Ancient Rhetorics and Digital Networks ed. by Michele Kennerly and Damien Smith Pfister (review)

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BOOK REVIEW

Ancient Rhetorics and Digital Networks. Edited by Michele Kennerly and
Damien Smith Pfister. Tuscaloosa, AL. The University of Alabama
Press, 2018; pp. xiii + 310. $39.95 paper; $39.95 ebook.

Many of us who write about rhetoric are prone, by training, to
make what is literally a "classic" move. This involves citing
some person or term from antiquity, a timeless name and itali-
cized word—Isocrates and *arête*, for example—in the course of an argu-
ment about how rhetoric works today, approximately 2500 years later.
Michele Kennerly and Damien Smith Pfister, the savvy editors of a strong
new collection called *Ancient Rhetorics and Digital Networks*, know this
move well enough to address it in their opening gambit: "What," they ask,
"can ancient rhetorics possibly tell us about new digital media technologies
in contemporary public culture?" (1). The answer, it turns out, is quite a
lot.

The collection includes eleven essays by a range of successful and well-
chosen scholars. There are plenty of names you are likely to know here,
and everyone else earns the distinction of being someone you should.
Topics include historical tropes of "network" (Mifsud); the cultural speci-
ficity of "tactical media" (Lyon); discourses of "big data" (Hartelius); the
affectivity of visual culture (Crick); the metaphor of "viral media"
(Gilbert); the multiplicity of online identity (Eberly and Johnson); virtual
reality as immersion (Haskins and Hubbell); the growth of "genre-talk"
(Miller); the genealogy of memes (Kennerly and Pfister); remix and voice
(Church); and online shaming (Stroud). These, of course, are radically con-
densed distillations of disparate and complex projects that draw upon a
range of ancient sources (Greco-Roman and otherwise) to produce insight-
ful scholarship able to teach us about digital culture and ancient rhetoric
alike. At times, in their effort to fulfill the marriage of ancient rhetorical
theory and digital culture that the collection proposes, the essays could be

more explicit about the locus of their contribution: is this telling us some-
thing we did not know about antiquity or something we did not know
about our digital world today? At their best—and, fortunately, for readers,
usually—the answer is both.

The same smart, careful, and illuminating qualities that characterize the
scholarship that Kennerly and Pfister produce on their own are every bit as
evident in the work they have done together as editors and contributors.
Aware of the pitfalls posed by evoking the ancients as if doing so alone
were some kind of argumentative mic-drop, they introduce their project by
suggesting five ways that exploring the relationship between ancient rheto-
ric and digital networks might be generative. First, an "antecedent relation"
shows us that today's digital communication has a precedent linked to an-
tiquity. Second, an "analogical relation" underscores that, although the
media technologies and communicative practices of contemporary life
may seem new and unprecedented, there are analogous practices and tech-
nologies that people have been using and grappling with for millennia.
Third, the "heuristic relation" draws out the ways that insights from an-
cient rhetorical theory in particular can be useful for understanding digital
communication. Fourth, the "convention relation" offers a guide for con-
duct in digital culture today based on what we can learn from conduct in
cultures from the past. Fifth, a "renewal relation" reminds us of a deep con-
nection in communicative norms that links antiquity to today such that
things are, in many ways, the same, yet also marked by a difference.

All eleven of the essays in *Ancient Rhetorics and Digital Networks* mobi-
lize one of these relations (although often implicitly) to contribute to a col-
lection that makes good on its ambition. Kennerly and Pfister's goal, as
they describe it, "was to produce a volume that establishes the range of
insights possible through engagement with ancient rhetorical theory" (14).
The book certainly succeeds at this, or at least at showing a rich and gener-
ative segment of the larger range of insights that ancient rhetorical theory
makes possible *vis-à-vis* the digital. Kennerly and Pfister, however, also
frame their intention for the book in a secondary way, writing that "the
volume also responds to the turn to comparative rhetorics" (14). Here, the
collection is less successful. To be sure, the essays that draw on non-
Western traditions—Scott Stroud's (Jainism), Scott Haden Church's
(Buddhism), and Arabella Lyon's (Confucianism)—are quite compelling.
Perspectives from such traditions have much to contribute to our ways of

understanding the digital contexts of contemporary life; furthermore, such traditions are particularly important to acknowledge and take seriously at a time when digital networks have brought geographically distant and philosophically unique cultures together. But the nod to non-Western or, more specifically, to non-Greco-Roman traditions feels, as Aristotle might say, more like one of the collection's "accidents" than its "substance"—witness the "classic" move in action!

It turns out that there is another, newer move that those of us interested in contemporary media studies are also sometimes prone to make. It involves falling back on synecdoche to describe a host of phenomena, technologies, processes, materialities, and techniques under a single term. "The digital" is one of them. As Tarleton Gillespie has pointed out, "algorithm" is another. "Networks" might be a third. Although this collection opens with Mari Lee Mifsud's excellent and nuanced history of the concept's lexical, mythical, and tropical variations, for a book that so artfully fulfills the first half of its eponymous promise to engage "ancient rhetorics," the corresponding focus on "digital *networks*" could be more consistent throughout. Readers looking for a "media studies" book, particularly those inclined toward the more materialist work in media archaeology or media epistemology that has (for good reason) been gaining interdisciplinary traction of late, may find the collection more promiscuous than they would like. Yet, one of the volume's great strengths is the diversity and surprising inventiveness of its contributions. Readers interested in rhetorical theory, old or new, or in the still-emergent reconfiguration of society around digital communication technologies, will certainly find plenty worth their investment.

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