

The Electronic Word: Democracy, Technology, and the Arts

Richard Lanham

(University of California, Los Angeles)

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Reviewed by

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This collection of essays, most of which have appeared in print before, bears the clear impress of the author's career as a historian of rhetoric who applied his scholarly labors to UCLA's composition program. Lanham, author of *The Handlist of Rhetorical Terms* (1991), *The Motives of Eloquence* (1976), and *Style: An Anti-Textbook* (1974), brings a valuable perspective to questions involving digital technology and culture. In attacking Daniel Boorstin's *The Image, or, What Happened to the American Dream* (1961) and Neil Postman's *Amusing Ourselves to Death: Public Discourse in the Age of Show Business* (1985), he points out that their pop "arguments against electronic technology" turn out "to be variations on the traditional arguments developed against rhetoric by Platonic philosophy and Christian theology" (p. 197), and he goes on to explain that "the quarrel between the philosophers and rhetoricians constitutes *the* quarrel in Western culture" (p. 202). According to Lanham, "the deepest debates about TV, about the decline of the book, about the computer as Big Brother or little one" (p. 203) simply repeat this millennia-old debate in which the opponents always speak past each other. Whereas the philosophers assume that all thought (and truth) exist essentially independent of language, media, or information technology, the rhetoricians, who begin with the assumption that the medium colors the message, outrage the philosophers by taking a playful, apparently nonserious, approach to language and learning.

The particular relevance of this ancient debate to computing lies in Lanham's claim that "the bit-mapped, graphics-based personal computer is . . . intrinsically a rhetorical device" (p. 105). It is so in at least two ways. First, "in its memory storage and retrieval, in its dynamic interactivity, in the dramatic rehearsal-reality it creates, in the way game and play are built into its motival structure, it expresses the rhetorical tradition just as the codex book embodies the philosophical tradition" (pp. 105–106). Second, "classical rhetoric, and hence all of classical education, was built on a single dominant exercise: modeling. . . . *Declamatio*, as the modeling of speeches came to be called, stood at the hub of Western education, just as computer modeling is coming to do today. The world of electronic text has reinstated this centrality of modeled reality" (p. 47). Arguing that neither side has the complete answer, *The Electronic Word* locates the cultural and educational solution in alternating between both poles—though, as we shall see, Lanham does not have nearly enough to say about what such an oscillation might imply for a digital culture.

Throughout this volume, Lanham argues convincingly for his interpretation of education, computing, and our culture's primary opposition of rhetoric and philosophy. In addition to its main approach, which I find valuable and necessary, *The Electronic Word* has many other good points—not the least of which is its generally clear, strong, often witty writing. Similarly, Lanham's judgments of postmodernism and poststructuralism, like his explanation of McLuhan's importance and the hostile reception his ideas have encountered, make valuable contributions to our understanding of the political and cultural implications of information technology.

I do not wish to take away from these considerable accomplishments by pointing out that *The Electronic Word* also strikes me as a deeply flawed book. Whenever Lanham strays from his areas of greatest competence—the battle between rhetoric and philosophy and the broader implications of digital textuality for culture—his discussion becomes unnecessarily vague. Of course, part of the problem derives from the book's origins: of the ten essays that make up *The Electronic Word*, seven have previously appeared in print, and of these, several take the form of review articles that perhaps made greater contributions at their appearance than they do in the present volume. These origins do much to explain the volume's unevenness and repetitions.

They do not, however, explain, or explain away, the impressions of unfairness and even mean-spiritedness toward other writers in the field that Lanham too often conveys. A knowledgeable practitioner of rhetoric, he commands the particular art of creating what Aristotle termed *ethos* (or credibility) by presenting himself as a rational, urbane authority who can be counted on to judge with knowledge and fairness. Lanham certainly succeeds with some of those who do not know the literature very well—a fact apparent from the book-jacket blurb in which a Donald McClosky gushes about his originality. In fact, there exists a substantial literature that discusses McLuhan, digital textuality, culture, and related topics that Lanham either does not know or fails to acknowledge.

