

Plus Ça Change

Inger H. Dalsgaard

The Postmodern Adventure: Science, Technology, and Cultural Studies at the Third Millennium, by Steven Best and Douglas Kellner. New York: Guilford, 2001. 313 pp. \$38; pb \$19.95.

At the most recent *fin de siècle* a whole host of critical publications anticipated a turning point, and the subtitle *Science, Technology, and Cultural Studies at the Third Millennium* suggests that Steven Best and Douglas Kellner conceived of *The Postmodern Adventure* in that context. A specific turning point did arrive, not at midnight of 1 January 2000 (or 2001), but on the morning of 11 September 2001, which made a revision of much millennium literature and theory seem in order sooner than could have been anticipated.

So, one may ask with 20/20 hindsight, was *The Postmodern Adventure* outdated the very year it came out, or does it remain relevant beyond the turn of the millennium, post-9/11, and as the bloody aftermath of the second Iraq War continues to unfold? Though the chapter titled "Modern/Postmodern Wars: Vietnam, Iraq, and Beyond" leaves it to the reader to ponder exactly how Best and Kellner would have theorized the latest war, it does predict that the accession of another Bush president would mean a return to a harder military-capitalist "warfare state" (93).

Much of *The Postmodern Adventure* is latently about prediction or prophetic visions concerning our fate in an increasingly postmodern world dominated by technoscience and a military-industrial complex. If the adventure is an attempt to navigate the chaotic complexity of this world, then this book is about creating historical, literary, theoretical and cognitive maps of and for the journey.

Life must be lived forward but can only be understood backward—examined in the rearview mirror (as a latter-day Kierkegaard might phrase it)—and Best and Kellner's method is to use visions and descriptions of the near past in the form of literary narratives, science fiction, theory and the "quasitheoretical" text of *Gravity's Rainbow* to reflect and examine the broad sweeps, details and subjective experiences of the postmodern period or phenomenon (70). But the fact that they use late-twentieth-century sources to describe the third

millennium suggests they need prescient mapmakers who do not just map journeys posthumously but somehow plot them in advance.

Apart from challenging Pynchon's reputation as a difficult-to-access postmodernist prophet of doom, philosophers of our postmodern future have a number of reasons to give *Gravity's Rainbow* a prominent position in such a project. In many respects (war, for one) we have not yet achieved full postmodernity, as the title of Best and Kellner's introduction, "Between the Modern and the Postmodern," implies. The authors start their investigation with the transitional phase, which they use Pynchon to help describe in the first chapter, on the "Advent of Postmodernity" or the "Rocket State," and then in the remaining chapters go through postmodernity's new forms of war, science, technology and society, culture and politics.

Pynchon has been chosen also as an exemplar of the variety of postmodernism involved not exclusively with linguistic/aesthetic innovation but with sociopolitical critique and resistance (24), a conscience and sense of responsibility to the world Best and Kellner feel all theorists of postmodernism, culture, science, technology and society should embrace (17–19). The focus on the impact of information- and biotechnology and of global capitalism on our lives and fates—"mapping the changes, threats, and promises now before us" (6)—is a clear point of resonance between *Gravity's Rainbow* and *The Postmodern Adventure*, though the authors of *The Postmodern Turn* (1997) invest perhaps too much affirmative promise in the "creative paranoia" of Pynchon's 1973 vision.

In the Zone, Pynchon dramatizes the way rigid modernist boundaries, once thought impermeable or constant, have dissolved, as have the Berlin Wall and DNA since (10). Not just national constructs are in flux in the theater of war: matter itself has become a zone where technoscience is fast obliterating pre-existing categories separating man, machine and animal by creating cyborgs and clones, a "fifth discontinuity" of which Best and Kellner also see H. G. Wells as a prophet.

Best and Kellner's definition of our times as "a tempestuous period of transition and metamorphosis, propelled principally by transmutations in science, technology, and capitalism" (6) allows for continual, unpredictable developments in our new world (dis)order. They find that literature and theory reflect this "irreducible plurality of discourses," especially in the case of the "multiperspectivist" style of *Gravity's Rainbow* (50). Conversely, pronouncements were made after 9/11 that this shattering event would spell the end of literature (at least as we knew it), yet literary production has continued, just as it did after the Holocaust, another point in Western history when unspeakable terror

threatened to render the writing of literature meaningless. Nothing escapes the delimiting effects of description, including the transition into and experience of the unforeseen.

Perhaps the repetition of the unfathomable, unwritable moment indicates that these times are not outside description or prediction, or that they are part of a continuum, a fluid change rather than a postmodern turn or a paradigm shift. The late comedian Bill Hicks lampooned the first Bush's war on Iraq in ways which fit Dubya's reprise of the "Gulf War Distraction" so perfectly that one wonders if anything in the postmodern world can be truly new, even something as chaotic as war, when seen at a distance.

Pynchon, Best and Kellner share a vision of the Second World War as the nuclear turning point which inaugurated the Rocket State (7). The latter two also draw on Baudrillard, Debord and Virilio for terms—hyperreal, spectacle, pure war—to show the nature, value and necessity to a military-industrial complex of truly postmodern warfare after the messy open-endedness of the Vietnam War. The First Gulf War gave viewers images of an efficient "techno-war"—unlike the seemingly far messier Second, muddled by politics and opinion in a global network, thwarted by opponents not equipped for the spectacle of a postmodern cyberwar but fighting by the rules of the previous wars with their old-fashioned insurgency and guerrilla tactics (81).

As our paradigms shift, war is only one of the areas in which science and technology have invaded culture and everyday life to interface "with our very bodies and subjectivities in unpredictable ways" (17). This fact needs interpretation to allow us not just to understand, Best and Kellner argue, but to *acknowledge* its full impact and ramifications. But how can the complexity of countless human lives, led within control systems in the process of mutating, be reduced to description?

On the one hand, the flux and complexity of a system that is large enough can take on recognizable structures. Best and Kellner point out that "chaos theory, for example, does not jettison the notions of determinism or order" (111), implying that unforeseen, apparently unfathomable and uncontrollable developments—from the allegedly creative workings of entropy (51) to the inexorability of globalization (207)—follow a natural law after all. Though this built-in inevitability in a chaotic, developing world obviates (other) control systems, such determinism is a trap: it implies that Nature's irrepressible, fertile, chaotic resistance to and obviation of control systems is itself bounded by laws and structures—which can be predicted and described: *Plus ça change, plus c'est la même chose*. In the terms of *Gravity's Rainbow* this is why not even Nature or the Counterforce escapes the hegemony

on which science, technology and capitalism in the Rocket State thrive. In this reading Best and Kellner show us the chains of our bondage and ask us to be creatively paranoid about the connections forced on us by reading *The Postmodern Adventure* and to make the most of our lot now that we recognize it.

On the other hand, readers of *Gravity's Rainbow*, recognizing the dark conspiracy of science, technology and capitalism which makes war predictable, often pin their hopes on active Counterforce intervention: a back door left open to possibilities and indeterminacy.

Maybe lives are irreducible to complete description (and ever more so by the fifth discontinuity technoscience threatens to bring about) and we should see Best and Kellner's efforts not as an acceptance of the inevitability of control systems but as a Counterforce raid on the closed meeting or teeming zone of a world dominated by science, technology and capitalism. In either case readers will recognize in Best and Kellner's project of analysis and prophecy the one Pynchon undertook a quarter-century earlier, with many of the same internal contradictions—and *that* is life for you.

—University of Aarhus