

Communication at the Intersection of Nature and Culture

Proceedings of the Ninth Biennial
Conference on Communication and the Environment



Selected Papers from the Conference held at
DePaul University, Chicago, IL, June 22-25, 2007

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*Communication at the Intersection of Nature and Culture:
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Barb Willard and Chris Green, editors

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From Awareness to Action: The Rhetorical Limits of Visualizing the Irreparable Nature of Global Climate Change

Richard D. Besel
University of Illinois

Abstract

In this paper I examine a recent artistic attempt to publicly visualize a future at risk, Alexis Rockman's mural painting Manifest Destiny. By turning to J. Robert Cox's work on the "Locus of the Irreparable," I contend that Manifest Destiny compels viewers to see the irreparable nature of global climate change in terms of the unique, precarious, and timely. Arguing that Rockman's creation is a visual example of the rhetoric of the irreparable, I put Cox's work into conversation with recent efforts to understand the nature of visual rhetoric. However, despite the attention-grabbing nature of Rockman's work, the production of specific social judgments related to the reduction of greenhouse gas emissions are left wanting. The implications for public understanding of global climate change issues and future research directions for scholarship using Cox's articulation of rhetoric of the irreparable are discussed.

Twenty-five years ago, the *Quarterly Journal of Speech* published J. Robert Cox's article, "The Die is Cast: Topical and Ontological Dimensions of the *Locus* of the Irreparable" (Cox, 1982). Since then, argumentation and rhetorical scholars concerned with environmental issues have recognized the importance of Cox's work, referencing the article on a variety of topics ranging from theoretical considerations of environmental metaphors (Muir, 1994, p. 3) and apocalyptic rhetoric (O'Leary, 1997, p. 299) to analyses of environmental controversies related to Deer Creek Crossing (Bannon, 2006, p. 31-33) and the protection of orangutans by nongovernmental organizations (Sowards, 2006). Perhaps the most impressive testament to the importance of Cox's effort is its inclusion in *Landmark Essays on Rhetoric and the Environment* (Waddell, 1998). Indeed, Cox's article stands out as an influential work of environmental communication scholarship. However, more can be done to understand the range and limits of the rhetoric of the irreparable.

To engage and expand on Cox's notions about the *locus* of the irreparable, I turn to Alexis Rockman's 2004 work, *Manifest Destiny*. Set 3,000 years in the future, this eight-foot high and twenty-foot long oil and acrylic painting depicts Brooklyn long after the effects of global climate change have taken their toll: the ice caps have melted, sea levels have risen, and only ruins

remain of the coastal cities. By analyzing Rockman's *Manifest Destiny*, I accomplish two important tasks in this paper. Arguing that Rockman's creation is a visual example of the rhetoric of the irreparable, I put Cox's work into conversation with recent efforts to understand the nature of visual rhetoric. I agree with John W. Delicath and Kevin M. DeLuca when they claim, "We need to find a way of theorizing how images give meaning to social problems and the role they play in contemporary public argument" (2004, p. 320). Examining Rockman and Cox's works answers Delicath and DeLuca's call for additional scholarship. In addition, by turning to a case study involving the environmental problem of global climate change, I illustrate the limited potential of the rhetoric of the irreparable for social action.

The remainder of this paper is divided into three sections. First, I briefly summarize Cox's articulation of the *locus* of the irreparable. Second, I analyze Rockman's *Manifest Destiny* as a visual example of rhetoric of the irreparable. Finally, I discuss how my analysis reveals the limits of the rhetoric of the irreparable for global climate change solutions.

Cox's Dimensions of the *Locus* of the Irreparable

Building on the works of Chaim Perelman, Lucie Olbrechts-Tyteca, and Martin Heidegger, Cox's 1982 article explores the nature of the *locus* of the irreparable. According to Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca, "Whether the result of it be good or evil, the irreparable event is a source of terror for man; to be irreparable, an action must be one that cannot be repeated: it acquires a value by the very fact of being considered under this aspect" (1969, p. 92). It is the significance of an event that cannot be repeated or erased that gives communicators their rhetorical traction to rearrange our societal values and hierarchies; in other words, an irreparable event can function as one of many *loci communes*, or discursive commonplaces.