When he does recognize the existence of some others in the field, such as Jay David Bolter, Alvin Kernan, and Gregory L. Ulmer, he treats their writing inadequately and at times very unfairly. For example, Bolter's fine volume, *Writing Space: The Computer, Hypertext, and the History of Writing* (1991), like Michael Heim's *Electric Language: A Philosophical Study of Word Processing* (1987), anticipates all of Lanham's points about the nature of electronic textuality—something one would never learn from Lanham's text. Similarly, although Lanham may fairly criticize Alvin Kernan's *Death of Literature* (1990), he never credits that author's brilliant *Printing Technology, Letters, and Samuel Johnson* (1987) with anticipating many of his own recognitions about print culture.

Lanham also writes very condescendingly of Ulmer, something I find particularly ironic for two reasons. First, most of the ideas of collage in Lanham's second chapter, "Digital rhetoric and the digital arts," have been anticipated by Ulmer's essay, "The object of post-criticism," (1983). More important, his condescending remarks on *Teletheory: Grammatology in the Age of Video* (Ulmer 1989) show that he really does not understand that Ulmer has, to a very large extent, answered Lanham's own call for a writing that permits oscillation between philosophy and rhetoric, style and truth.

The explanation of Lanham's inability to see the implications of Ulmer's work for new kinds of reading and writing lies in his readily apparent lack of first-hand experience of hypertext and other digital media. In his own terms, he holds too firmly to the rhetorical pole rather than, as he advises, oscillating between that and philosophy, or, here, an actual experience of that of which he writes. I find such omissions particularly odd for someone so involved in the teaching of discursive writing. He tells us he has run a program in composition for seven years, and the annual conferences on computers and composition offer examples and experiences of teachers in the field

using hypertext for teaching composition. Like many others, he seems to prefer writing about the educational possibilities and cultural effects of unexamined systems and documents, rather than expending the effort to look at them and see their potential effect first hand.

In fact, his remarks on hypertext seem remarkably vague for a book published in 1993, a time by which literally hundreds of published and research hypertext systems had become available, applied to educational matters, and used for creating fiction and art. His treatment of Bolter seems particularly strange given that he is one of the developers of Storyspace, a leading hypertext system, the existence of which Lanham seems entirely unaware. (*Guide* and *HyperCard*, for Lanham, seem to constitute the sum total of hypertext.)

His lack of experience with digital textuality leads to my greatest disappointment with *The Electronic Word*—its failure to apply the author's expert knowledge of rhetoric developed for use in oral, manuscript, and print cultures to electronic media. Before Lanham published the first of these essays, many of us had been calling for a rhetoric and stylistics suited to electronic writing. In hypertext, for example, the writer needs to work with (and in some cases against) individual systems to provide the reader some means of orientation and navigation in e-space. At the very least, we need rhetorical devices of departure and arrival—means of informing readers where links might take them and why they have arrived at (or opened) particular documents. Chapter after chapter, I kept waiting for the man who has written books on the history and practical application of rhetoric to apply his specialist's knowledge to the electronic word. He never did.

Not surprisingly, therefore, the electronic version of *The Electronic Word* proves a mixed bag, but, like the print original, worth a look. Lanham (or his publishers) use the Voyager Expanded Book system, which is built on top of HyperCard 2.0, and this system (unlike the multimedia version that Voyager created for the brilliant CD-ROM *Who Built America?*), here produces what is essentially an electronic book rather than a true hypertext. In other words, although the e-version contains expected features of an electronified text, such as efficient full-text search, annotation, and bookmark mechanisms, its other explorations of the capacities of this new kind of textuality seem trivial. Almost all of the added material occurs near the beginning of the text—and as an electronic book with an axial structure, it does have a beginning—and these add-ons tend to take the form of "look what you can do with computers!" Yes, you can include, as Lanham has, digitized sound in which the author talks to you, but Lanham does not consider the implications, the costs and benefits, of such incorporation of sound in alphanumeric text. Yes, you can also have animation sequences to show how e-text can be reconfigured, and Lanham does a bit better with the implications of these, but he makes no fundamental revisions of his text for its electronic translation. He does not, as one might expect, link together some of the repetitions or convergences in the separate chapters, nor does he cut and reshape the text to take advantage of digitized text.

Lanham has produced a clear statement of some of the basic implications of digital textuality for the humanities. His placement of contemporary debates about culture, computing, and education within a debate that has continued for two-and-a-half thousand years should prove of special value to those, particularly scholars in the humanities, who remain fearful of recent information technology. Unfortunately, the author's failure to extend his knowledge of rhetoric to hypertext and other forms of digital textuality makes *The Electronic Word* more of a failed opportunity than a prophetic vision.

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