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Aesthetic Response to the Fires at Notre Dame: A Case for Rhetorical Aesthetics Within
Conventional Rhetorical Analysis

Amanda Clifford

A thesis submitted to the faculty of
Brigham Young University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Arts

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ABSTRACT

Aesthetic Response to the Fires at Notre Dame: A Case for Rhetorical Aesthetics Within Conventional Rhetorical Analysis

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The field of rhetorical aesthetics has a long and rich history. Despite that history, however, aesthetic artifacts have yet to be considered with the same weight that conventional rhetorical artifacts are. My project is to consider the rhetorical effectiveness of aesthetic artifacts, making a case for more inclusion of these types of artifacts in rhetorical theory. I will demonstrate the effectiveness of the aesthetic by performing a comparative analysis of both an aesthetic and conventional reaction to the 2019 fires at Notre Dame de Paris. By considering the constitutive power of the aesthetic, I will argue that the depth of analysis that the aesthetic allows makes it, in some cases, a more effective space for rhetorical analysis than conventional artifacts.

Keywords: aesthetic, rhetoric, artifact, constitutive rhetoric, performativity, Gregory Clark, Judith Butler

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Introduction

On April 15, 2019, Notre-Dame de Paris dramatically caught fire. The 800-year-old cathedral lost its iconic central spire and most of the roof was destroyed. During the fires, Parisians, other French people, and tourists took to the bridges and streets surrounding Notre Dame to watch. Eventually the groups began to sing Catholic hymns in French. The videos of the singing (mostly cell phone footage) depict a performance of identity, loss, and belonging. The aesthetics of the public response turned disparate onlookers into a unified public. To put it another way, the aural and visual elements of the singing did more to reconstitute the French people than even the conventional appeals of French President Emmanuel Macron's televised address to the nation the following day.

The field of rhetorical aesthetics has contributed much to our understanding of rhetorical theory. For example, Nathan Crick argues that enriching our understanding of aesthetics will create a better rhetoric (132). He attempts to enrich that understanding by analyzing the work of John Dewey, arguing ultimately that the aesthetic pushes rhetoric to expand its understanding of possible outcomes and audiences to include those that defy logical argumentation (186). Beyond Crick, John Poulakos has also argued that aesthetics evolved from rhetoric and that the two are intrinsically connected (338). Despite these acknowledgments, however, there remain considerable gaps in our understanding of when an aesthetic response is more effective in a rhetorical situation than a conventional rhetorical response, such as an oration or essay (Clark, Reed, Browne). There is not yet a fully articulated theory as to when the aesthetic should supersede the conventional in a given rhetorical situation. The goal of this project is to consider the strength that aesthetic considerations bring to rhetorical theory by looking at the power of aesthetic rhetoric in constituting the identity of the auditor.

This paper will consider the aesthetic response to the fires as an example of constitutive rhetoric, demonstrating the value of aesthetic artifacts in broadening current understandings of rhetorical theory. Specifically, I will argue that the aesthetic response to the fires was more effective than conventional responses in three ways. First, the aesthetic response allowed crowds to take on the role of audience and rhetor simultaneously, meaning they could both contemplate and perform French identity whereas a conventional response only allowed for passive contemplation. Second, the aesthetic response “called an audience into being” that depicted the people as they were in the moment of loss (Charland 134). Finally, the aesthetic response created a space where aesthetic judgment (Nanay 46-48) could be suspended, allowing the audience to see the moment as more than a “mere means” to a conventional rhetorical agenda (Stroud 41).

Looking at the need to reaffirm French identity in a time of tragedy, it becomes clear how an aesthetic performance in response to an exigency constitutes an expression of group identity – in the case of Notre-Dame, a shared, public identity. As my analysis will show, these distinct benefits make a compelling case for further development of an aesthetic rhetoric in response to certain exigencies. I will begin with a discussion of aesthetic rhetoric, showing how it draws on notions of constitutive rhetoric and performativity for its persuasive functions. I will then consider the rhetorical context of the fires and conduct a close reading of the visual, textual, and aural elements of the public response. A brief discussion of the analysis will conclude the paper.

The Constitutive Power of Rhetorical Aesthetics

Before discussing the implications of aesthetic rhetoric in bettering our understanding of rhetorical theory, it seems important to define aesthetic rhetoric and offer some theoretical context for the ideas that I will address in this paper. In this section, I will consider the definition of aesthetic rhetoric, review its recent and longer history, and consider the ways that constitutive

rhetoric and performativity broaden and expand our understanding of aesthetic rhetoric and its implications for rhetorical theory as a whole.

Susanne Langer stated that, “Art in the sense here intended—that is, the generic term subsuming painting, sculpture, architecture, music, dance, literature, drama, and film—may be defined as the practice of creating perceptible forms of human feeling” (6). Our interaction with these “forms of human feeling” that lead to a change in perception, in other words an aesthetic judgment, is what I will classify here as a rhetorical aesthetic encounter. Aesthetic encounters are notoriously difficult to articulate (Nanay 1), but their force is easier to identify. Nanay presents the example of seeing a piece of art in a museum. He describes the feelings that come from experiencing the art and the subsequent impacts of those feelings. The experience of seeing the art is an aesthetic encounter; the way the encounter changes the way I think about the world is the aesthetic judgment, or where rhetorical force is enacted.

These judgments can occasionally be suspended, and some theorists argue that they should be in the name of protecting the experience of art as art (Nanay 46). As Judith Butler points out in her book *Bodies that Matter*, language is divisive by nature, so removing the requirement of language from an experience creates space for the consideration of art without implied meaning. That suspension happens as an individual looks beyond ranking or describing art and instead experiences it as a whole, leaving concerns about judgment behind. While the judgments create a rhetorical effect to be tracked, the temporary suspension of judgments creates new and unique experiences that are both extra-textual and extra-rhetorical until they are again subjected to language and judgment.

