

CyberReader, 2nd ed.

By Victor Vitanza

509pp.

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\$56.00, Paperback

Reviewed by Anna Marin

It seems Victor Vitanza asked a Magic 8-Ball to see if the world of college composition courses would merge enough with the virtual world to warrant a textbook to be written. Apparently, all signs pointed to yes, and so was born *CyberReader*. Vitanza asserts from the beginning of his anthology of cyberReadings that a pragmatic foray into writing within the virtual world is also an existentialist foray into realizing “self-identities in terms of human-cum-virtual *bodies* in new *spaces* in an ever-changing technological-informational society” (viii). The question he poses throughout the book is whether the rules which govern an individual in the tangible linear real world where we live still hold true in the multi-planed cyber world where the physical body is not there to exert pressure and take on physical consequences of actions. Also, if the physical is not present, how does one determine identity in a place where true personas are shared, true information is exchanged, and true communities are established. Although staunchly pro-cyber, by selecting readings that argue both from a conservative angle and from a dare-devil approach, Vitanza recognizes the natural trepidation of his student readers as they cross from the real into what might be the unknown. What he does not effectively translate is how writing fits into the journey.

Although I would recommend *CyberReader* for its texts, I am skeptical of its use as a rhetoric in the classroom. At the end of each reading selection are questions and writing assignments for “rereading,” a pointed cue that this book is intended for students. Unfortunately, these writing tasks are dull and facile at best. At worst, they do nothing at all to acknowledge the goal of the book: to cross the boundary between real and virtual, and ask oneself about personal identity and how it communes with others online. Most of the posed writing tasks simply ask students to write a reaction to the reading, rarely making them actually interact in the virtual community or interface about which they have just read. To Vitanza’s credit, however, the textbook holds strong for a more adventurous and perhaps experienced teacher who will dutifully devise her own assignments. The meaty texts do provide ample fodder for anyone willing to take the challenge.

From the introduction Vitanza immediately addresses the potentially wide scope of readership of his textbook. He offers us two methods by which to step into the cyber world. The first is the conservative “Bill Gates” way, which gives definitions of unfamiliar words and an explanation of the virtual world in the linear step-by-step process taken from the real world. “Bill” explains the “book-to-human-to-computer interface” by comparison to the “Holodeck” from T.V.’s *Star Trek* (xv), a fictional place with imagery that mimics reality. It gives the reader an option to view the cyber world as a fictional place as well, but that which is taking on more real characteristics each day. The other method by which to use the book is the “Timothy Leary” way, where the book is a surfboard by which to ride the higher rising technological waves of the future (xvi). “Tim” uses jargon already known by those of the “New Breed...psychedelic (cyberdelic),

super high-tech, with interest in smart drugs, brain machines, and the Internet” (xvii).

Vitanza takes a risk putting his readers into two very distinct categories: the initiated and the non-. However, “Tim” reminds all readers that, regardless of their cyber experience, *CyberReader* functions as a textbook, which even the “Bill Gates” followers might be willing to swallow: TFYQA. “To think for yourself; question authority!” (xvii).

Luckily for our daring teacher, the selection of texts does provide a way for students to question authority...or to decide not to. The topics range from virtual communities to sexual politics to censorship, all of which occur equally in both the real and cyber worlds. Besides providing definitions of new terms at the end of each chapter, Vitanza also includes a variety of authors and text formats throughout the book. Neil Postman and Camille Paglia, two social critics of different generations, argue print culture versus electronic culture in “She Wants Her TV! He Wants His Book.” The format “is that of a forum, comparable to the hacker’s forum” (233), only the two authors are really sitting down at dinner in a posh New York City restaurant. An excerpt from Douglas Rushkoff’s book *Cyberia*, as well as the fiction piece “The Library of Babel” by Jose Luis Borges, also appears in *CyberReader*.

The article most closely linked with the polemic posed by Vitanza is Raymond Kurzweil’s “The Future of Libraries,” which appears in chapter 5: “Virtual Books and Libraries.” Kurzweil logically argues that the demise of tangible print media is not only inevitable but natural by way of the technological life cycle. Seven stages are identified starting with precursor, then invention, development, maturity, false pretenders, obsolescence, and finally antiquity. At stage four, false pretenders, a new form of technology (in its own precursor stage) emerges to posit itself against the old form. At

stage five of the current technology, a real threat begins where the new starts to overtake the old (291-92). This explains the real-time debate between print and non-print media, between the real and virtual worlds.

Vitanza aspired to write the book which bridges the gap. He not only seems to agree with but also wants to prove real Kurzweil's thesis that electronic media is usurping the role of print. Unfortunately, he falls far short of his goal. Vitanza knows that at the moment of printing, *CyberReader* is already obsolete, so he assures readers that "the real 'book' is out there on the Web, and it changes every nanosecond" (viii). Perhaps a new calculation of nanosecond has been reached: the website has not been updated since September 18, 1998. So far, print media and the real world in which they reside are not yet obsolete. It is just *CyberReader* might be soon due to its tentative place in the composition and rhetoric classroom without guidance from the rare SuperTeacher.