

Two Primo Takes on Pomo's Technological Sublime

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David E. Nye. *Narratives and Spaces: Technology and the Construction of American Culture*. Columbia UP, 1997. xvi + 224 pp. \$45 cloth; \$17.95 paper.

Mark Dery. *The Pyrotechnic Insanitarium: American Culture on the Brink of the Millenium*. Grove, 1999. 224 pp. \$25 cloth.

Show Mark Dery pictures of Coney Island at night, its garish architecture outlined by thousands of electric lights, and he starts wondering whether the turn-of-the-century carnival of America's first great amusement park is a harbinger for the excesses and grotesqueries of contemporary porno culture. Show David Nye those same pictures, and Nye starts wondering exactly where Coney Island fits into the history of the electrification of America. Both authors see the Coney Island of 1910 as crucial to the development of a consumer culture of sensation and simulation, but, while Nye views Coney Island within several "orderly" narratives of technological progress, Dery sees it in terms of carnivalesque cultural chaos. Dery and Nye approach contemporary American culture from very different perspectives and to very different ends, but these two books feature a surprising overlap of subjects, and both should be of interest to cultural studies students and science fiction scholars. Moreover, Dery's wonderfully written essays, what he terms his "perilous tap dance in the minefield between pop intellectualism and academic criticism" (viii), display more than enough cultural insight and verbal elan to reward anyone who likes to read and to think.

Nye's *Narratives and Spaces* continues its author's well-respected project of unpacking the prevailing narratives related to America's understanding (or misunderstanding) of technological change. With *Electrifying America* (MIT, 1990), *The American Technological Sublime* (MIT, 1994), and *Consuming Power: A Social History of American Energies* (MIT, 1999), Nye has established himself as one of our most insightful and reliable commentators on the history and cultural construction of technology in America. In *Narratives and Spaces* he revisits much of his earlier work, as he focuses on the ways technological change has been narrativized to create American "landscapes," including the newest one of cyberspace. Nye's primary goal is to discredit the notion of technological determinism; instead, Nye uses ten case studies to argue that "most fiction has a technological underpinning" (180) and that theories of narration rather than technology itself determine the cultural impact of technology. His case studies range from how railroad technology was narrativized to create the "natural vistas" of Niagara Falls and the Grand Canyon, to how NASA failed to narrativize the moon as a landscape during the Apollo Program, to how narratives about computers have reconstructed the machines' initial association with authoritarianism to make them guarantors of democracy and decentralization, the creators of the interior landscape of cyberspace.

Nye devotes a chapter to the electrification of the American West, a chapter to Wright Morris's photo-novel *The Home Place* (1948), a chapter to New Deal electrification projects, and three chapters to various aspects of World's Fairs as loci of technological narratives. All of this should be of significant interest to students of

American Studies and of the cultural representation of technology, but two of his chapters strike me as also being of particular interest to readers and scholars of science fiction. His fifth chapter, "Energy Narratives," reconsiders novels (such as *The Great Gatsby* [1925]) not generally known for their focus on technology in terms of how they narrativize energy. An energy narrative, Nye explains, may derive implicitly from the form of energy (steam, electricity, nuclear power, etc.) that is a central part of the social order depicted in a text, or it may derive explicitly from a particular technology "such as electric high-tension lines or a hydroelectric dam" that "becomes the subject of or the location for social struggle" (75). According to Nye's schema, "most explicit energy narratives emphasize one of the following five preconceptions: (1) natural abundance, (2) artificial scarcity, (3) human ingenuity, (4) man-made apocalypse, and (5) existential limits" (77). While it is clear that science fiction is *not* one of Nye's literary interests, it is tempting to wonder what new insights into sf such a typology might yield: reconceiving the genre in terms of its explicit or implicit energy narratives might lead to a fresh and provocative understanding of its underlying assumptions.