Gregory Clark offers an example of the flexibility of the aesthetic in becoming extra-rhetorical and then rhetorical again in his book *Civic Jazz*; documenting his studies of the

rhetorical force of the creation and performance of jazz music, Clark argues that the creation of jazz music is a model of functional civic life. In the book, he describes how experiencing the musicians at work and experiencing the music teaches the listener something that goes beyond admiring artistry. His understanding of democratic life and civic responsibility was deepened. He used his understanding of that experience—in other words the aesthetic judgment he had made—to explain something about how the world works. For example, Clark discusses the way that jazz musicians work together by “submitting themselves to what the music requires of them” and “do[ing] what it takes to combine their separate voices in a coherent musical statement where separateness can be still heard. And they do so improvisationally, without knowing precisely what that statement, fully realized, will be” (6). His observations teach him what it means to work cohesively and helps him draw principles about how we can use this work as a model for “getting along” (7).

Clark is in no way the first person to engage in conversations about the merit of the aesthetic. Aesthetic rhetoric has a long history woven throughout rhetorical theory. Plato engaged in debates over the role of poetry in rhetoric in many of his writings, arguing specifically in Socrates’ second speech in *Phaedrus* that the aesthetic can point us to truth in sometimes more effective ways than traditional rhetorical strategies (Crick 131). Poulakos recently made the claim that the field of rhetoric spurred the field of aesthetics by looking at the work of Baumgarten and Kant in the 18th century. The philosophers’ attempts to advocate for the acceptance of aesthetics in rhetoric were met with disapproval; Baumgarten acknowledged that some find that the “deliverances of the senses, fancies, fables, and stirrings of the passions are below the philosophical horizon” (cited in Gilbert and Kuhn 1954, 290). Poulakos, speaking about what drove Baumgarten to create acceptance amongst philosophers, said that he thought

that philosophy's "disregard of the senses, the imagination and the emotions amounted to partial blindness" (339). Despite the lack of acceptance from philosophers and rhetorical scholars initially, Baumgarten and Kant made a case for the aesthetic in rhetoric that carried on into the 19th century.

Working to create more space for the aesthetic theory of earlier centuries, Kenneth Burke and John Dewey worked in the 19th and 20th centuries to build a more functional theory of aesthetics based on principles of identification, expression, and form (Clark *Civic Jazz* 3). Reed summarizes the key contributions of Burke and Dewey saying:

... both see art, as it creates opportunities for shared emotion and shared experience, breaking communication barriers that otherwise develop between individuals. In a society that is full of divisions and rifts, art allows two separate people to inhabit and share a common emotional, aesthetic experience and thus recognize in each other a capacity for a common way of experiencing, and, by extension, a common way of believing and living (14).

This rhetorical force that comes from art creates identification as Burke points out. This process of viewing art, articulating meaning, and creating identity from those reiterations is Burke's concept of "aesthetic form in action" (Clark). These concepts make a compelling case for the rhetorical force of the aesthetic.

Building on these earlier works, scholars have studied a variety of aesthetic artifacts; from sonic rhetoric (Eckstein, Hawk) to visual rhetoric (Lamp, Hill), the sensory experience of the aesthetic is often discussed within rhetorical theory. That being said, the traditional methods of rhetorical analysis still leave something to be wanted of aesthetic artifacts. For example, Greg

Clark points out in his work with Hawaiian culture and music that rhetoric and aesthetics are still held apart from each other and that they should not be:

In their conventional conceptions, rhetoric engages concepts while the aesthetic engages sensation and emotion—an overgeneralization that, operationally may be more or less accurate. But if we believe Burke (and I think, much of our own experience) and conclude that it is not really useful to treat the rhetorical and the aesthetic as all that separate (*Language* 307), we can confront with greater understanding the human tendency to abandon abstraction and dive into immediacy when matters pertaining to self and community become difficult. (254)

Despite the increasing openness of rhetoric to aesthetics, Clark acknowledges that the separation remains in place and limits our ability to engage with abstraction as rhetorical critics. The tendency to “dive into immediacy” keeps the critic from considering an exigence and all of its implications and artifacts, including the more abstract, limiting the merit of an analysis. Turning away from abstraction, like that offered by aesthetic artifacts, keeps the critic in the realm of the immediate.

Nathan Crick also points out that the gaps between aesthetics and rhetoric are limiting. After reviewing some of the most common contentions between the two fields, he states that to create a better rhetoric, we do not need to debunk aesthetics but to find a richer form of it (132). His point reiterates Clark’s conclusion: excluding aesthetics from rhetoric does not improve rhetoric, but rather limits it from understanding all of the “available means of persuasion” (Aristotle). The richness that Crick is describing can be found in aesthetic encounters, experiences where traditional approaches to rhetoric are neglected in favor of a focus on audience or viewers in a singular moment. That new approach broadens and expands how and

what can be communicated; by inviting both a broader consideration of artifacts and a broader application of rhetorical theory, including aesthetics creates new understanding.

To Clark and Crick's point, although a lot of work has been done to include aesthetics in the field of rhetoric, most conventional rhetorical analyses do not include an analysis of aesthetic responses to a clear rhetorical exigency, and they certainly do not perform a comparative analysis of an aesthetic response and a conventional response to the same exigency. By considering the ways that the aesthetic can be analyzed in a rhetorical analysis, I will demonstrate a wider application of aesthetic theory that will explore uncharted human activity, rhetorical expressions, and communication. Specifically, my analysis will show that aesthetics do not merely merit consideration by rhetorical critics, but they can in fact be more effective than conventional responses to certain rhetorical exigencies.

