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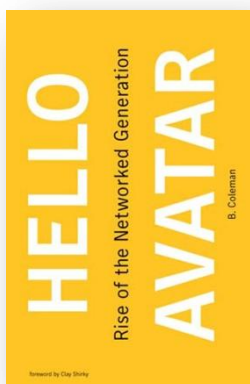
MAT LIT

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B. Coleman, *Hello Avatar: Rise of the Networked Generation.* Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2011, 216 pp. ISBN 978-0262015714

The alternate/original subtitle of Beth Coleman's *Hello Avatar* was "From Virtual Worlds to X-Reality" and was intended for publication in 2010, but arrived with the new subtitle at the end of 2011. The change in subtitle suggests how rapid changes are in reality at the beginning of the second decade of the twenty-first century. In November of 2011, *Hello Avatar* was made available in hardcover with alkaline paper, meaning that it is a book intended to have a long shelf life. In size and weight it is very close to that of a Kindle Fire HD: 5.5 x 0.4 x 8.5 inches and 1 pound, and it is surprising that a digital version only arrived much later in 2012, although, from 2011 to now, much has changed in the publishing world. The print version is more attractive than the digital version, with short yellow-paged interviews presented as inter-chapters, and with the notes given as sidebars; the color of the inter-chapters disappears in the digital version, the sidebars become chapter endnotes, and the digital version does not yet have page-number indications.

Ubiquitous is the keyword in Clay Shirky's forward to Coleman's book, and this is a word that is used to describe the relationships between people through media as they exist now, and in contrast to what many futurists were predicting until the very beginning of this century. It is very much connected to a word used in The Materialities of Literature Doctoral Program: *Presence*, which is, in fact, the title of her fourth chapter. Shirky writes this: "[I]f we think of the network as a cyberspace and ourselves as actors enveloped by it,

we will analyze our life with the network in one way; if we think of the network as a light, ubiquitous communications substrate linking real-world actors and actions, we will think of it in an alternate way." Facebook, of course, was changing everything in these theories from 2011-2012. Coleman, Shirky says, brings these two ways of thinking together, saying that Coleman "presents the use of these tools not as fealty to one or the other metaphor for interpreting our behavior but rather as a whole, organic set of explorations and practices" (xi).

X-Reality is the keyword in *Hello, Avatar*, even if it disappears in the subtitle, and even though the word *Avatar* is in the title. Coleman defines X-Reality as a "term" used "to describe a shift from the binary engagement that spans types of connections . . . [marking] the variable spaces, places, and temporalities in which a network society exists, calling for an expanded vision of what comprises one's world" (84). X- reality is "[a] continuum of exchanges between virtual and real spaces. Pervasive media use defines a world that is no longer either virtual or real but representative of a diversity of network combinations" (188). X-reality moves away from immersion in the screen to the idea that we now carry with us what used to be thought of as screen content everywhere we go: rather than the real moving into the virtual, the virtual has escaped the box and become a part of the real, and the intersection that the "x" in X-reality represents is this new space, this new reality, a human geography that was not anticipated, but which has come to be.

Beth Coleman creates her X-reality thesis stylistically. Her book is in many ways an art book, about people, about relationships, and it is fragmented, in the sense that styles cross, genres cross, images provoke. *Hello Avatar* is a story, and every chapter (there are only five) begins with a story, the first and last chapter beginning with autobiographical stories which are removed from each other in geography. The first chapter begins in January, 2006 in Austin, Texas (sort of, as many members are not in Austin, Texas) and is the story of the attempt to create a virtual community with avatars that was not, in the end, successful: the story of Linden Lab's Second Life, in which members could create their own avatars and explore worlds, and create worlds, with their desktop or laptop (the screen had already begun to become mobile) computers. The last chapter begins in October 2006, in Berlin, Germany, and reveals the intersection of real and virtual via text-messaging, and the use of the word *figurines* as opposed to the word *avatar*. Much had changed from January to October. The other three chapters begin with stories as well: the story of a story of a story in chapter two (retelling the story that Anne Friedberg tells about Leon Battista Alberti talking about *De Pictura*); the story of a Frenchman able to do things (cannibalism) virtually that he most likely would not perform in real life in chapter three; and the story of Jorge Luis Borges's story "On Exactitude in Science" in chapter four.

The inter-chapters are excerpts from interviews, and are all presented in the standard Q & A (Interviewer/Interviewee) format, except for the interview with the cannibal, Gy, which is presented as a real-time chat transcript, and the final inter-chapter, which is really an introduction to a pictographic representation of avatars, which serves to finish the book, before the chronology of X-Time, the glossary, and the index. The inter-chapters make the book bear comparison with Hemingway's *In Our Time*. The cannibal chapter is the key chapter though it is hidden in the middle of the book as chapter three. Immediately after speaking about Gy, it swiftly moves to the 1995 text *Life on the Screen* by Sherry Turkle, before moving back to Gy.

Hello, Avatar is a book that began as one thing and has been presented as another. The very production of the book presents the problem of attempting to write about New Media at this time. What might have begun as the sense that things had changed in the landscape since 1995, since discussions of cyborgs and screens, became ever-complicated, as the landscape seemed to be changing yet again and moving in a different direction. What happened is that people accepted the technology and made it a part of themselves, similar to monkeys accepting a twig to stick into an anthill, or a heavy branch to damage other monkeys.

Coleman's book is, really, a (beautiful) art(ist's) book, a recent history of how we have come to NOW, realizing that now ever changes. Coleman knows this. And she says, pertinently: "In a time of accelerated simulation such as ours, I ask what are the implications of the media equation. If our use of avatars is deeper and broader than ever before, if we are constantly mediated, then how are we making judgments between the real and the virtual?" (67). Coleman knew when publishing this book that it had been published too late, and it is odd to say that her book is already an artifact. But no matter how quickly things might change, the possibility of the adventure of entering x-reality must not be denied.