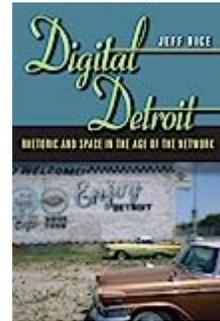


H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences



Jeff Rice. *Digital Detroit: Rhetoric and Space in the Age of the Network.* Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2012. 264 pp. \$39.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8093-3087-4.



Reviewed by Eric Hall (Clemson University)

Published on H-DigiRhet (April, 2013)

Commissioned by Douglas A. Eyman (George Mason University)

Jeff Rice opens up for us a new map of Detroit, a digital, virtual Detroit invested with a new sense of itself in the network age where the established topoi of the city's historic prosperity, its current economic decline, and its now commonplace rhetoric of renewal reconvene outside of their usual place in a network space wherein these common narratives of Detroit are reassembled into new meanings for and in the digital age. Rice does not model this rhetorical reassembly line after the Detroit-based model with which we are already familiar. Instead, he takes up as his method the apparatus of the network, the mapping of various, nonstable meanings present in the virtual "Detroit" perceived with the concept of the "network," a concept that Rice attributes to Bruno Latour, specifically.

To call Detroit a network is to call it an account, not a fixed representation of space. It is to simultaneously call it the physical locale we have always known to be Detroit, but it is also to call this space something else," writes Rice. This Detroit-as-network is, for Rice, an account of situations that ultimately give rise to a "project about invention" (p. 6). A project about invention and a product of invention, *Digital Detroit* is as much about rhetorical invention in virtual reality as it is about the actual city Detroit, since in the network of space with-

out permanence or stability, rhetorical invention is also at stake along with our existing readings of space and place.

Rice's proposal for a new map of Detroit is a proposal for a reconsideration of what it means to create in situations that disturb and redistribute our preconceived notions of space and rhetorical topoi. Not only does Rice make this proposal, but he also acts upon it. *Digital Detroit* makes an argument for a rhetoric of digital space and a creation of that rhetoric. The book proposes a method of the network as well as performs the method of the network.

In supporting his choice of the network and its inexhaustible potential for making meaningful connections in the digital space of Detroit, Rice appeals to a number of French theorists, such as Latour, Michel de Certeau, and Roland Barthes. The prominence of French theory in *Digital Detroit* can hardly go unnoticed. Rice adeptly points out how each of these theorists contribute to our understanding of what it means to make connections among a jumbled series of signs in Detroit's digital database of meanings. Rice appeals to de Certeau's city walking to situate his own relation to the situations encountered on a virtual walk through the recognizable yet unfamiliar

digital city of Detroit. He appeals to Barthes's stress on the importance of pleasure in organizing the information to be networked. And of course, Rice appeals to Latour most of all for his understanding of the network, the concept that brings together all the walking destinations of Rice's digital Detroit, the pleasures and personal experiences of a situational Detroit, and every other "something else" that exists in database space of a city that resists our attempts at familiarization almost successfully.

However, it is not just French theorists that make contributions to Rice's work. One cannot help but think of Greg Ulmer's writing, perhaps *Electronic Monuments* (2005) and *Heuretics: The Logic of Invention* (1994) most specifically, when reading *Digital Detroit*, and indeed Rice acknowledges his influence. Such scholars as Marshall McLuhan, N. Katherine Hayles, and Lloyd F. Bitzer also make up Rice's rhetorical database in which he makes connections with Detroit.

But this is a book built with the logic of chora, so we can hardly expect Rice's intentional space to consist only of scholarly resources. In keeping with the tenor of such writings as Ulmer's, Rice allows a variety of pop culture "theorists" into the mix, including Internet bloggers, Bob Dylan, Jack White, and Eminem, among others, in order to create the networked Detroit that surprises us with its freshness and wealth of unstable yet undeniable meanings. With this amalgam of materials in the form of a database ready to be mapped as a network, Rice presents anything but "an expected reading of the city, but instead offer[s] something else, something that isn't entirely expected, nor completely absurd; something that is networked" (p. 11).

Not disappointing our expectation for the unexpected, Rice opens his first chapter, "Networks, Place, and Rhetoric," with an anecdote from a *Saturday Night Live* sketch from which he leads into a discussion of his chief apparatus for plying the network of Detroit, the all but ubiquitous network navigation system, Google Maps. Rice argues that like Google Maps, which allows users to explore a city in an endless series of possible routes due to its foundation in the database, which holds not the combinations that make up physical Detroit but the virtual information components that make up the digital Detroit, he is going to piece together Detroit data.