The Aesthetic as Constitutive and Performative Rhetoric

The rhetorical effect that I will consider here is the constitution of an audience's identity. If we are going to further develop a functioning theory of aesthetic rhetoric, then we must consider how the aesthetic functions rhetorically in a way that we can analyze. Maurice Charland's theory of constitutive rhetoric explains that rhetoric "calls an audience into being," meaning that an audience is never just a transcendental body of people (134); it is always being formed and defined by the rhetoric itself. Edwin Black's argument for an implied audience (which he calls the second persona) makes the central idea clear: the audience that the rhetoric implies is as rhetorical as the artifact itself (112). The theory implies that one of the critical functions of rhetoric is that it can both define an audience and entice that audience to accept the definition simultaneously. In defining the process of identification within an audience, Charland posits that the creation of an ideological subject and an effective narrative to support that subject

are what make identification so effective. These two specific elements of constitutive rhetoric are what make the rhetorical consideration of the aesthetic so interesting; does the aesthetic artifact have the same—or even more—potential to create an effective narrative that outlines an ideological subject that an audience will be compelled to adopt as conventional rhetoric? Charland says himself that his theory could be lent to understanding aesthetic artifacts, saying “ideological rhetorical practice is not restricted to explicitly political public address, but can include a range of aesthetic practices, including music, drama, architecture, and fashion that elicit new modes of experience and being” (148). The aesthetic, then, has the potential to create an ideological subject that can change the way an audience views themselves, thus influencing the effectiveness of the rhetoric.

The question then is how exactly aesthetic encounters become rhetorically effective in constituting an identity amongst an audience and generally. Judith Butler provides one framework to better understand how an aesthetic constitution of identity takes place. Butler’s assertion that gender is performed leads her to make claims about what other types of behaviors are performed and how marginalized and voiceless groups create identity for themselves by exercising their “right to appear” as bodies in the street. That right to appear is a rhetorical and performative force according to Butler, one that has more power than we might think at first. Like Charland, Butler acknowledges the power of an ideological subject as it is created and reinforced through performance.

Butler builds from J. L. Austin’s linguistic theory of performativity which argues that words not only state things, but that in some instances, words actually do things. The most popular example of this force is when a man and woman say “I do” and are thenceforth wed. Austin states that “When I say before the registrar or altar ‘I do’, I am not reporting on a

marriage: I am indulging in it” (6). The force of these types of encounters is what Austin calls illocutionary, meaning that something has happened in saying something (106). Butler applies that theory to gender, arguing that gender is performed because it is enacted as words are spoken, clothes are chosen, and legal documents are signed (32). Moving Austin’s theory to a realm beyond spoken and written language, Butler raises interesting questions about what else can be interpreted as performative and how performative force functions in society.

Particularly in her work *Notes Toward a Performative Theory of Assembly*, Butler looks at the complexities of public gathering and the consequences of that gathering. Because the aesthetic artifact I will be examining deals directly with bodies gathered in the street, Butler’s work with assembly offers interesting insight into the ways that gathered bodies create a demand or message even if one is not explicitly written or spoken (25). When bodies gather in the street, they exercise their right to appear, creating a demand (even if it is unspoken). The response to these demands shows how the aesthetic moves into the rhetorical realm. Butler points out that once an explicit or implied demand is made, the change that is being demanded has to be supported by external entities, especially when those making the demands are asking for the conditions of a livable life (153). In the case of the Notre Dame crisis, I will argue that the identity constituted by the aesthetic performers does create a demand for acknowledgement of their loss of more than just a building. In creating a means of communicating with the body, Butler offers an explanation for how the aesthetic, in this case a gathering of bodies, can create rhetorical effect and a distinct message.

Taken together, Charland and Butler invite a consideration of the aesthetic because the rhetorical force of the aesthetic that comes from its constitutive qualities created through the same concept of performativity that Butler identifies in her conversation about gender norms. In

other words, aesthetic artifacts are effective because of the performative construction of identity amongst an audience. Charland's invitation to apply constitutive rhetoric to aesthetic artifacts and Butler's inclusion of "bodily acts" in the theory of performativity create a space to consider how the aesthetic functions and whether that function is rhetorically significant (29). Again, by removing the need for language, Butler opens the discussion to new, productive realms. These bodily acts according to Butler function to reinforce the spoken words that come to define norms; her primary example is gender of course, and she argues that the bodily acts that reinforce the spoken norms are just as performative as the spoken words (31). The case that Butler builds for the inclusion of these bodily acts in a consideration of the construction of norms prompts the question: how do non-conventional, in this case aesthetic, artifacts add to or reinforce rhetorical theory? One way that I argue that we see that happening is through the constitutive power of aesthetic rhetoric; the complementary ideas of performative force and constitutive rhetoric provide a new way to think about the aesthetic as rhetorically impactful.

Public Reactions to the Fires at Notre Dame

On the day of the fires at Notre Dame, an alarm went off in the Cathedral at 6:18 PM, alerting the guards on site that a sensor had detected smoke in the attic. After mistaking which area of the attic the fire started in, the guards called the fire department about 30 minutes after the initial warning (Peltier). The cause of the alarm turned out to be a fire that began to spread in the attic of the cathedral, also known as the forest, because it is made entirely of wood that dates back to as late as the Middle Ages (Nossiter 2019a).

About 20 minutes after the initial alarm and before the authorities were called, images and videos started appearing on social media; people posted panicked videos of what was at first a small stream of white smoke, but within another 20 minutes, the smoke had darkened, and the

flames were visible from the streets (Peltier). The streets quickly filled with tourists and Parisians, some crying. From those initial moments, images and videos spread across social media, alerting the world to the burning cathedral.

After nightfall, the crowds remained on the narrow streets and bridges that surround the cathedral. At an undetermined time, groups of these onlookers began singing in impromptu vigils. They sang traditional Catholic hymns in unison as they watched the cathedral burn, unsure if it would stand by morning. The vigils seemed to take place at various locations around the cathedral and were captured by fellow crowd members on cell phones. The people gathered were not organized formally or associated with a specific group. Many major news stations around the world shared the images and videos of these bystanders in their coverage of the fire, including CNN, ABC, DW, France 24, The Guardian, and CBS. The singing bystanders watched as firefighters fought until about 11:00 PM and then announced that the cathedral was structurally sound (Peltier).

The next evening, President Emmanuel Macron addressed the world in a televised address where he promised to rebuild the cathedral within five years. He also notably postponed his highly anticipated speech in response to months of violent protests by an informal group called the Yellow Vests (Nossiter 2019b). The postponement created a complex political situation that Macron had to address in his speech. The controversial Yellow Vest protests were a movement that started in the spring of 2018 in response to high tax rates. Most notably, the protests led to damage at the Arc de Triomphe, three deaths, and 260 injuries (Rubin). In response, Macron spent months meeting with citizens in what he called “The Great Debates,” essentially public forums where citizens were allowed to air their grievances with the president

directly. He was meant to give a speech on the night of the fire in response to these public forums but announced that the speech would be postponed due to the fires (Nossiter 2019b).

