fluff). In an attention economy, figure and ground have traded places: fluff triumphs over stuff; consequently, “we need a wider model for an attention economy” (19). *The Economics of Attention* provides an important initial development toward such a model. The book’s fifth chapter, “Style/Substance Matrix,” is particularly invested in model-building as Lanham assembles a series of spectra, each representative of a polarized concept operating in the attention economy. He sets up and explains a spectrum related to each of the following terms as they toggle between extreme positions: signal, perceiver, motive, and life.

Lanham elaborates a framework suited to thinking about an attention economy as a rhetorical phenomenon with its capital circulating widely in the cultural conversation (9). For an example of the way Lanham conceptualizes and constructs a vocabulary for theorizing attention, consider the idea of “attention structure.” Attention structures manifest in the collective gaze. They are spectacular (in a Debordian sense) loci of attention, held together by shared interest in an event or object. Examples of attention structures include theme parks, cruise ship layovers, Mount Everest, and the university curriculum. Notably, most of Lanham’s examples operate at the relatively large scale of the popular, famous, or well known rather than at the microlevel of everyday encounters. Lanham’s project signals a starting point for connecting the attention economy to other matters of interest to scholars in composition and rhetoric, often pointing out potential applications that will be fruitful for others to extend and explore more deeply. Oscillation, bi-stability, and attention structures are only a few of the terms Lanham’s book offers to understand changes for rhetoric and writing in the information-bloated attention economy.

Readers familiar with Lanham’s earlier work in *The Motives of Eloquence* (1976), *Revising Prose* (1979), and *The Electronic Word* (1993) will probably recognize the return of several concepts that arch across his scholarly career, appearing once more in *The Economics of Attention*. Again, Lanham works at length with “at/through” as indices for a bi-stable condition of perception. He reiterates the limitations of the C-B-S (clarity, brevity, sincerity) model of communication, which places a value on reductive language that functions as clear and concrete. And once more he considers “radical convertibility” of digital texts whose artful, hyper qualities upset decorum in academic publishing and other domains accustomed to the minimal visual performance of texts. Given that Lanham concludes with a call for “revisionist thinking,” whereupon knowledge is understood to be dynamic as it is perpetually redrawn through an ongoing oscillation between creation and revision, *The Economics of Attention* could be viewed as an enactment of such principles, given the way he revises his own work—folding together ideas he has developed in publications and presentations over more than a decade.

Whereas *The Electronic Word* dealt primarily with the changes emerging digital communications technologies wrought for print discourse, in *The Economics of Attention* Lanham develops a far more ambitious set of claims, applying the substance/style oscillation not only to discourse as it moves to the digital interface but also to material objects. That is, while we may be far more accustomed to simplistic characterizations of language that assign it to one or the other of the substance and style extremes, Lanham asks us to consider material objects as locatable on the style/substance spectrum. For instance, Lanham uses one of the book’s final anecdotes to disclose his first attention-encounter with a stylish thing:

Two doors down from where I grew up, the family had a magnificent 1934 Dietrich-bodied Packard, a gleaming black four-door convertible with a bleached white top and burgundy leather upholstery. . . . Everything that could gleam, gleamed; everything that could glow with a deep inner fire did so. Here was *style*. (268)

Lanham compares the fancy vehicle with the one parked in his own driveway—a much less glamorous 1941 Ford sedan, which he takes to be emblematic of substance. If one car represents style and the other represents substance, what does this mean for the forms of attention surrendered to each? The Packard would at first seem more likely to recruit attention, and while this might well have been the case for many onlookers, it seems risky to trivialize the attention-getting aspects of the Ford sedan. Lanham’s economics of attention tends to favor *positive forms* of attention: attention as the result of glinty design and ornate presentation. Still, one can think of as many instances of negative forms of attention on any number of different scales, whether summoned by a loud muffler or, to shift back again to the computer interface, the gaudy design excesses of blinking banner advertisements and 36-point lime green fonts. Granted, inasmuch as designs are locally meaningful, no single car or web site will win attention in quite the same way, so we should prefer a framework for theorizing attention that can account for a full range of attentional variables, local and global, laudatory and critical, and culturally astute among them.

Considered relative to one another, the two main terms from the title—economics and attention—figure much differently in the book's key arguments. Whereas economics is the *explained* term, attention operates throughout as a *given*. Because economics invokes a wide range of associations with theories, traditions, and practices in that field, Lanham acknowledges that his use of the term is unorthodox, for he is not trained as an economist in any conventional sense. Instead, he adopts the framework of economics in a more general sense; that is, because economics concerns "scarce resources," it provides a suitable metaphor for discussing a blight of attention in the information age. A vocabulary of economics is applied directly in chapter seven, "The Audit of Virtuality," in which Lanham "audits" ten assumptions related to the sea change for traditional universities brought on by the attention economy. Other concepts from economics surface briefly in Lanham's asides about genre as the macroeconomics of style, sentence structure as the microeconomics of style (81), and eyeballs as "the coin of the realm" (17). Attention, on the other hand, gets considerably less overt treatment and thus depends much more on implicit associations, as a term already understood. And yet, to paraphrase Donald Norman, any presumption of a comprehensive understanding of attention ought to be held in check against our understanding of human consciousness in all its mystery and complexity. Further insights into the meaning of attention for Lanham can be garnered by considering the figures he refers to as the economists of attention.

