

Books

The Postmodern Adventure: Science, Technology, and Cultural Studies at the Third Millennium

Steven Best and Douglas Kellner.
2001.

New York and London: Guilford Press

I have been an appreciative reader of Steven Best and Douglas Kellner's work on postmodernism for several years. Nevertheless, I found that this most recent volume left me with a nagging feeling of frustration. The unease that accompanied my reading was not produced by the authors' failure to provide appropriate examples; nor was it produced by obscurity in the development of their central arguments. Quite the opposite, the illustrations were timely and well presented, and Best and Kellner were conscientious in seeing to the needs of their readers as their theoretical positions were unfurled. The main cause of my frustration was not with things the text lacked, but with things the text over-developed. Put plainly, it was the text's broad and sweeping inclusiveness that I found occasionally off-putting.

In their laudable search for comprehensiveness, Best and Kellner risk surrendering postmodernism to any and all comers. I realize that even as I raise this point some readers will already be on their feet, cheering at the mere idea that the walls securing postmodernism from its detractors may have been breached. My criticism, however, does not go quite that far, for inclusiveness is hardly a bad thing. The difficulty arises, as I see it, when the desire to be inclusive is transformed into a sort of wanton or undisciplined eclecticism. Best and Kellner present a compelling story which focuses with considerable and valuable insight on the interstices in the modern/postmodern interface. But there are features in the argument that

are not easily conceptualized owing to the elasticity of the terms they engage. I am not suggesting a return to logical positivism where the goal was the reduction of language to a form of certainty that could be guaranteed by logical deduction or empirical verification. I accept the necessary hermeneutic struggle that characterizes projects dealing with cultural studies and analyses of the postmodern condition. Still, I have some difficulty accepting completely the enormity of the subjects that Best and Kellner manage to filter through the postmodern lens. Throughout the text, postmodernism is brought forward as cause and consequence, as process and product, and even as fact and fiction. This approach illuminates the contemporary cultural scene in several important ways. Nonetheless, at times I found the glare produced from this illumination rather disorienting.

None of these comments should be interpreted as dismissing the book's overall value, however. An enthusiastic telling of the chronicles of new technology, the *Postmodern Adventure* is also a cautionary tale of the folly of unbridled hubris. In addition, it is a well-crafted adventure story in its own fashion, for the book is an exercise in unraveling the dialectic between the modern and postmodern eras via a narrative sharply energized by a series of spatial metaphors. References to distance and proximity – and images of border transgressions – play key explanatory roles in the text. The "adventure" described in the book's title is both the historical trajectory of human biological and cultural evolution, and the promise of an unscripted future on whose brink lie poised the massive armies of technology and science. What is "postmodern" about the tensions such forces bring into existence is the inevitability of the annihilation of inevitability; the destructuring of structure; and the permeability of formerly rigid lines of demarcation.

Best and Kellner cast themselves in the roles of mapmakers investigating the "violent cartographies" employed by the ideologues of the modernist regimes (Shapiro, 1997). But although they seek out ways to reestablish the coherence of the "social maps" we know as theories, they are insistent that the modernist agenda does not warrant total rejection. Hence Best and Kellner can be regarded as having set themselves the task of striking a balance between a modernist faith in reason, and a postmodern suspicion of foundationalist thinking.

But the adventure, as I have suggested, is sometimes difficult to grasp in its entirety. Because the authors wish to construct a multiperspectival critical theory that will enable them to combine the best elements of modernist thought with the best things found in postmodernism they occasionally produce a series of dichotomous readings that are balanced rather precariously on a constantly shifting foundation. This sort of give-and-take narratology can be perplexing. For instance, readers are told that the postmodern adventure "is the systematic dismantling" of modernist ideology. Yet we are also informed that in the domains of science, "the postmodern adventure strives to overcome all known limits [to scientific knowledge]," even as it "departs from positivism, mechanism, and the coordinates of absolute, three-dimensional space and time" (pages 11, 102 and 110). Hence the postmodern adventure, it would seem is constructive, deconstructive, and reconstructive. I suppose there is nothing particularly wrong with this kind of intellectual flexibility, but at times I found myself confused by the manner in which Best and Kellner combine a trenchant critique of the pretensions of scientific rationality with a curious sidelong approval of various mystical conceptions of multi-dimensional cosmologies. Although there is a good deal of genuflection before the altar of technology in the book, it would be a misrepresentation to say that Best and Kellner have abandoned their critical theory roots and the goals of cultural emancipation. Hence they also recognize the "dark side" of the postmodern adventure in the continuing threat of high-tech war alongside "increasing global insecurities and the possibility of world destruction" (page 92). Still, their analysis of those whose voices are raised against the enframing of the (post)modern world in the discourse of

technological determinism is curiously dismissive, and they express surprise that a large share of recent scholarly literature has been "strikingly technophobic" (page 156).

Best and Kellner provide what may be the most thoughtful overview of their work when they tell us that the postmodern adventure is "a hotly contested journey into the future" (page 155). This is a judgment with which most readers are likely to be inclined to agree, for images of contestation in the form of border patrols, modernist cartographers, and technocapitalism are regular figures in the text. To what extent Best and Kellner are able to overcome the limitations imposed on their analysis by the grandeur of their ambitions is best left for other readers to determine for themselves.

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