Within days of Macron's announcement that the cathedral would be rebuilt, \$845 million Euros had been donated to the project (Bredeen). The donations came most substantially from some of France's wealthiest families and companies, stoking the fire of income inequality that the Yellow Vest Protests had sparked (Alderman). The result was a complicated political situation that had people wondering how effective the president had been in his attempts to understand the people when on the same day that he was meant to address the concerns about income inequality, instead he incited the donation of millions of Euros to restore a piece of history that had nothing to do with the economic alienation felt by the French people.

The Three Benefits of the Aesthetic

Dual Role of Audience and Rhetor

The cell phone footage of the singers pans over large crowds of hundreds of people (see images 1 &2). The crowds depicted are made up of elderly people with white hair or none at all, young college aged students who are clumped together within the crowds as though they all came together to watch, and the middle aged, some carrying or tending to young children. Everyone wears warm jackets and long pants, some wear hats and gloves. Some people look as though they just came from work or school, not stopping to change or leave backpacks or briefcases at home. There are people from a variety of ethnic backgrounds; white European men and women make up the majority of the crowd, but there are numerous Asian and African people as well as other Caucasian people. The people are standing, kneeling, and sitting on the sides of what are usually busy streets in the heart of Paris. Many of them clasp their hands together or fold their arms in front of them. The crowds are lit by the lights of shops and streetlamps. It

seems to be very late at night. Most of the crowd is singing Catholic hymns in French, but some people just silently watch. Everyone in the crowd in every video keeps their eyes trained on the cathedral as it burns, as though they are waiting for it to collapse at any moment; they do not look around them at the people or their surroundings. Even the camera people are members of the crowd, not third-party observers. The faces of the people we see are side profiles, indicating that the people taking the videos are standing shoulder to shoulder with the subjects of their films.



Figure 1 Still from "Notre Dame: French pray in the streets while firemen tried to stop the fire" (0:44)



Figure 2 Still from "EXCLUSIVE: People praying and singing while Notre Dame cathedral is burning in Paris" (0:49)

Typically, such diverse crowds do not have very much in common between the various members. From a quick glance, that appears to be the case with the people who gathered as Notre Dame was burning. In such a politically and socially divided world, even the fact that

these large groups of people are singing traditional religious hymns publicly and unprompted is surprising. My reading of this situation, however, looks at the fact that these people gathered and then united in song as a sign that there was some common ground among them. Butler points out the relation between bodies who gather as having a shared need that demands coalition (135). In this case, that shared need is the need for acknowledgement of loss that creates a shared sense of identity that is possible because the crowd members are working as both rhetor and audience member simultaneously, a feature that I will argue is unique to aesthetic rhetoric.

Despite the differences in age, ethnicity, and levels of emotion in the crowd, the eye is drawn to the similarities of the group. Everyone in the crowd belongs to a new group, one that is defined by the collective watching and mourning even though there are obvious differences between each person. For example, by keeping their eyes trained exclusively on the cathedral, the members of the crowd seem to reassure each other that they are not there to judge or condemn their individual experiences, but that they are there to mourn a loss, no matter the weight or scope of that loss, together. Staring at the cathedral while singing in unison creates space for each individual to feel included but not emphasized. One man from the videos demonstrates what I mean here; as the people sing all around him, he stands on a small concrete barrier that lines the streets. He is filmed from the back, but his head is riveted toward the burning cathedral in the distance. Both of his hands are clasped behind his back and clutch his phone. His conscious choice to move away from the crowd and stand on a barricade reassures others standing by that he is there to see the cathedral, not them. He focuses so intently on the building, holding any distraction behind him both metaphorically and physically as he holds his phone away from him and behind his back (See image 1).



Image 4 Still from “Notre Dame: French Pray in the Street” (0:20)

The individuals are not creating an identity that is based on the other people around them the way that a speech would require an individual to build an identity based on the rhetor and their perception of the crowd. Instead, they are creating an identity that is rooted in the reason for the gathering, in this case mourning, instead of an individual rhetor. In terms of Black’s “Second Persona,” the aesthetic eliminates the distinction between “the man and the image” that is inherent in a conventional artifact (111). The result is that there is no need for a second persona at all. By looking beyond the people around them, the singers break convention by eliminating a clearly defined rhetor. There is room for each individual narrative because there is not one dominating narrative from a single rhetor; the narrative of the individual is assumed in the narrative of the group, fostering group identity. Looking at the subject of the gathering rather than a speaker gives the people in the crowd a more direct sense of common purpose; there is no

need to explain what each person is doing there or to get lost in the nuances of an argument.

Where sometimes people observe a speaker with the goal of assessing their message, in the case of the cathedral and the aesthetic response, there is no assessment or questioning of the artifact itself. The ability to let go of preconceived notions and prejudices in a crowd seems to come from the fact that there is not one individual speaking; because the group is communicating as a whole, their message depends on the strength of their numbers, motivating the individuals to let go of divisive biases in the name of mourning together. Charland argues that this ability to see a group of individuals as a whole is constructed through narrative, in this case, I argue the collective individual narratives, that though unspoken, are assumed amongst the group. He states:

It is within the formal structure of a narrative history that it is possible to conceive of a set of individuals as if they were but one. Thus the ‘struggles’ and ‘ordeals’ of settlers, as a set of individual acts and experiences, become identified with ‘community,’ a term that here masks or negates tensions and differences between members of any society. The community... is the master agent of a narratized history (140).

As each member of the community is subsumed into a single body, the rhetorical force of that moment becomes palpable. The implied narrative that the singers portrayed through their acts of public singing and mourning laid the foundation for everyone to feel as though they belong. That feature is unique to the aesthetic: in conventional oration the lines defining audience and rhetor are rigid.