To these five characteristic approaches to energy narratives, Nye's conclusion adds a much broader typology of at least six characteristic narratives of technology in general. In this umbrella schema, narratives of technology (1) tend to overlook or undervalue the impact of machines, (2) present machines as agents of social ameliorization, (3) depict technology as a means of social control, (4) present new technologies, particularly media, as reshaping the perception of time and space, (5) satirize the unintended consequences of technology, or (6) depict new technology as apocalyptic. "All of these narratives," Nye observes, "can be used to present technologies as deterministic forces, which, depending on one's assumptions, can lead to automatic growth, social betterment, massive surveillance, transformation of the lifeworld, ironic reversals of intended results, or apocalyptic destruction" (179). Nye rejects each of these six possibilities as master-narratives, however, arguing for the importance of "contemplating a set of rival discourses" to free us "from being the prisoner of any one account" (188). Once again, Nye's discussion is not concerned with sf, but seems to me to offer a potentially useful analytic grid for rethinking the way sf works function within larger cultural contexts.

Nye's ninth chapter, "Don't Fly Me to the Moon: The Public and the Apollo Space Program," may also be of particular interest to sf readers and scholars, as it relentlessly chronicles the extent to which the Apollo Program was never seen as compelling by the American public. In 1965 only 45 percent of all Americans favored going to the moon, with 42 percent opposed. In 1967, support for going to the moon dropped to 34 percent and support remained about that low until Neil Armstrong set foot on the moon in 1969. While the Apollo Program was most enthusiastically supported by "those who were young, affluent, well-educated, Caucasian, and male" (151), it was strongly opposed by "African-Americans, women, the least educated, and the poor" (150). Only a month after the successful moon landing, 47 percent of Americans believed "that the space program was 'not worth it'" (152). Nye argues that significant popular support for the Apollo Program never materialized because NASA administrators and supportive

politicians and scientists failed to construct the moon as a landscape, “as infrastructure or background for our collective existence” (159), but he goes on to note that “the Apollo Program appears to be gaining sanctity in retrospect” as it becomes a unifying cultural memory (160). While Nye does not contrast this “narrative failure” with the “narrative success” that has constructed cyberspace, sf readers and critics may well find this topic worth considering.

A clear subtext of Nye’s chapters has to do with the author’s obvious anxiety that the deconstructive moves of postmodern literary theory may somehow challenge the idea that history can still be written. “Social historians,” proclaims Nye, “do not need the wrecking ball of deconstruction,” since they “labor to create new texts out of fragments, and in that sense they have been postmodernists for a long time” (8). Like Nye, Mark Dery reveals a deep-seated mistrust of narratives of technological determinism, and Dery also critiques deconstruction, noting that it, along with semiotics and New Historicism, comes strangely close to sharing the world-view of conspiracy theory. Of course, “the best conspiracy theorists,” he wryly observes, “are unhinged scholars, virtuosos of overinterpretation and amok ‘intertextuality’” (21). But then, Dery sees both conspiracy theory and deconstruction as not-unjustified panic-attack responses to contemporary everyday life. Up from what Dery sees as an increasingly deep pool of cultural anxiety bubble the oddities and grotesqueries his essays target for interrogation, auditioning each initially unlikely-seeming subject for a role as a millennial meme. What Dery sets out to answer in *The Pyrotechnic Insanitarium*, continuing and expanding the information-age cultural critique he began in *Escape Velocity: Cyberculture at the End of the Century* (Grove, 1996), is the question of whether or not the world has gone crazy, and to this question he brings not just the methodologies of deconstruction, but of an amazingly wide range of contemporary theory. His answer, somewhat anticlimactically—but characteristic of his generally evenhanded approach to competing cultural claims—is “yes and no” (30).

Starting from John Kasson’s brilliant reading, in *Amusing the Million: Coney Island at the Turn of the Century* (Hill & Wang, 1978), of the different social and cultural functions Coney Island served at the start of the twentieth century, Dery suggests that all of American society may be “out of control” in the way that Coney Island was around 1910, when a writer called it a “pyrotechnic insanitarium” (3). Coney’s *fin-de-siecle* “signature blend of infernal fun and mass madness, technology and pathology” strikes Dery as strongly parallel to the “infernal carnival” of *fin-de-millennium* America (6). The fourteen essays in *The Pyrotechnic Insanitarium* surround this proposition with an atmosphere of linked or linkable information, more than justifying Dery’s savvy claim that his book is not a linear argument but “an obsolete hunk of dead-tree hardware that went to sleep and dreamed it was a Web page” (44). Ranging in ostensible subject from killer clowns and cloned sheep to the Disneyfication and Nike-Swooshing of America, from Jim Carrey’s talking asshole act to the Unabomber’s murderous ecotopianism, these essays deliver on Dery’s promise to refract “the megatrends and microshifts of American culture late in the twentieth century through the prism of a