Rice then begins to map out the centerpiece of his version of the networked Detroit in the historic, iconic Woodward Avenue. It is important to note here that it is not Rice's intention to take critical aim at either the nostalgic narratives concerning Detroit's past or the hope-

ful, even if naïve narratives of economic renewal that often center around such landmarks as Woodward Avenue. While he does call attention to the prevalence and even the banality of these narratives, namely, "Tech-Town," he clearly does not agree that these rhetorics are helpful to Detroit in that they are built around the commonplace readings of Detroit. He shows why they must remain in our frame of consideration if we are to actually work out a rhetoric of network Detroit which improves and helpfully complicates our understanding of what Detroit means in all its proper narratives and improper sub-narratives. It is these narratives, no matter how proper or improper, that Rice navigates in connection with Woodward Avenue, and in doing so gives us not only a fascinating and unique view of a networked Detroit outside of "place," but also an inspiring example for how to rhetorically and communally navigate through the topoi of a city or situation as digital database. The result is a whole host of new meanings for Detroit via Woodward Avenue concocted with the familiar rhetorical destinations of the Model-T, labor migrations, and race riots, but also the unusual relationship of Dylan's rock 'n' roll folk music to the city of Detroit.

Calling on Dylan as temporary theorist, Rice inflects his network navigation method to reflect the form of folksonomy, "a method of categorizing information according to desire, taste, personal interest, communal knowledge, information, and so on" to get our readings of Detroit away from the textbooks by "plugging in" to the familiar and strange alike (p. 87). The result is a kind of pedagogy that Rice proposes against the typical Ramist approach of topoi-based writing assignments. Rice's method is the folksono(me) where opposed to Petrus Ramus's method the writer "surfs through a variety of meanings in order to demonstrate an image, a point, a place," emphasizing the personal, self-invested meanings as we commonly experience in the web space of the network (p. 91). Folksono(me) is yet another unexpected, revealing way of seeing the digital Detroit.

The following chapter, "The Maccabees," is an attempt to write the network of the "affective interface" of the infamous home to Detroit's department of education, the Maccabees Building. Since this building has personal significance for Rice, just like with Woodward Avenue, he uses folksonomy to weave in the various historical narratives regarding the "Maccabees," ranging from the actual building's current state of decay to the leaders of the ancient Jewish revolt against the Seleucid Empire. However, perhaps more significant for this chapter is Rice's navigation of architectural space as inter-

face. Rice is concerned not so much with physical buildings, but with *buildings building buildings*, which challenges the stable Aristotelian model of perceiving buildings according to their use by conducting a folksonomic drift across all the uses of a building simultaneously. The *building* constructs a virtual space which Rice explores as an interface for a network of meanings. The *Macabees* for Rice takes on rhetoric of *spacially based info tech* that helps us understand the grammar of the virtual network and its possibilities for meaning (p. 119). Rice shows us how this rhetoric of technological interface works and points to a theory of invention for the rhetorical, technological info-space—a new mapping and a new method disturbing the crumbling Aristotelian logic of ordered space as *topoi*. The pressures on the Aristotelian reading of building space in the digital age are such that a new way of reading the special interface is required along with a new way of teaching in and through these interfaces, and Rice provides both method and example for doing so.

In the next chapter, *The Michigan Central Train Station*, Rice attempts to create a composite of the previous chapters by looking at responses to the state of Detroit in the digital sphere. Without much pause, Rice relates the photographic narratives of Detroit's dilapidation across the web to the need to reinvent ways of photographing the digital Detroit, understanding photography not as an art of taking but as an art of making. It is the nature of photography to make its own rhetorical argument about space, and not just translate, that makes photography a powerful method for exploring special potential. Rice brings forth the question of special potential in the formerly grand building of the Michigan Central Station (MCS). The city of Detroit in both its physical, civic capacities and its digital realm, as Rice shows us, has been trying to come up with a solution for the vacant space of the MCS. The photographs of the MCS's iconic dereliction have overwhelmingly provided the exigency to which Detroit city planners and bloggers are trying to respond, and like these rhetoricians of space, Rice also attempts to do something with the empty space of the MCS. However, Rice's intention is not only to rehearse the rhetoric of Detroit's ironic failure in one of the greatest symbols of its transportation legacy but also to utilize the vacancy as a place for discovering an exigency that will help Detroit fill the space rhetorically. The answer may not be in the singular, such as turning the station into offices, but rather in multitude of responses that stretch our abilities to be creative members in digital space. Rice ultimately wants to place the MCS into what he calls the cre-

