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Fantasy and Purchasing Power: The World Wide Web as a Utopian Space and the New Capitalist Arena

Cheyila Samuelson
University of California, Santa Barbara, cheylas@gmail.com

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Fantasy and Purchasing Power: The World Wide Web as Utopian Space and the New Capitalist Arena

The World Wide Web and Contemporary Cultural Theory.
 Edited by Andrew Herman and Thomas Swiss. New York:
 Routledge, 2000. 312 pp. ISBN 0-41592-502-9

The culture addressed in this collection of essays contributed by a diverse group of researchers from the humanities and social sciences is that of web savvy users in the US. The collection was edited by Andrew Herman and Thomas Swiss, and contributors include: Jody Berland, Jodi Dean, Sean Cubitt, Greg Elmer, Andrew Herman, Steven Jones, Nancy Kaplan, Robert McChesney, Vincent Mosco, Stuart Moulthrop, Theresa Senft, Rob Shields, John Sloop, Thomas Swiss, and David Tetzlaff. The contributors confront questions about the web and commercialism, utopian community building (and its failures) on the web, cults, conspiracy theory, the public imagination of the web, web journalism, print vs. digital texts, and software piracy as social protest and commercial subversion. Framing the discussion of the web in terms of "magic, metaphor and power," these articles constitute separate chapters that attempt to confront popular conceptions of the web and the underling assumptions that are producing, sometimes erroneously, the cultural identity of the web. The issues at stake are those of access, commercialism, representational power and the structural dictates of the form itself. In the chapter entitled "So Much for the Magic of Technology and the Free Market: The World Wide Web and the Corporate Media System," Robert McChesney discusses the ways in which the popular conception of the web as a new space for the creation and promotion of small entrepreneurial business ventures rests on a problematic conception or "mythology" of capitalism and the free market. He argues that, far short of enabling competition and innovation, capitalism has served to concentrate power in the hands of

an increasingly small group of predatory multinationals. His is a cautionary tale for the enthusiasts of the new media as being an alternative to the monolithic control of massive corporations. Nancy Kaplan contemplates the future of literacy and literary criticism on the web with her contribution "Literacy Beyond Books: Reading When all the World's a Web." She is critical of the idea that the web as a GUI (Graphical User Interface) will reduce literacy in the general population. She points out that similar reactions have been provoked by the rise of every new technology of communication. In addition to exposing the underlying elitism inherent in accepted definitions of literacy, Kaplan discusses the cognitive quality of the experience of the reader of nonlinear hypertext material. In another, more epistemological chapter, "Hypertext links: The Ethic of the Index and its Space-Time Effects," the notion that conventional concepts of time and space are undergoing radical change as a result of the global and (nearly) instantaneous nature of the web is tackled by Rob Shields. Much has been made of the nonlinear nature of hyperlinks and the possible implications of this new structure for conceptions of narrative form and causality. Exploring these possibilities, Shields asks, "What is the ontology of the mouse click?"

For a web enthusiast familiar with contemporary cultural theory and debate, this book offers a brilliant collection of commentaries focused on a field of study that is only just beginning to be articulated and will be subject to change as rapid as the developing technologies. The dual attempt to examine assumptions about the nature and future of the web and to embark on the creation of a critical language and theory for those who wish to examine it is a titillating one. There is a great deal of humor and liveliness in some of the pieces, much of which draws on the experience and knowledge of advanced or "power" web users. This brings me to a warning for those who might expect to find a range of "cultures" represented in this

collection. The focus of this collection is a testament to the power relations of the web that the contributors describe. The inequity of access that belies the egalitarian myth of the web is gestured at, but the actual participation of groups from the margins of the global economy is not discussed. Although the popularity of web based chat is transforming communicative strategies in many developing countries, there is no mention of this phenomena. In countries with repressive social systems the web is providing opportunities for organization and communication formerly unavailable to dissidents. The diversity of cultural products available through the web is changing the worldview of individuals from formerly isolated regions. The fact that much of what is moving across the web is pornography (which often reaches communities unimagined by the producers of the pages) always gives me pause. In short, this is an interesting and valuable collection for those curious about or studying the web, but there are still many stories to be written about the production and perception of the new media.

Cheyly Samuelson
University of California, Santa Barbara