mass fad, a subcultural craze, a pop archetype, a work of art, a TV show, a corporate enterprise, a technological breakthrough, or the night-vision world-view of a mad bomber, a millennial cult, a conspiratorial underground” (43). While the rhetoric and research in *The Pyrotechnic Insanitarium* invariably lean toward constructing contemporary culture as “out of control,” Dery scrupulously reminds us in essay after essay of the perhaps even more unsettling prospect of a “controlled” or “ordered” culture structured by the norms of an elite, whether of the right or the left, whether composed of technophobes or technophiles. Behind too-easy condemnations of liminal culture, Dery notes, of a too-easy dismissal of Jim Carrey’s talking butt act and of other recent valorizations of excrement, “lurk the old, familiar specters of class, gender, and race (along with the modern frisson of sexual preference)” that shaped elite culture responses to Coney Island (98).

It is almost always the case—as is particularly true of his “Return to Abnormalcy: Freaks, Gaffes, and Geeks at the Fin-de-Millennium”—that Dery’s essays take unpredictable and rewarding turns as he examines a subject through differing theories, counters his own arguments, effortlessly justifies associational links, and reaches provocative conclusions. In this case, he starts from a discussion of sideshow freaks, teases the topic through five or six major turns (including a delicious go at right-wing talk radio), and ends with the pragmatic observation that freaks ‘r’ us: “Collaborating on the consensual hallucination that is the freak, we become what we behold” (105). Dery’s best essays, such as his superb “Wild Nature, Wired Nature: The Unabomber Meets the Digerati” (a compelling interrogation of “the buried lines of connection between the Unabomber and the geek elite who style themselves the ‘digerati’ ” [229]), not only unfold in impressively original ways, but also swell with finely crafted, exquisitely precise sentences: “Wild Nature conceals wired nature: The Unabomber may be a wolfman, but he’s a prosthetic one, a selfdeclared ‘techno-nerd’ beneath his hairy neo-Luddite hide” (230); or: “The Unabomber’s radical libertarian vision of a ‘postnational’ body politic, decomposed into scattered cells, is the missing link between wild nature and wired nature, the toggle switch that connects the Unabomber to cyberpunk on one hand and cybercapitalism on the other” (236).

Dery’s subtitle, “American Culture on the Brink,” fails to specify whether that brink is of chaos, apocalypse, anarchy, disaster, the millennium, or any of rhetorical brinkmanship’s other usual suspects. “On the brink of precisely what?” the picky reader might ask. One possible answer, based on Dery’s patterns of progression and argument in the fourteen essays that ground this book, might be on the brink of escaping theoretical formulation, as American culture is simply becoming too weird and too contradictory in too many different ways for cultural critics to “control” or “edit” its burgeoning oddities into any satisfying master narrative. Even as it looks as if Dery is trying to craft a new meta-narrative of the odd, he acknowledges that:

the information revolution and globalization have greatly amplified the historical tensions in postwar American society—between capitalism and

democracy, private and public, the elite and the masses, national and global, suburban and urban, the mainstream and the margins, “normal” and “deviant,” mind and matter, culture and nature, unreal and real. (261)

As a consequence, Dery views contemporary America as “less a coherent society than a fault zone, a network of interconnected societal fractures” (261). He’s not the first and is far from the only cultural critic to make this point; indeed, Dery’s larger targets—such as the erasure of the borders between the real and the unreal, the growing sense that computers lead us ever more toward disembodiment, or the sense that the digerati are simply the newest face of corporate greed and social irresponsibility—have all been theorized more completely and more rigorously, if much less engagingly, elsewhere. His particular genius is that he gets at these larger targets through pockets of strangeness on the very edges of our peripheral vision, bringing to his criticism the kind of always edgy, sometimes creepy, insight I associate with the fiction of J.G. Ballard.