For Cox, the *locus* of the irreparable involves three dimensions: "The *locus* of the irreparable is a way of organizing our perceptions of a situation involving decision or action; its use calls attention to the *unique* and *precarious* nature of some object or state of affairs, and stresses the *timeliness* of our relationship to it" (1982, p. 229). According to Cox, the "object or act which qualifies as irreparable is necessarily unique" (182, p. 229). He continues, "Much of the potency of arguments regarding the irreparable derives from the value of what is unique or singular, and from contrast between that and some fungible alternative" (Cox, 1982, p. 230). In addition to being unique, an irreparable object or act also has a precarious nature. However, the precarious nature of the irreparable is not reduced to simplistic fatalism, for the irreparable "need not be lost if one acts" (1982, p. 230). Precariousness may refer to that which is fleeting, fragile, or established and stable, but threatened. Finally, although Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca do not explicitly mention timeliness as a quality of the irreparable, Cox extends their work to include it. For Cox, "our experience with precarious reality places value upon the timeliness of choice or action" (1982, p. 231). In other words, the *locus* of the irreparable asks us to act *now*, before it is too late.

In addition to engaging the temporality of the present (we must act now), Cox also reminds us of Heidegger's contributions to our understanding of time. The irreparable is not just concerned with the present; it is also concerned

with the past and the future. How long have we had the unique, fragile, threatened object or act? What will the world look like in the future if we do not act to save it? Thus, Cox paraphrases Heidegger's general interpretation of human existence, or *Eksistenz*: "The meaning of our experience is rooted, not in a succession of particular Nows, but in a field or temporal spread of Future-Present-Past" (1982, p. 232). It is this ontological location in a temporal field that perpetually leads us to be "thrown-ahead-of-ourselves-toward-the-future" (Barrett, quoted in Cox, 1982, p. 233). The ultimate source of terror that Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca see in the irreparable is, thus, a human being thrown so far into the future that he or she no longer exists. In other words, you confront your own finitude and mortality; you are dead.

With this understanding of the *locus* of the irreparable in mind, Cox suggests there are ways actors confronted by this line of argumentation can adjust their actions and decision-making processes. One possibility is that they lengthen the amount of time to consider action. Another possibility is that they seek additional information. A third possibility is that they adopt a minimal condition rule. Finally, actors can engage in extraordinary measures.

Now that I have summarized Cox's dimensions of the *locus* of the irreparable, I wish to explore this understanding in light of the recent "visual turn" in rhetorical studies (e.g., DeLuca, 1999; DeLuca & Demo, 2000; Erickson, 2000; Finnegan, 2001, 2004; Foss, 1994). If asked whether or not I believe it is possible to have a visual rhetoric of the irreparable, I would simply answer "yes." However, following Finnegan's (2001) lead with "visual argument," I am not so much interested in *what* a rhetoric is as much as I am interested in *how it functions*. Thus, the next section of this paper will address how Rockman's rhetoric functions as a rhetoric of the irreparable.

***Manifest Destiny* and Visual Rhetoric of the Irreparable**

Alexis Rockman is not your typical painter. Educated at New York's School of Visual Arts and inspired by painters like Thomas Cole, Frederic Church, and Albert Bierstadt, Rockman considers himself to be a "pop artist using natural history as my iconography" (Potter, 2006, p. 715). Perhaps best known for his 2000

piece, *The Farm*, which depicts a square cow and other bioengineered animals, Rockman has long focused on the relationship between humans, technology, and nature.

