# Reviews

Hello Avatar: Rise of the Networked Generation, by Beth Coleman, MIT Press, 2011, pp 194, GBP 20.95, ISBN: 0814743501. Language: English.

Beth Coleman's *Hello Avatar: Rise of the Networked Generation* is an attempt to provide a holistic view of current network society. It focuses on the cultural moment of pervasive media during the first decade of the twenty-first century. To a certain extent *Hello Avatar* seems to be a continuation of Manuel Castell's *The Rise of Network Society* (1996) – the first part of a trilogy titled *The Information Age: Economy, Society and Culture*; but it also significantly departs from Castell's interpretation of the transition toward network society. Whereas Castell draws a picture of the technological and economic changes defining 'the network society' and focuses primarily on the accelerated engagement with media up to the 1990s, Coleman takes the following decade and provides a multi-directional interpretation of the impact of the technological shift. Instead of a linear narrative about technological changes leading to economic, societal and cultural transformation, Coleman explores interactions between technical affordances and cultural values through the demonstration of multiple aspects of our experience as networked subjects. The scholars differ in their conceptualization of such a subject. While Castell sees a fundamental division between 'the self' and 'the net' rather than their reciprocal determination, Coleman considers subjects as nodes in a social network. They are neither determined by nor entirely independent on the network of exchange. In this respect *Hello Avatar* provides a vision of a subject similar to that offered in *Networked Publics* (2008), edited by Kazys Varnelis. *Networked Publics* maintains that 'the self' and 'the net' cannot be viewed separately. The term 'networked public' is used in the edited volume as an alternative to terms such as 'audience' or 'consumer', and signifies not merely the agency of an individual but also the dissolution of individual identity 'in favor of an affirmation of existence through the network itself' (Varnelis et al. p. 154). *Hello Avatar* investigates the networked subject in similar terms of agency.

Reconceptualization of agency in a network society is one of the main undertakings of Coleman's book. In a narrow sense Coleman defines agency as 'user creation with networked
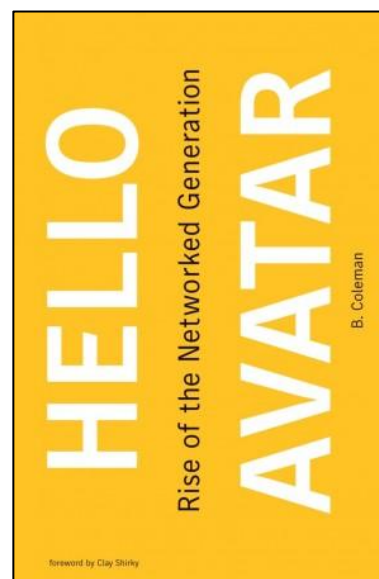
media tools' (p. 2). In her broader definition, 'agency indicates presence, will, and movement (the ability to move freely as being) and is not restricted to the individual but also pertains to systems' (p. 2). This allows Coleman to consider 'technological agency' that speaks to the ways in which external devices help us navigate the terrain that we live in. Coleman writes, 'In calling agency a technology, I describe a world in which our reach is extended and amplified in terms of spheres of influence, sites of engagement, and presence to one another' (p. 2). This expanded definition of agency goes along with her understanding of media as the extension of man, following McLuhan's notion. Therefore, avatars are considered not as our substitutes in the networked world, but as our extensions that aid us in expressing agency. Coleman does not restrict the concept of avatar to the animated figures moving across the screen. She broadens the concept to include any 'gestalt of images, text and multimedia that make up our identities as networked subject' (p. 4). This extension of the self toward its diverse manifestation in the networked world through the avatar is grounded on two basic assumptions: fluidity of selfhood and absence of clear-cut distinctions between mediated and unmediated interactions. Coleman draws a persuasive analogy between someone's avatar waving to us in the virtual world and someone blowing us a kiss in the real world. She states, 'there is no return to an unmediated world, a bucolic face-to-face exchange, if it ever existed in the first place' (p. 39). What Coleman proposes, therefore, is an investigation of new facets of ourselves manifested through avatars.