ative economy by acknowledging the space's potential from an electronic perspective—continuing the project already begun by the digital Detroit. Part of this digital Detroit is the handful of films that have been filmed at the MCS, each of which renews the space in its own way. By connecting these responses to the vacant space, and by reading the various *punctums*, to recall Barthes on photography, that come with the filmic renewing of the MCS, Rice finds a method for networking responses to Detroit's state, which allow us to enter those data points into the database of the creating network. Detroit may not be renewed in its physicality, but in its digitality, and Rice is only spurring on this active creativity in rhetorical remapping for the *new media writing space* [which] brings new types of features into relationship with existing features of writing (p. 177).

The final chapter, *8 Mile*, is not a resolution. Instead, this chapter is for Rice a promise for something other than progress in the digital Detroit. Just as in the physical Detroit, in the digital Detroit, *8 Mile* connects with the chapter *Woodward Avenue* where the question of decision is put to the organizing concept of the network. Here Rice is concerned with *choice and decision making in the network*, which precludes any sort of resolution in its limitless possibilities for navigation (p. 185). Navigation comes back to the fore in this chapter, but in a problematic way since it becomes the rhetorician of digital space to consider where one is going to make connections in the first place. Decisions are acts of organization in terms of the network. Whereas with *Woodward Avenue* the folksonome acted as a method for organization, *8 Mile* presents a different challenge. The road is by no means a singular symbol of either Detroit's prosperity or its decline but rather an unstable site oscillating in meanings, such as the gangster culture of *50 Cent* and *Eminem's* rap music, which is situated in the graffiti and decay as well as the typical narratives of economic redevelopment of the decayed road. For Detroit, *8 Mile Road* acts as a dividing line racially as well as morally. *8 Mile* acts as an *imagined border* for Detroit that possesses explosive and *hyperbolic meanings* which resist resolution in the network (pp. 185, 190). Rice shows us that a method for navigating *8 Mile* in all its racial, economic, and cultural explosiveness is found not in the rhetoric of progress so endemic in discourse about Detroit but in the rhetoric of *good enough*: *Good-enough moments appear when various elements networked within a decision are not common and when they do not necessarily point to rational outcomes* (p. 206).

While this may seem dissatisfying for a book that promises the makings of a creative digital Detroit, it is in fact in keeping with Rice's method of invention, which is based so much on the idea of the database and idea that rhetorical invention in the digital age is one relationships and connections not status, the outcomes of which are never certain or could ever be subjected to the standard of progress, which for Rice is an outmoded estimation in the first place. The goal is not progress but satisfaction. *8 Mile*, then, is Rice's "navigational device" with which he builds connections between the musical Detroit, a lost magazine, and Eminem's film *8 Mile* (2002) to show us how new media effects decision making as the ability to navigate the network as well as how it reroutes our expectations away from "progress" to the exploration of promise held in the plentiful but unfamiliar digital space of Detroit.

Digital Detroit does not resolve its stance on the cur-

rent standing or the future of Detroit, or even its own rhetorical method. Instead, the book is a promise for Detroit in the new rhetorical practice of the network in the digital age. The promise comes in a rhetoric of "allowing spatial meanings to avoid the total theory or grand narrative gesture (Detroit is in ruins/Detroit is about to be rejuvenated)" (p. 225). Rice's method is "not a doctrine of rhetorical practice I propose, but a rhetorical model conducive for electronic culture," and therefore is able to lend its flexible strength to fostering creative thinking and meaning making for a digital Detroit (p. 14). One could almost say that from Rice's perspective Detroit is lost in the virtual world of connections, but not forever lost. *Digital Detroit* ends with a sense of closure that leaves us thinking that the Rice tour of Detroit for the digital tourist was a good one, and not just a good one, but a tour "good enough" for Detroit and more than good enough as a heuristic model for us residents of the digital rhetorical network.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-digirhet>

Citation: Eric Hall. Review of Jeff Rice, *Digital Detroit: Rhetoric and Space in the Age of the Network*. H-DigiRhet, H-Net Reviews. April, 2013.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=36610>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.