In an effort to name specific economists of attention, Lanham turns to twentieth-century avant-garde artists in the book's second chapter. Foremost among the "rule breakers," Marcel Duchamp, Filippo Tommaso Marinetti, Andy Warhol, and Christo Javacheff stand out for Lanham for their mastery of attention-getting aesthetic techniques. Duchamp, with "Readymades" and his famous *Fountain*, for instance, attracted much attention and generated a great deal of controversy while commenting on the "final insignificance of physical objects" (43). Marinetti's Futurism accompanied boundless typographic play to explore the effects of pastiche layout and logographic patterns. Warhol's techniques of collection and duplication mocked consumerism; with his "attention traps," as Lanham calls them, "a maximum of commentary was created by a

minimum of effort" (50). Finally, Christo, whose multimillion dollar *Running Fence* spanned miles of scenic southern California before ending abruptly at the ocean's edge, fashioned temporary monuments as dependent on converging attention as physical materials for their culmination. With each artist came a renewed awareness of the primacy of the viewer's attention as the resource in high demand; with the avant-garde visual artists—exemplary economists of attention—came a renewed zeal for style.

Should we accept Duchamp, Marinetti, Warhol, and Christo as premier economists of attention, what can readers conclude about the kind of attention these forbearers inculcated? Foremost, each was famous. Albeit with some distinctions, each attention economist rose to celebrity status in association with the peak of an attention-winning production. The avant-garde artists mentioned by Lanham were magnates of mass, international attention. Large-scale attention, accordingly, supercedes attention on a lesser scale, attention that manifests only briefly and locally, in fleeting moments or small-time niches. That is, the attention won by each figure was big and lasting and, as such, contributed to a prominent attention structure. What more can be said of these four exemplars? Taking visual artists as harbingers of the attention economy now upon us also positions the attention economy as ocularcentric. In other words, the scarce resource—attention—is measured exclusively by the gaze, which raises vexing questions about the relevance of auditory attention and the sonic arts that, one could easily argue, have been every bit as viable in recruiting attention on a large scale in the past century. This point is especially important considering Lanham's contention that attention leads to "knowledge" (179). Arguably, sonic and haptic sense experiences contribute to forms of knowledge on par with knowledge constructed via attention to the visual domain.

Readers seeking a counterpart text that deals with the relevance of avant-garde artists, such as Duchamp, for composition studies should consider Geoffrey Sirc's *English Composition as a Happening* (2002). Lanham tends to focus on the large-scale, almost celebrity-like, influence of each figure, while Sirc draws upon a related set of artists, framing them not as marquee winners of attention but as radical practitioners, whose stances, techniques, and material choices can be applied to writing

activity on an everyday scale, in contrast to the prevailing orthodoxies in composition studies.

The Economics of Attention raises as many questions as it answers. While this might come as faint praise to those seeking strong conclusions and clear resolve in a scholarly monograph, it is an appraisal that might alternatively be framed as a nod to the generative quality of the book, which delivers an invitation to continue the conversation and complicate the rhetorics of attention Lanham introduces here. A few such conversations have already begun in technology studies. Discussions of mind hacks and GTD (getting things done) can be followed at <http://www.mindhacks.com> and <http://www.43folders.com>, which addresses the challenges of managing productive work habits when so much competes for our attention. Related conversations shift the frame to Linda Stone's valuable notion of "continuous partial attention" and take seriously the invigorating potential of purposive or productive digression. That is, discussions of attention in technology studies often seek to complicate the idea that a monolithic focus is possible, sustainable, or winnable. Rather, one is as likely to find discussions countering synoptic views of attention and instead emphasizing distal combinations.

Chris Anderson's recent book, *The Long Tail*, offers a number of promising overlaps with Lanham's *The Economics of Attention*. Anderson, the editor in chief of *Wired Magazine*, writes about the shifting conditions in the same attention economy Lanham describes. For Anderson, niche culture has replaced hit culture. Commercial viability no longer depends upon locality nor is it constrained by limited retail shelf space. Many little-known or long-forgotten things, "misses" rather than "hits," in other words, are now revived because e-commerce systems, such as *Netflix.com* and *Amazon.com*, frequently make use of intelligent agents to recommend products and promote related goods and services. In these spaces, information about one product typically reroutes attention to associated products.

In effect, following Anderson's reasoning, the explosion of choices all wrangling for consumer attention places a premium not only on how products themselves circulate but on how information about products circulates. Equally enthusiastic about the plentitude of choices competing for consumer attention, Lanham and Anderson both make a strong

case for the use of filtering and aggregation to help us manage the abundance of information.

Certainly *The Economics of Attention* will be regarded by those who pick it up as a notable contribution to studies in rhetoric and information technology, but even more so if considered alongside the conversations emerging in technology studies in recent years concerned overtly with attention and shifts in attentional dynamics. I have tried briefly to outline a few related trajectories above. In its own right, Lanham's book challenges readers to adopt a selected vocabulary of economics that can be put to use for explaining the rhetorics of attention in the information age. His work aspires to reach the widest possible audience; he writes across the disciplines, demonstrating the project's far-reaching relevance and including, at the end of each chapter, "Background Conversations," in which he shares brief bibliographic essays to account for the readings that ground the chapter. Furthermore, Lanham's *The Economics of Attention* primes a provocative conversation with certain relevance for composition and rhetoric scholars interested in understanding the changes brought about as digital communication technologies refigure studies in rhetoric and writing.



Health and the Rhetoric of Medicine, Judy Z. Segal (Carbondale: Southern Illinois UP, 2005. 217 pages).

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Medical rhetoric has only recently become a specialization in English studies, although health communication in communication studies has been on the scene for many years. The focus in health communication tends to be on social science research and more often on studies of oral rather than written communication. Some rhetoricians in communication studies, of course, do take a more humanities-based approach. As Judy Segal points out in *Health and the Rhetoric of Medicine*, "... [Rhetoric]