



ARTIFACTS

A Journal of Undergraduate Writing

An Unspoken Tool: Review of John Schilb's Rhetorical Refusals

Jordan Dillender

Imagine you're having a heated argument. Maybe you and a friend are debating some issue you both feel passionately about. You begin giving your opinion on the matter, maybe offering up a defense of your position while simultaneously attacking the other person's stance. Your tirade goes on for several minutes, and you think that your target is absorbing your words, readying to make an articulate response. Instead, when you've finally finished pouring out your thoughts, your friend answers with a simple "Whatever," and then retreats from the debate without another word.

This type of refusal to engage in a topic of discussion, thus breaking away from an expected flow of dialogue, would be considered an example of rhetorical refusal. Author John Schilb explores this matter in his book, *Rhetorical Refusals: Defying Audiences Expectations*. While the hypothetical situation presented above offers a very general image of rhetorical refusals, and Schilb makes it clear that there are different types, it serves to illustrate the very basic definition of the term, which also serves as the subtitle of the book: defying audiences expectations.

In the introduction, Schilb opens with an anecdote detailing the controversy surrounding dance critic Arlene Croce, who in 1994 wrote an article for *The New Yorker* entitled *Discussing the Undiscussable* in which she voiced a scathing opinion on the AIDS-conscious dance piece *Still/Here*, while admitting in the same article that she did not intend to ever actually watch it. Schilb uses Croce's refusal often throughout the introduction and the first section of the book as a measuring stick for other examples and their representation of the characteristics of rhetorical refusal. This is a crucial move by Schilb, as he could have just provided a litany of instances involving his subject with little attempt to correlate the events, leaving the reader on his or her own to navigate from one type of refusal to the next with no constant tool to guide them. As it stands, the Croce incident is a fairly obvious example. Even if one is entirely new to the study of rhetoric and its forms, one can easily see the dilemma posed by Croce's article. Not only is the refusal itself very clear, but the responsibility of a distinguished art critic to experience the piece he or she is persuading against would be agreed by most. The entire article *Discussing the Undiscussable* is her cynical "whatever" response to someone else's attempt at a discussion.

As previously stated, the Croce story is threaded through the first section of the book, which is comprised of three chapters. Schilb uses these chapters almost like a tutorial for how to spot and classify different forms of rhetorical refusal. The first chapter is meant to describe the basic characteristics of rhetorical refusal and how to properly study them. As he moves through the different modes and methods of the term, he points to real

world examples and previously written texts, then relates them to Croce. For example, when Schilb attempts to detail the function of dissociation in rhetorical refusals, he calls on the book *The New Rhetoric* by Chaim Perelman and L. Olbrechts-Tyteca. He then describes it as an attempt to split up a socially accepted unity into different parts and uses Maxine Hairston's 1985 speech *Breaking our Bonds and Reaffirming Our Connections*, which advocates the parting of English and composition as a unified subject. Schilb then applies this information to the Croce case to show how her refusal to watch *Still/Here* exhibits multiple instances of dissociation, including the dissociation between what is and isn't art.

This method of exploring a wide range of rhetorical refusals and viewing them in light of the single Croce article is carried on through chapter two, which is dedicated to the evaluation of rhetorical refusals and the problem that arises when they're criticized by people who haven't experienced what they're criticizing. Schilb gives accounts of various rhetorical refusals, such as former New York City mayor Rudy Giuliani's attempted ban on the Brooklyn Museum's 1999 show *Sensation* before he even attended it. The final chapter of the first section takes all the elements of rhetorical refusal evaluated in the previous pages, then uses them to focus on dissecting the Croce piece even further.

The last three chapters are less cohesive, but they provide studies of the use of rhetorical refusals that suggests it is more complex than simple whatever statements, and that some aspects

of it are harder to see but still active. Schilb covers the refusal of historian Deborah Lipstadt to debate Holocaust deniers; his point being that some rhetorical refusals are directed as much at the agents of rhetoric as the rhetoric itself. In another chapter, Schilb posits that a rhetorical refusal can be viewed differently over time. His evidence includes, among others, a magazine interview with Michel Foucault in which the famous theorist requested his identity be kept secret. Looking back on it now with knowledge of Foucault's theory of the author function, a reader can see him trying to avoid the very problem he tried to address – that is, an author's name recognition can influence how a reader interprets a reading. However, this understanding of the refusal only came to light years after it was made, when knowledge of his identity in the interview was made known and placed in his oeuvre.

The final section includes a study of Frederick Douglass's criticism of Abraham Lincoln amongst a mostly laudatory speech he gave at the dedication of a memorial to the late President ten years after his assassination. This demonstrates how rhetorical refusal can appear within otherwise anticipated material. Also covered are the possibilities of rhetorical refusals in literature. Examples used are stories based on Vietnam, such as Tim O'Brien's *Lake of Fire*, a mystery novel that performs a refusal by not providing a solution to the mystery.

Compared to the first section of the book, the last four chapters of *Rhetorical Refusals* are a bit harder to follow. While they provide a lot of information on the subtle nuances of rhetorical refusals, he often stretches his anecdotes further than perhaps he should. For example, the chapter on Lipstadt and her unwillingness to debate with people she claims are Holocaust deniers is a bit overlong. It's clear that Schilb wants the reader to understand that Lipstadt's refusal is based on her belief that this group of people don't deserve to be considered valid historians, but eventually he delves too deep into the subject, and his inclusion of certain details (like Mel Gibson's mixed signals toward his opinion of the Holocaust) seems unnecessary, and comes close to putting the matter into the realm of social commentary. It almost distracts from the real point of this section.

Overall, *Rhetorical Refusals* provides an informative study on the basic principles of its subject. Schilb's book makes it easier to detect these rhetorical refusals and emphasizes how prevalent they really are by using a

wealth of popular examples from famous theorists to politicians to comedians. He rarely portrays the refusals as being morally good or bad, but he stresses that their presence should cause concern if they are born out of misinformation or prejudice. And although the book only focuses on more contemporary rhetorical refusals, it opens the possibility of recognizing similar acts throughout the history of rhetoric.

Since he doesn't really cover any instances prior to Frederick Douglass's speeches, it would be interesting if someone, maybe Schilb himself, took a look at rhetoricians from earlier periods to evaluate how these refusals have evolved over time. Far from being a comprehensive look at the subject, *Rhetorical Refusals: Defying Audiences Expectations* wants its reader to be aware of what rhetorical refusals do, and asks us to be ready for them in any discourse we come across.

Jordan Dillender recently graduated from MU with a degree in English.

Part of Issue 1, published in Summer 2008

About *Artifacts*

Artifacts is a refereed journal of undergraduate work in writing at The University of Missouri. The journal celebrates writing in all its forms by inviting student authors to submit projects composed across different genres and media.

Artifacts is sponsored by [The Campus Writing Program](#).

Published by the Campus Writing Program.

Copyright © 2014 — Curators of the [University of Missouri](#). All rights reserved. [DMCA](#) and [other copyright information](#). An [equal opportunity / affirmative action](#) institution.