Another major point in Coleman's argument is that virtual reality is not an alternative to our actual world but its augmentation. Coleman argues that 'we have already deeply incorporated network society into our lives and that the important change to understand is the continuum between online and off' (p. 3). The scholar coins a new term, 'X-reality', to refer to this world of pervasive mediation that encompasses the virtual and the real. In her investigation of this 'X-reality', Coleman describes the mutual impact of real and mediated engagements in our daily practices enabled by networked media. In this regard, Coleman's project resembles, as she herself acknowledges, Michel de Certeau's study of quotidian practices. According to de Certeau our practice of everyday life is critical to understanding the society in which we live. If he uses the analogy of a rented apartment to show how people transform borrowed spaces into their own, Coleman attempts to demonstrate this practice in relation to networked media. In other words, Coleman investigates not simply the impact of new technology but various attempts to capture how we engage with technology within the fabric of our daily life. In the light of Alan Kay's insightful observation that 'any new technology today becomes culture for the next generation' (p. 46), Coleman's book is about this next generation, for whom technology has already become culture.

The book is comprised of the Introduction and five chapters. The Introduction together with the foreword by Clay Shirky, provides an excellent outline of the main argument in the book. The five chapters advance this argument by combining theoretical and empirical knowledge derived from fieldwork. Each chapter aims to critically engage 'parallel histories of media technologies, scientific research agendas, and the experience of media participants themselves' (p. 5) in order to draw a holistic view of the current networked society. This goal manifests itself through the fine balance between accessible discussion of current theoretical concerns and analysis of actual media experience. Provided at the end of each chapter, inter-

views with media practitioners and users, conducted in a number of ways, help construct this holistic view.

Chapter One, 'What is Avatar', traces the history of the notion of the avatar from Hindu mythology to the present day whereby in contemporary use the term stands for embodied agency in the human-computer interface. The chapter addresses issues of the mediated presence and face-to-face encounters in a world of accelerated mediation. It supports the idea of the co-evolution of technology and the self that results in the augmentation of reality. In Chapter Two, 'Putting Face on Things', Coleman presents the evolution of computer simulated virtual worlds, starting with those that utilise text and emoticons and finishing with 3D websites. The chapter explores our new practice in terms of virtual embodiment and provides an insight into both cultural reception and cognitive perception of these conditions.

Chapter Three, 'Interview with the Virtual Cannibal', focuses on the virtual world of a single player Gy – the avatar of a French white male who ventured into Second Life by way of video gaming and a philosophical interest in language – and examines issues of identity, ethics, virtual violence, and actual consequences in pervasive media culture. In this chapter Coleman demonstrates how the 'virtual cannibal's' staging of death simultaneously becomes a critique of simulation and a dissolution of the boundaries between virtual and real. Chapter Four, 'Presence', focuses on research in mediated co-presences and provides a closer look at work carried out in virtual reality labs. It discusses issues of behavioural modelling and identity manipulation by means of avatar interfaces. Countering Jean Baudrillard's argument on the seduction of simulacra, Coleman argues for the recognition of the increased capacities of co-presence, epitomized by various kinds of avatars.

The concluding Chapter, 'X-Reality: A Conclusion', presents a discussion of platforms that describe a specific aspect of X-reality engagement, with augmented reality being used as a design principle. Coleman introduces and analyses recent work in media forms that contribute innovative design by extending the networked subject's reach across worlds. This includes Google Earth, Pachube platform (this platform can be used, for example, to create a symbiotic circuit between carbon-producing computers and plants that offset carbon dioxide) and other projects.

Although the overall tone of the book is celebratory of the current moment of pervasive media, in analysing how media behave, i.e., how they are designed and what people do with them, Coleman tries to maintain a cautious position. She acknowledges that '[w]e are not outside of the augmented reality we engage, even if we are not enslaved by it' (p. 107). The invocation of the myth of Pandora's box in the last section of the book is indicative of this cautious position. While welcoming avatars as demarcations of 'points of connection not only across technological networks but also connections of self to others and to the world' (p. 159), Coleman states, 'we still find new technologies in the form of a Pandora's box. With these tools in our hands, we can unleash a plague upon our world or we can harness them for good' (p. 161). But the question is: how do we know which way is harnessing them for good? Throughout the book, Coleman advocates an orientation toward the extended scope of human agency as a way to avoid 'the plague' of a Pandora's box.

The book is written in an accessible and lucid, although sometimes repetitive, style and provides an interdisciplinary approach that deftly combines current concerns in humanities,

social science and applied practice. This makes the book equally valuable to media theorists, IT (Information Technology) professionals and general readers interested in new media.

Works cited

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