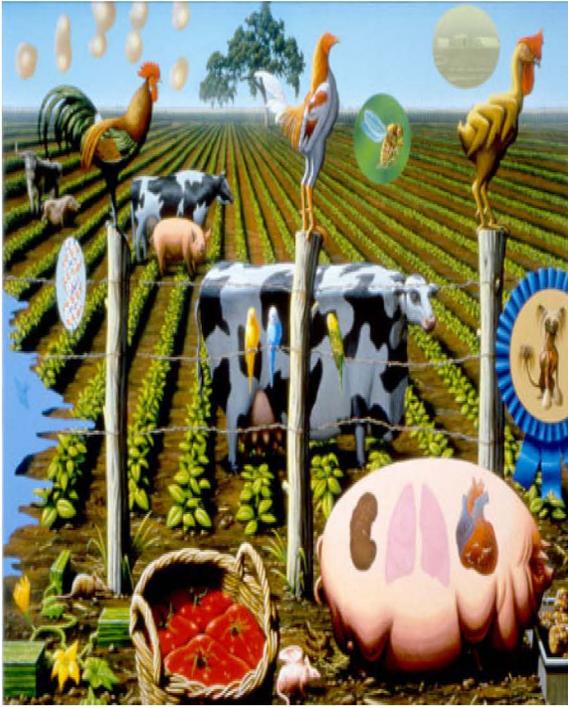


Figure 1. Alexis Rockman's 2000 painting *The Farm*.

Not only are his paintings impressive in terms of size and color, but they are also imaginative. In fact, Stephen Jay Gould once said, “[Rockman] tweaks my cerebrum” (Potter, 2006, p. 716). One commentator summarized his work in the following way:

A combination of natural science and fantasy, his work explores the predatory relationship between nature and culture. Inspired equally by scientific curiosity and artistic compulsion, his startling images are at once literal, naturalistic, and entirely imaginary. Challenging the way we see and categorize the world, he questions human-animal-nature interaction by creating “in your face” scenarios based on vital popular culture dilemmas, among them genetic engineering and global warming (Potter, 2006, p. 716).

His recent painting, *Manifest Destiny*, is Rockman's attempt to visualize what the world would look like after global climate change's effects have run their course. But *Manifest Destiny* is not simply a product of Rockman's imagination. Representative of many of his other works, Rockman engaged in painstaking research to ensure his painting was powerful, yet realistic. According to Rockman, when dealing with unfamiliar images “you want as much credibility as possible” (Wear, 2005, p. 772). Thus, Rockman consulted with architects, biologists, and climate scientists before painting *Manifest Destiny*. The final product has, according to Spencer Wear, “caused a considerable stir, with prominent features in the media and reproductions showing up on environmental websites” (2005, p. 771). Rockman has certainly been successful in garnering the attention of audiences beyond the artistic elite, leaving the general public “flattened by



Figure 2. Alexis Rockman's 2004 painting *Manifest Destiny*.

the display of a truly possible future” (Wear, 2005, p. 773). Rockman's bleak depiction of the future is precisely why *Manifest Destiny* is a visual rhetoric of the irreparable.

Not only does Rockman's painting visually depict Cox's dimensions of uniqueness, precariousness, and timeliness, but it also confronts audiences with the Heideggerian interpretation of human existence.

Rockman's painting certainly depicts the quality of uniqueness. Although brimming with detail of birds, buildings, and bacteria, the painting's most recognizable object is the Brooklyn Bridge. In terms of the *locus* of the irreparable, the Brooklyn Bridge is a one of a kind. There are no other bridges like it in the world. The choice of the Brooklyn Bridge was a deliberate one. According to Rockman, "I felt that I needed something iconic, like the Statue of Liberty in the 'Planet of the Apes'" (Yablonsky, 2004, p. AR28). Rockman's painting suggests that in a future changed by pollution, the unique qualities of the Brooklyn Bridge will no longer be available to humans. Additionally, taking a step back, one can understand the unique nature of the entire city, depicted in the painting under the watery depths of the Atlantic. What today is recognized as the East Coast of the United States is no more in Rockman's fatalistic future. What is depicted as unique in Rockman's work is perhaps best described as a specific, geographic location, a location that is valued because there is no other place in the world quite like it.

