

Book Review

Nadin, Mihai. (1997). *The Civilization of Illiteracy*. Dresden, Germany: Dresden University Press, Inc. \$79 (Hardcover), 880 pp.

Reviewed by Stephen Petrina

Literacy and illiteracy are no longer what they used to be. This is basically the conclusion of Mihai Nadin in his *Civilization of Illiteracy*. Nadin traverses over a few thousand years of the history of literacy, but the bulk of his attention is turned toward the contemporary. Now, he writes, we are witnessing the proliferation of literacies and multiplication of media on a scale that makes notions of a single form of literacy seem like a quaint dream of the past. The *Civilization of Illiteracy* is a documentary record of literacies and their forms which are circulating through the urban and hyper-urban creations which we have come to call our modern Babylon. Nadin may be out of vogue in his long, historical view of literacy, in his wordiness at a time when three-sentence paragraphs are an Internet average, and he may be out of vogue in his refusal to select any single specialized lens with which to analyze our Babylon. This break from academic and popular fashion is precisely what makes his work so far-reaching. However, there are big differences between authors and rhetoricians, and I could argue that his message will be lost in the painstaking details of the *Civilization of Illiteracy*. This argument would ignore the message and Nadin's medium is the message. Reduced to 880 pages of text without a single chart, comic, doodle, drawing, graph, icon, photograph, or sketch, our modern Babylon is in a book. There is only black print on white pages. Swoosh - nothing but text - pure text. If this is some kind of post-modern joke, I would finish the review at this point. To be sure, there is quite an irony in his choice of media—in his reduction of modern Babylon to Babel to text—but I assure you, Nadin is serious, if not seriously post-modern.

Literacy is no longer a key to cultural participation in what has become an “illiterate” civilization. Literacy for Nadin is not merely the ability to read, write, and decipher text, but rather a cultural way of being. Indeed, being literate is about the same as being “modern.” The privileged status of this particular way of being can no longer be maintained Nadin argues (pp. 8-11, 140). Literacy is all-encompassing as he demonstrates, reaching beyond communication or education, and far into aesthetic, athletic, commercial, religious, sexual, and

Stephen Petrina (stephen.petrina@ubc.ca) is an Assistant Professor of Technology Studies Education at the University of British Columbia, Vancouver, BC.

technological practices. But he is quick to note that literacy as a way of being has been undermined by a number of other literacies, or simply by illiteracy. Participating in these types of practices no longer requires that one be “literate” in the traditional sense. Hence, the more one argues for widespread ecological, scientific, technological, or visual literacy, the more one acknowledges the fall of literacy and the reign of illiteracy.

Some design and technology educators may be attracted to visions of a digital future in *Civilization of Illiteracy* (pp. 729-767). What makes the World Wide Web so promising says Nadin, “is not the potential for surfing, or its impressive publication capabilities, but the access to the *cognitive energy* that is transported through networks” (p. 740). Other design and technology educators may take to his descriptions of the interrelations between design and literacy (pp. 590-613). “[T]he new object is designed to be idiot-proof (the gentler name is *user-friendly*)” he notes, “reflecting a generalized notion of permissiveness that replaces self-control in our interaction with artifacts” (pp. 610-611). I am much less hopeful than he is in the potential of intelligent materials and machines to address our ecological problems (pp. 603-604). Still other educators may resonate with his prescriptions for education (pp. 282-318, 746-751). “The change from a standardized model” of education he argues, “to the collaborative model of individuality and distinction re-establishes an ethical framework... The goal of education cannot be the dissemination of imitative behavior, but of procedures” (pp. 316, 746). For readers of the *Journal of Technology Education*, the three chapters on digital technologies, education, and design are the most relevant among the twenty-three chapters in the book.

Nadin offers an accurate portrayal of the complexity of navigating in and around Babylon—a civilization spoiled in luxury and vice. While the proliferation of literacies ought to be documented, it is not clear that this ought to be celebrated. To be sure, it can be argued that this proliferation is not so much a flowering of diversity as it is a reassembling of Babel, but now in the form of Babylon. Multiple literacies certainly do not offer a common ground for dialogue. Multiple literacies in no way offer a collective medium for discussing what it is that we all have in common, or how we might go about establishing a way toward a common future. Then again, there is the possibility that we have never been literate: there was never a time when spoken and written language literacy reigned over others (Latour, 1991). We were always a hybrid of illiterate and literate objects and subjects. So for now, I’m opposed to celebrating illiteracy as a post-modern accomplishment *ala* Nadin, and prefer the project of dismantling Babylon and rebuilding literacy from the collective ground up (Petrina, in press).

References

- Latour, B. (1993). *We have never been modern*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Petrina, S. (in press). The politics of technological literacy. *International Journal of Technology and Design Education*.