Dery’s subjects include the oddly inappropriate-seeming appropriation of Edvard Munch’s modernist emblem, *The Scream*, by a postmodern culture that rewrites the terror of Munch’s painting in ironic and affectless ways. He devotes essays to the profusion of “killer clowns” in postmodern media culture and to the reasons why Jim Carrey’s talking butt gag found mainstream acceptance. A discussion of the “dead meat” art of Damien Hirst turns into a discussion of the emblematic functioning of mad-cow disease, which Dery suggests has served as “a screen for the projection of popular anxieties about the free-floating, indeterminate nature of things in postmodern culture, where quotation, hybridization, and mutation are the order of the day” (135). A description of *The Operation*, a frequently yucky example of TV-verite on the Learning Channel, turns into one of Dery’s many briefs for the persistence of the body in an age of digital disembodiment—one of his many points of contact with the discourses of cyberpunk. Indeed, Dery rarely misses an opportunity to celebrate the reality and corporeality of flesh—no matter how grotesque or grim its form—against digital dissing. “It’s the body’s job, these days,” Dery sadly observes, “to be a symbol of ‘detestable putridity’ in the eyes of an information society characterized by an exaltation of mind and a contempt for matter, most of all the body—that aging, earth-bound relic of Darwinian evolution that Net junkies sneeringly refer to as ‘meat’” (142). In “Space Oddities: Heaven’s Gate and *Homo Cyber*—Strange Allegiances on the Level Above Human,” Dery warns that the “neognosticism” that led to mass suicide by Heaven’s Gate cultists is not all that far removed from the protocols of cyberpunk and other longstanding strains of sf, and the new desiderata of the digerati who rally around *Wired* as their blueprint for the future. Terming the Heaven’s Gate cultists “merely a cyberspace-cadet caricature of the growing alienation of our minds from our bodies in an information society where we spend ever greater amounts of our lives sitting in chairs, staring at screens,” Dery concludes:

Obviously, most of us aren’t going to be packing our carry-on luggage for a one-way flight to the Evolutionary Level Above Human anytime soon.

But as increasing numbers of us spend more and more of our working lives and leisure time on the other side of the screen, a neognostic alienation from our own fleshly “vehicles” and the world around us is beginning to haunt mainstream America. The relocation, in technology, of many of our mental and muscular skills, what McLuhan called the “self-amputation of our physical bodies,” has made the supposedly obsolete body a source of creeping anxiety, if not outright fear and loathing. (255-56)

As the above paragraph may suggest, the concerns, claims, and assumptions of recent sf are never far from the focus of Dery’s essays. Moreover, as I read Dery’s provocative discussion of Renee French’s chilling comics, “Grim Fairy Tales: Renee French’s Kinderculture,” I began to realize that his consistently perceptive and wide-ranging references to sf works represent only one part of the significant connection between his essays and contemporary sf. Much more important is that Dery’s essays mine the cultural phenomena that more and more give rise to sf’s most engaging narratives, suggesting that the horrific ontologies of artists such as Renee French or David Lynch, rather than the triumphalist physics of Hal Clement’s *Mission of Gravity* (1953), may now fuel the genre’s innermost workings.

Promotional web pages for Dery’s books contain a brief bio that ends with an ambitious credo suitable for a whacked-out postmodern Whitman (Walt, not Slim):

Aesthetically, however, I’m interested in the unlit, unfrequented corners of society, the nethermost regions of the self: freaks, forensic pathology, true crime, conspiracy theory, cannibalism, madness, medical museums, Art Brut, weird science, sexual deviance, soft tissue modification (by tribal peoples and postmodern primitives), creature features, alien abductions, insects, Situationism, Surrealism, science fiction, the gothic, the grotesque, the carnivalesque—in short, extremes and excess of every sort. I want to induce, in my reader, the vertigo that comes from leaning too far over the edge of the cultural abyss.

And for my money, that’s exactly what Dery delivers in *The Pyrotechnic Insanitarium*. Whether or not I share his particular anxieties, I find his approach to American culture through its anxieties both engaging and valuable. I’m a newcomer to the Mark Dery bandwagon, but—based on the perception, the precision, and the panache he so clearly displays in this book—I look forward to a long and exciting ride.

A critique of his ideas & actions.



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