The identity that they all create and adopt together is one of belonging in loss. They are mourners who have come to pay some homage to what was lost. Although no single story is emphasized or explained, the sense is that each person there has a connection or memory

associated with the cathedral. Those assumed connections—connections between people based on assumed narratives that depict some sort of relationship to the cathedral—are what constitute the identity of belonging. Because each member of the crowd is both creating an identity and adopting it at the same time, the lines defining performer and observer are blurred. That blurring creates a space where the individuals in the group can both contemplate and perform identity simultaneously. As that identity is established by the performing aspect of the individual, it is adopted by the observing aspect of the same individual. The spell that the rhetor usually must cast over their audience is being cast by the audience turned rhetor themselves. The result is a strong and assured sense of belonging that goes beyond what conventional rhetorical practices provide.

That belonging is reinforced by the fact that there is no spatial or authoritative division between the people who are merely watching the performance and those who are actually performing. The people recording the event are also participants and prompts thought about the ways that the people in the crowd see themselves. They are both singing and mourning while also adopting another role as they capture the video. It is clear from the quality of the footage (mostly captured on cell phones in poor lighting) that there are only self-proclaimed film makers, not premeditated producers. One man shows the kind of flexibility in roles and purpose that was afforded to the people in the crowd. He stands, again, on top of a cement pillar and holds his cellphone in one hand as he pans around looking at the crowds. His body is turned toward the cathedral, but his shoulders, hands, and head pivot, taking in all of the people as well as the cathedral. He is both spectator and recorder (“Notre Dame: French Pray in the Street” 0:26).

That flexibility in identity reinforces the idea that the crowd is accepting of any and all attempts to recognize and remember the cathedral. Those filming stand next to and among those

singing and those watching, and all have their eyes trained on the building. The priority is to mourn and to allow each individual an equal chance to do so; the result of that priority is a strong sense of belonging that each person constitutes for others and adopts themselves.

The power of this identity comes from the gathered bodies that articulate demands. Butler examines the demand for acknowledgment and belonging in these shared and personal memories. Her work shows us the power of gathered bodies in creating space for the individual to feel heard as they also listen to those around them. As a crowd comes together, even if they have no formal demands, there is a demand implicit in the gathering of the bodies (Butler 25-26). In this case, that implicit demand is an acknowledgment of loss. That acknowledgment comes as the story of the individual is swallowed up and defined in the performance of the crowd. As each person performs and observes simultaneously, there is an acknowledgment of the individual experience with Notre Dame and the tragedy of its loss that is translated into a collective tale through the gathering of multiple bodies. Despite the differences in age, ethnicity, religious affiliation, and experiences at Notre Dame among the individual members of the crowd, the collective acknowledgement of loss is felt through the aesthetic response. Whether you are coming to Notre Dame for the first time or if you grew up in its shadow, there is room for you to stand in the crowd of mourners who demand acknowledgment of their collective and individual loss.

The identity of belonging that is shared among the crowd is powerful because it transcends any other identity through the acknowledgment of the common yet personal experience of the individual. Despite being gathered in a crowd of strangers, similarities—not differences—are assumed. In the moment of the singing, every difference that could (and generally does) cause division is rendered irrelevant. That type of open connection to an

audience is powerful, but it only comes when the audience is also the rhetor. The feelings of belonging and the general acknowledgment of the loss of the crowd is what creates a safe enough space for a crowd to generally agree and assume a shared identity. Charland makes this point when he talks about the flexibility of the subject, in his case the “people,” in rhetoric: “Not only is the character or identity of the “people” open to rhetorical revision, but the very *boundary* of whom the term “people” includes and excludes is rhetorically constructed: as the “people” is variously characterized, the persons who make up the “people” can change” (136). The inclusion offered at Notre Dame is founded in an open definition of who can be included, as Charland argues is uniquely rhetorical.

The effect of the gathered bodies then is that the individual feels as though they belong because they are creating an identity for themselves as rhetors while adopting that identity at the same time as audience members. These simultaneous roles cannot be found in conventional rhetorical practices: can a formal speaker create an identity for herself and her audience while also adopting that identity while speaking? Looking at traditional audiences, that effect is impossible because the conventional rhetor cannot hope to consider and acknowledge each individual story while effectively conveying their own message. The priority has to go to the message and the perception of the audience that was assumed as the message was prepared. The constitutive effect of a group taking on the role of rhetor and audience simultaneously as happens in the videos of the singers at Notre Dame is a notable feature of the aesthetic because the identity that is created is powerful enough to transcend differences between individual members of the crowd.

Accurate Depiction of Audience as They Were

The day after the fires, French President Emmanuel Macron addressed the nation and the world in a televised speech that served as a response to the fire. The speech lasts just under six minutes. The central goals of the address are 1) to help the French people reckon with the national tragedy, 2) to offer an explanation for the cancelation of the highly anticipated speech after the national debates or public forums, and 3) to announce the French Government's intentions to rebuild the cathedral within five years. Macron begins by explaining what he experienced at the site of the fires the night before and thanking all of the people who were there helping and "giving what they could."¹ He then proceeds to reflect on the history of France and connects that history to the present, saying, "The fire at Notre Dame reminds us of our history, of our history which will never stop which never stops." He reminds the French citizens of their "duty" to rebuild the cathedral and to protect the life that is found in the historical artifacts of France. He excuses the government and himself from the anticipated speeches that were to follow the great debates, saying that "now is not the time for politicking." He concludes the speech by stating that the French people, like their ancestors, will rebuild the cathedral within five years. He follows that announcement with an acknowledgment that this work will be easier said than done, implying that he does not make that promise lightly.

