Virtual Realities and Their Discontents

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The recognition that cyberspace is a fiction -- a narrative that creates a coherence it would like to imagine "really" exists -- is crucial to any theoretically sophisticated critique of the limitations of this consensual hallucination and the discontents it imperfectly masks. In this groundbreaking volume Robert Markley and his co-authors set out to discover why "cyberspace provokes often-rapturous rhetoric but resists critical analysis."

Taking a variety of approaches, the authors explore the ways in which virtual realities conserve and incorporate rather than overthrow the assumptions and values of a traditional, logocentric humanism: the Platonist division of the world into the physical and metaphysical in which ideal forms are valued over material content. Cyberspace, David Porush suggests, represents not a break with our metaphysical past but an extension of its basic theistic postulates. Richard Grusin argues that the claims for new forms of electronic communication depend upon the very notions of authorship -- and subjectivity -- they claim to transcend. N. Katherine Hayles examines debates about cybernetics in the 1950s to demonstrate that the history of mind-body ideas in the age of computers and feedback loops is itself conflicted. David Brande analyzes cyberspace as an extension of the logic of late twentieth-century capitalism. And Robert Markley explores the entangled roots of cyberspace in the philosophy of mathematics.

"One of the ironies of our culture's fascination with cyberspace is that our material and psychic investments in Virtual Reality suggest that the death of print culture -- or its disappearance into the matrix -- has been greatly exaggerated.... Cyberspace is unthinkable, literally inconceivable, without the print culture it claims to transcend. It is, in part, a by-product of a tradition of metaphysics that, boats against the current, bears us back relentlessly to our past." -- Robert Markley, from the introduction

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