In addition to the dimension of uniqueness, *Manifest Destiny* also exhibits precariousness. According to Cox, rhetors develop a sense of precariousness by noting the way established, stable or secure objects can be threatened and destroyed unless an agent intervenes (1982, p. 230). Although it is difficult to imagine all of New York submerged, Rockman's piece brings the possibility to life. The stable slabs of concrete and the secure foundations of skyscrapers are no match for the effects of global climate change. The new stadium that is being proposed is illustrated in its completed state, submerged. The power plants and smokestacks of Con Edison are likewise illustrated in the watery depths. The audience is reminded that their physical location, their home, is not established, stable, or secure.

Manifest Destiny also exhibits the dimension of timeliness. Rockman has commented that his painting is a reference to Americans' "long tradition of entitlement in terms of natural resources" (Weart, 2005, p. 772). If the irreparable loss of our place on earth is to be avoided, Rockman's painting implies we need to change the system of entitlements to natural resources that we have developed since the start of the Industrial Revolution. The combined influences of the Hudson school of painting and the Industrial Revolution have allowed Rockman

to see what he calls "the dark side" of natural resource use, use that must be halted (Yablonsky, 2004, p. AR28). Rockman's painting works as a "forewarning, an opportunity to act in appropriate ways before it is too late" (Cox, 1982, p. 232).

In addition to exhibiting all of the dimensions Cox has outlined, Rockman's painting also confronts audiences with the Heideggerian interpretation of human existence. For Heidegger, humans are in a temporal field that perpetually leads us to be "thrown-ahead-of-ourselves-toward-the-future" (Barrett, quoted in Cox, 1982, p. 233). Also recall that, for Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca, the ultimate source of terror, interpreted in Heidegger's language, is a human being thrown so far into the future that he or she no longer exists, an awareness and fear of death. In Rockman's work, audiences are confronted by that which terrifies them most: the end of humanity. In Rockman's rust-colored world, humans are nowhere to be found. The only life one sees is the growth of vegetation on ruins and the parasites that have filled the new niches created by human degradation. Rockman's 3,000 year projection fails to project any humans. Yablonsky rightly titles her commentary on *Manifest Destiny* "New York's Watery Grave." Weart observes, "At a deeper emotional level, the imagery of human absence evokes universal personal anxieties about abandonment, connected with the death of the individual and the end of all hopes" (2005, p. 773). An art observer noted, "This painting should scare everyone" (Yablonski, 2004, p. AR28). Perhaps this is why Cox has noted that "the irreparable does not offer hope" (1982, p. 233). Audiences are asked to throw themselves into the future only to find that they are not there.

At this point it is clear that Rockman's work is indeed a visual example of the rhetoric of the irreparable. *Manifest Destiny* contains each of the dimensions mentioned by Cox in addition to engaging the Heideggerian interpretation of human existence. However, Rockman's efforts also reveal the rhetorical limitations of the *locus* of the irreparable.

Rhetorical Limits of the Rhetoric of the Irreparable

My analysis of Rockman's work not only establishes the possibility of having a visual rhetoric of the irreparable, but it also reveals

three ways this kind of rhetoric is limited and constrained by the nature of the topic being addressed. First, the rhetoric of the irreparable, when used in isolation, offers no solutions to environmental problems. Second, our understanding of the timeliness dimension of the irreparable must be revisited in light of specific subject constraints. Third, understanding the rhetoric of the irreparable through the reading of individual texts and images leaves the critic with a methodological blind spot. Scholars have not yet fully explored the role of argumentative conflict between various works that use the *locus* of the irreparable.

In terms of solutions, Rockman's work leaves the audience without a solution to the very problem being identified. *Manifest Destiny* has thus been extremely effective in garnering attention, but may not be the scientific popularization attempt environmental activists have been longing for. Attention is one thing, but action is another. What audiences are left with is a feeling of pessimism and terror. Even the title of the work, *Manifest Destiny*, hints at the fatalistic feeling one gets when confronted by humanity's lack of existence 3,000 years into the future. Viewers are left with a sense of urgency, but no sense of agency. What is the viewer to do to hold back what appears to be an imminent deluge of humanity's own doing? The painting itself testifies to the futile attempts humans may make. Visible in the painting are the remnants of a wall built to temporarily hold back the waves of the ocean, but to no avail. Used in isolation, the rhetoric of the irreparable draws audiences' attention to problems as it depresses and disempowers them. However, this is not to say we should stop using the rhetoric of the irreparable. On the contrary, what we need is not less rhetoric, but more rhetoric. We need additional attempts to visualize global climate change, especially in terms of what we can do to solve the problem.