On the surface, the speech follows a very basic structure and seems successful. Macron attempts to unite the people who are feeling a sense of despondency after a massive loss. His tone is solemn as he comes to the people humbly to try and speak to what they might be feeling while also inspiring a sense of hope and belonging. In many ways, one could argue that his speech is effective; it meets conventions and effectively delivers a message. Considering the dual

¹ The original speech was delivered in French. This translation comes from a news broadcast by France 24 that translated the speech into English.

roles of the singers as audience and rhetor, however, shows a weakness of Macron's speech: his speech cannot include the experiences of every member of his audience. The limits of a conventional approach mean that the audience that is defined at the time the speech is prepared is all that can be construed and the rhetor must hope that the audience identifies with the implied version of themselves. Although his speech is conventionally effective, I argue here that the ideological subject and narrative articulated by the singers is more effective in constituting an identity that is easy to adopt because the aesthetic is inclusive. Charland makes it clear that "subjects within a narrative are not free," something that the subjects in Macron's narrative demonstrate. The aesthetic subjects, however, are more agentic in their narratives because they are not constrained by a destined ending. Where Macron's subjects are inflexible portrayals of people as they may or may not be, the singers are free to include and move the narrative anywhere they want. A comparison of the two approaches will help make this clear.

Macron and the singers' perspectives seem to align when Macron calls the French people to consider that each and every thing that was built by the people of the past is living. He says, "Everything that makes up France from a material or spiritual point of view is alive and therefore fragile. We mustn't forget that" ("REPLAY-"). Speaking of Notre Dame as something that has a life of its own seems to mirror the feelings that the singers are trying to articulate in their prayers and songs. Considering the sanctity of the life of the cathedral and the significance to French culture, Macron gives voice to the magnitude of the loss that people are feeling.

Although Macron acknowledges the depth of the loss that the people are feeling, the ideological subject and narrative structure that he imposes on those feelings is where he becomes disconnected from the goals of the singers. The ideological subject that Macron emphasized so strongly is a patriotic sense of duty that each French citizen has in rebuilding the cathedral. He

says directly, “it is up to us the French citizens of today who have the responsibility to ensure the continuity of the French nation and that is why I wanted to speak to you directly. Because it is our duty today and that is the duty we must bear in mind” (“REPLAY-”). He defines this duty in terms of a national project more explicitly later, saying, “It is our duty to find the thread recover the thread of our national plan of our national project which brings us together. A human project. A passionately French project” (“REPLAY-”). These implications of national duty are meant to help the audience identify themselves as agents of the country who will do whatever it takes to rebuild the cathedral because the cathedral is a symbol of the country.

In referencing the national project and considering the cathedral as a French project, Macron really alludes to a sense of administration and bureaucratic duty. The problem with the invitation to engage in this project is that it neglects the reality of the feelings of the people who are experiencing the loss of life that he has just described. The word “project” is particularly concerning; healing from the loss of a life as he qualified the loss of the cathedral as is not something that can be addressed as a project. That term and the implications oversimplify the weight of loss and the complexity of the human psyche. Macron tries to assure his audience that he is not trying to oversimplify what rebuilding the cathedral will entail, saying, “the pressures and impatience that we have to announce everything and take action at every minute of the day as if being at the head of the country means administering things without being aware of history and the time factor” (“REPLAY-”). Despite those efforts, however, his swift move into “project” planning shows a level of naivety in understanding the way that people are reacting to the loss of the cathedral.

Macron furthers the gap between himself and his audience when he tries to solidify this ideological lens of duty by imposing a narrative on his audience of the French people as

“rebuilders.” Macron references the people as builders and rebuilders throughout the speech, saying, “During our history we have built towns and cities, ports, churches. Many have been burnt down or destroyed by wars, revolutions, and every time we rebuilt those towns and cities” and “And I say so this evening with strength: we are this people, the builders, a people of builders. We have so much to rebuild. So, we will rebuild Notre Dame cathedral.” The description of the history of the people as builders and the implication that they then will rebuild gives a sense of action and narrative to the ideological plea for patriotism. If the people are patriotic, then they will take up the same cross that all French citizens have throughout time: the duty to build and rebuild. In this way, the people are protecting their history and their fellowperson. This narrative, however, forces audience members to engage in the “project” of rebuilding or to be considered unpatriotic. Because the narrative constrains the people as builders, anyone who is not ready to move past the tragedy and pick up a hammer could be considered a failure. The sense of duty that Macron imposes on his audience represents the constrained narrative character that Charland points out. The freer the agent is, however, the easier he or she will be to identify with.

As Macron’s implied audience represents characters constrained by the narrative, the singers on the streets and bridges represent free agents. Without the constraints of conventions, the aesthetic response creates a space that does not rely on a call to action. This is demonstrated by the song choice of the group; the singers sing Catholic prayers and hymns, including “Ave Maria,” “The Salve Regina,” and “Da Pace, Domine.” The traditional Catholic hymns offer insight into the ideologies that are at play in the construction of themselves as agentic subjects.

The traditional prayer “Ave Maria” asks the Virgin Mary repeatedly to “pray for us sinners now/ and at the hour of our death.” Similarly, “The Salve Regina” pleads for mercy

saying, “To thee do we cry,/ poor banished children of Eve./ To you we sigh, mourning and weeping/ in this valley of tears.” Finally, in “Da Pace, Domine,” patrons ask, “Grant us peace, O/ Lord, in our days/ For there is none other/ Who will fight for us/ Save but You, Our God.” The dependence and desperation with which these people pray to Mary and God shows a vulnerability among them. The images of people doing what the songs imply—crying, sighing, and begging for peace—in the context of the burning cathedral are compelling because they evoke a sense of powerlessness to the will of God. As the singers fall to their knees, look up to the cathedral, and cry, the lyrics of these songs and the desperation that they display become potent. From these images and lyrics, it is easy to see how deep in mourning the people were in the wake of the fire. The sense of a loss of life that Macron points out is seen in the actions of the singers. The difference, however, is in the fact that the singers do not feel a need to push themselves past that acknowledgment because of rhetorical conventions that demand a call to action and specified thesis. Again, as Butler points out, there does not need to be an implicit demand amongst gathered bodies to create an impact of some kind.

The public singing of hymns with intense ideological implications is a surprising example of how the singers acted as free subjects. For the most part in our secular world, discussions about God and religion do not take place on the streets, and such a public demonstration of faith is usually reserved for holidays. Thus, the outpouring of emotion and devotion is a great example of the agentic subject that is unique to the aesthetic: Despite the fact that people might reject the singers because of the religious nature of the songs, the singers sing. The choice to prioritize their own narratives over one that might better conform to societal norms and conventional rhetorical approaches represents the people as agents, which Charland says is something that

narratives generally cannot do. The advantage of the aesthetic then is the agentic narrative subject that can create a more inclusive identity—in this case one of belonging.

While Macron's speech is a conventionally successful attempt to unite the French people under a common purpose, the songs of the bystanders on the streets offer a different perspective as agents of their own narrative. The narrative of belonging that Macron attempts to incite through a united "project" as a duty to the people of the past is less effective than the songs of the bystanders on the bridges. That effectiveness is quantified in the international news coverage that the singers received. As mentioned previously, most major U.S. networks covered the story of the singers and offered analyses of what the singers might mean. One CNN report plays the singing continually in the background as they receive updates; at one point the anchor stops the reports and invites viewers to listen to the singing as they watch footage of the burning cathedral. That moment of listening is followed by an analysis by an international correspondent who argues that despite not losing human life, the tragedy at the cathedral is evoking a strong sense of mourning amongst the French and people all over the world. The journalist explains the cultural relevance of the tragedy alongside clips of the singing for about ten minutes on air, a considerable amount of time for a story on the nightly news ("Hear Crowds Sing Hymns Outside of Notre Dame"). Macron's speech received comparatively little coverage from this same network, with only brief summaries being written about his remarks in live updates (Ries). The majority of the articles simply emphasize his promise to rebuild the cathedral, neglecting the rest of the speech that did speak to the cultural significance of the building.

Looking at the reactions to Macron's "project" proposal in the days following the announcement offers a second way to evaluate the effectiveness of the speech; French citizens who had been paying close attention to the Yellow Vest Movement for months were distraught

when within days millions of euros had been raised by some of France's wealthiest families and organizations to rebuild the cathedral. The people were outraged knowing that these families and the wealthy in France were willing to support the rebuilding of a cathedral in the name of French duty and patriotism but were not willing to negotiate living standards for the middle and lower classes. It did not help that the President had just spent months in direct conversation with the people and still could not seem to recognize that the narrative he was imposing was in some ways neglecting the outspoken needs of so many citizens.

The conventions of a public political address demand some sort of call to action or proposal for the future, something that the people are not yet ready to consider, especially in the context of the narrative that Macron forces upon them. The singers, however, are well received despite the fact that they sing Catholic hymns exclusively; the agentic singers are able to use the songs in a new and effective way for the context that they are in. Not constrained by genre and social conventions, the singers are able to create a narrative that is driven by their own agenda: evoking a sense of mourning and belonging. It makes a lot of sense that Macron's speech would have to neglect such an angle. For the same reason that it is surprising that a group of people openly were singing Catholic hymns in public, it would be inappropriate for a political figure to bring a higher power into a formal televised address. And yet, that is exactly what the singers do as they commune through song that is traditionally prayer. The aesthetic offers a space for an identity to emerge that is not constrained by political narratives. That narrative of belonging—the same one that Macron emphasizes—is much more effective in the hands of the singers because of the agency over narrative that the aesthetic allows.

Suspension of Aesthetic Judgments

One reaction to the singers, despite their attempts to foster an identity of belonging is to see the individual acts as inappropriate or overly theatrical for a public setting. While this response might seem typical in a conventional speech, the aesthetic creates a space free of these judgments. For example, there is one woman featured in the videos who makes her face look very sad. At one point she slowly lifts her head and opens her eyes and then looks past the camera and then lowers her head and closes her eyes again (See images 2&3).



Image 5 Still from "Notre Dame Fire: Parisians, tourists sing d pray for Cathedral" (0:27)



Image 6 Still from "Notre Dame Fire: Parisians, tourists sing d pray for Cathedral" (0:30)

The initial reaction I have to the woman is that what she did should be done in private, as though her mourning did not belong on the street. There is another man who looks directly at the camera and then quickly looks away, as though he feels exposed in the moment that he turns around and senses someone witnessing his mourning. Again, the feeling is that what is happening amongst the individuals is something that should not be happening in public.

These observations offer an explanation for why and how the aesthetic is more effective in constituting an identity that the people can adopt. The singers create a space where aesthetic judgment (Nanay 46-48) can be suspended, allowing the audience to see the moment as more than a “mere means” to a point or agenda (Stroud 41). The suspension of aesthetic judgment is a result of the dual identity of the subjects as audience and performers and the subsequent identification as a part of the whole and an individual. The primary feature of that suspension then is the fact that the group works in an aesthetic medium that is not entirely dependent on a language to send a direct message. Instead, the singers rely on hymns that are only meaningful because they were accessible in the moment. Butler reaffirms the value and power of that space in her discussion of upsetting norms being the power of the right to appear (38). In this case, the disrupted norm is public grieving. By using aesthetic means to grieve in public, the people assert their need for acknowledgment of loss, constituting a new coalitional and collective rhetorical response. Looking again at Macron and the conventional political response to tragedy through a televised speech, it becomes clear that the direct messaging that came through in his speech is absent in the aesthetic response of the singers.

Macron’s reliance on language created the problems that Butler discusses in *Bodies that Matter*. There she reminds readers that the nature of language requires that something is only identified with when something else is rejected. Something is one thing because it is not

something else. This system is inherent to language but very difficult because it creates a space that feeds on discrimination. I would add that it creates a space where constituted identities are limited by the rhetor's definitions and language. What I am suggesting is that the moment of an aesthetic encounter is able to overcome these linguistic problems by suspending the dependence on language to construct reality. Although the absence of language might seem to exclude what I am describing from being considered performative in Austinian terms, the moment of suspension changes the recognition of self that the whole performative act pivots on. The aesthetic encounter—by removing language from the moment of the encounter—eliminates the need for the function of language that creates these in and out groups.