The rhetoric of the irreparable is also limited when environmental problems impose limitations on the amount of time decision makers have to act. Recall that Cox highlights four different ways decision makers can adapt their actions in light of the irreparable. People can lengthen the amount of time to consider action, seek additional information, adopt a minimal condition rule, or engage in extraordinary measures. However, many of the options are not available when the subject being

considered is global climate change. Take the first two of Cox's adaptations as examples. Today, scientists are concerned that humans are fast approaching a physical point of no return, a tipping point, when the environmental systems most influenced by global climate change will be well on their way to making human existence miserable, if not extinct. Although there is disagreement about how much time humans have left to take action, with a small minority believing there is no problem at all, the amount of time left to work with is finite. Thus, lengthening the amount of time to consider what should be done only delays action that must be done now. In terms of additional information seeking, this has long been used as a stalling tactic by global warming skeptics. Seeing that Rockman's work is consistent with the majority of the most recent scientific reports (IPCC, 2001, 2007), one wonders how much additional information is needed. The problem here is to be found in the nature of the topic being considered. If one has not yet taken an action that leads to an irreparable state of affairs, then the option of seeking additional information appears viable. However, when the action to be taken will prevent an irreparable state of affairs, a condition already approaching because of earlier actions, seeking additional information appears to be unwarranted.

Finally, understanding the rhetoric of the irreparable through the reading of individual texts and images leaves critics with a methodological blind spot. Scholars have not yet fully explored the role of argumentative conflict between various works that use the *locus* of the irreparable. In other words, what happens when one rhetoric of the irreparable meets another in the constant renegotiation of social hierarchies and values? For example, although Rockman consulted a number of scientists and his work reflects their most recent findings, if the results were projected into the future at their worst, my reading of Rockman's work does not put the painting into conversation with other rhetorics of the irreparable. Many opponents of greenhouse gas reduction legislation couch their opposition in the rhetoric of economics. However, their oppositional rhetoric also uses the *locus* of the irreparable in a way similar to Rockman. For opponents, the current strength of the economy is unique, precarious, and needs to be defended today. Not doing so would jeopardize the lifestyle Americans have grown accustomed to having. Although questions of whether or not the

opponents' case holds merit is open to debate, that there are ways of invoking the *locus* of the irreparable on more than one side of an issue seems clear. Scholars have not yet fully explored the implications of having competing rhetorics of the irreparable.

Conclusion

Given that this paper is part of a panel dedicated to exploring and reflecting on a landmark essay in environmental rhetoric, it seems fitting that I conclude with more questions than answers. Looking back on how Cox's article can be invoked in analyses of rhetoric that use the *locus* of the irreparable, such as my reading of Rockman's work, I am left to wonder where our future research will take us. Will communication scholars develop an alternative rhetoric that sufficiently suggests solutions for our world's biggest problems? Or perhaps a supplemental rhetoric to be used in conjunction with a rhetoric of the irreparable is a better

option. I am also left to question whether or not those wanting reductions in greenhouse gas emissions will begin to shift their rhetoric away from an emphasis on the irreparable and more toward a rhetoric of solutions. Will we successfully replace our pessimism with optimism? Already there are some signs that this shift may be happening. Although it does not significantly engage national legislation possibilities, Al Gore's recent movie makes some suggestions in terms of solvency. And what about the counter-rhetorics being generated that also use the *locus* of the irreparable? What are rhetorical critics to make of the messy and complicated clash of environmental and economic values? These questions, and many more, have yet to be explored. However, it is with a sense of optimism that I end this paper. I believe that there is a rhetorical potential in avoiding what Cox has called the fatalistic announcement of forces over which we have no control (1982, p. 239).

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