Scott Stroud discusses an example of the suspension that I am considering here in his analysis of John Dewey's *Art as an Experience*. In the example from Dewey that Stroud analyzes three strangers stand on the deck of a ferry boat as they ride into New York City. The first passenger looks at all the different buildings in the skyline individually, naming them as they pass by and then moving onto the next. The second passenger is anxious to be at work, so he sees the trip as a nuisance, something that he is eager to be done with. The third passenger takes in the lighting of the city scape, all of the buildings, and the river and sky in one breathtaking image which creates a truly aesthetic experience; he gives attention to every detail of the moment while attending to the experience of seeing it all at once (41). Stroud points out that Dewey used this example to explain one of the most important considerations for aesthetic encounters: avoiding an attitude of "mere means."

The idea is that when we, like the second passenger, look at our present experience as an obstacle to what we hope to be doing in the near future, then the aesthetic value of that moment is lost, and the rhetorical effect along with it. The third passenger, unlike the first and second was

able to avoid this attitude of mere means and suspend his judgments of what was around him. While the other two passengers were concerned about the immediate things in front of them—the names of the buildings, the time, where they would be a few moments later—the third passenger was able to disregard all of that context to see everything as it was in that moment as a whole. This disregard of context that is a natural and subconscious effect of an aesthetic encounter is what allows the exclusive qualities of language to be suspended, creating a richer constituted identity for an audience to adopt; the moment on the ferry is the only moment that matters to the third passenger. It is not defined or constructed by previous moments or influenced by thinking of being off the ship. The moment is not a “mere means” to another. In that moment, there is a removal of the self that sees everything as one entity, not divided or defined by other entities.

The same logic that Stroud applies to Dewey’s example can explain the effectiveness and the insights that we gain from the singers. As has already been pointed out, the singers demonstrate a sense of solidarity while also respecting the experience of the individual in the way that they look exclusively toward the cathedral and in the inclusivity of the group. The strong emotions coming from each of the singers are further evidence of the suspension of judgment; people cry openly, kneel on the ground, clutch a rosary, pray, and cross their arms solemnly, indicating how much emotion is flowing through the scene. Many of these emotions would typically be considered inappropriate or taboo to display in the streets among large groups of people; however, in the moment, the judgment that would usually condemn the people for their actions is completely let go. Emotion is allowed in the context of the singing because the language that would determine what is appropriate and what is not is excluded.

A close reading of the video footage makes the point. The woman who looks dramatically at the camera and the man who makes eye contact with the camera seem to be

mourning dramatically and in ways that may come across as inauthentic in and of themselves. But, taken as a whole—in the way that Stroud ensures us will lead to an aesthetic response—the individual doesn't seem to be as significant because they are just one piece of a whole. As an outsider to the event and the aesthetic moment, it is easy to judge the aesthetic in terms of language and what is and is not appropriate. But in the moment of the aesthetic, those linguistic and societal judgments are let go. There are a lot of people feeling emotions that would normally be considered inappropriate for public display, but they have a space to work through those feelings as a body in the street. Because we take the group as a whole, the individual experience is validated, constituting an identity of belonging.

Conclusion

The people who gathered and joined in song on the streets surrounding Notre Dame were not necessarily attempting to demand or communicate a specific call to action through their actions. However, their aesthetic response to the fires created an identity and message amongst the group that was recognized by international audiences. Charland shows us that such an identity is not only difficult to construct, but also is not guaranteed to be accepted, yet these singers were able to successfully constitute a group identity and accept it at the same time without any rehearsal or premeditation. As I have argued, such a powerful benefit to the aesthetic cannot be ignored.

Looking at the aesthetic response to an exigency creates an opportunity to deepen our understanding of rhetorical theory and possibility. The effectiveness of the identity that was constituted by the singers was impressive and was made possible by the unique attributes of the aesthetic, namely the ability for an auditor to exist as auditor and rhetor simultaneously, the creation of an identity that was inclusive of the people as they were, and the suspension of

judgment that language generally demands. Taken together, these contributions demonstrate the ways that consideration of the aesthetic can broaden rhetorical understanding – specifically, by showing how unconventional artifacts and responses can create powerful rhetorical effect that offer additional means of persuasion to rhetors and greater insight to rhetorical scholars.

Looking forward, aesthetic considerations could be considered in fields where there are fewer conventional artifacts and a surplus of aesthetic artifacts. For example, the work of black feminist scholars and activists has a uniquely aesthetic approach because the means of creating knowledge have been limited by gate keepers and oppressors or systems of oppression in the past. “Personal disclosures” and other aesthetic artifacts take center stage in a field that by necessity values personal experience more than the conventions of genre (Comfort). Other fields where rhetorical analysis founded in aesthetics might enhance conversation might be the environmental humanities. In the effort to integrate scientific findings into cultural conversations and values, aesthetic artifacts and responses have been used to both express and to respond the systemic problems that have led to climate disaster, for example, the work of Kathy Jetnil-Kijiner, a Marshallese Islander poet and climate activist has used poetry and photography to build foundations “dedicated to empowering Marshallese youth to seek solutions to climate change and other environmental impacts threatening their home island” (“Kathy Jetnil-Kijiner: About”). Using aesthetics as a reaction to a crisis, Jetnil-Kijiner epitomizes the ways that aesthetics are being used in rhetorical capacities that go beyond the literary or artistic realm alone.

The flexibility afforded to an aesthetic response in creating rhetorical effect is something that hasn’t been acknowledged in the past. My argument has been that looking specifically at the constitutive effects of the aesthetic response makes a compelling case for considering the

aesthetic response to certain exigencies. Broadening the type of artifacts that are examined in rhetorical theory opens the door for new interpretations to theory and deeper understanding of a rhetorical situation. The examples that I have offered make this point clear

The aesthetic response to the fires at Notre Dame demonstrate the added insight that an analysis of aesthetic artifacts adds to conventional rhetoric. The ability to constitute identity so effectively makes a strong argument for the consideration of the aesthetic; my hope is that with further research and application, a full theory of rhetorical aesthetics will be developed. Such a theory can expand and deepen our understanding of rhetoric by including artifacts that usually go unconsidered. Additionally, a theory that considers aesthetic artifacts makes a case for the arts in a pragmatic sense by acknowledging the power of creative expression.

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