

Reviews

David E. Nye, *Technology Matters. Questions to Live With*, Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 2006. ISBN 0-262-14093-4; £18.95 hardback.

Technology Matters is the fruit of a lifetime of thinking, research and writing on the history and impact of technologies and the use of energy on American culture. The writer, thinker and historian is professor David E. Nye, currently at the University of Southern Denmark in Odense. Nye has distinguished himself in the field of American Studies and is author of a number of books interpreting the social and cultural impact of technology and energy from the late 1800s into the 20th century.

Nye's interest in technology is almost hereditary. He has dedicated his recent book to his father who was a professor of mechanical engineering and who undoubtedly provided a lot of inspiration to his son's work. David Nye began his research and studies in the history of technology with a book about Henry Ford (1979) in which he discussed the great industrialist's ideals - and his ignorance, as exemplified in his belief in reincarnation, among other things. The book was followed by another one on Thomas Edison (1983) titled "an anti-biography." Instead of writing a conventional narrative of the inventor, Nye reconnects documents to the cultural systems that produce them. This led him to further analyses of the relationship between the invention and development of technological devices and their economic, social and cultural impacts in a series of books on the application of forms of energy. *Electrifying America: Social Meanings of a New Technology* (1990) and *Consuming Power: A Social History of American Energies* (1998) are seminal books and required reading in this field. Nye has also explored the philosophical and artistic implications of technology in what may be his most important and innovative contributions to American Studies, viz. *American Technological Sublime* (1994) and *America as a Second Creation: Technology and Narratives of New Beginnings* (2003). He applies his wide knowledge in the vast field of American Studies to combine the perspectives of technological history and the history of landscape, art and philosophy, traditionally worlds apart, but - as Nye shows us - closely related.

The subtitle of *Technology Matters* is "Questions to Live With" which means that the book is meant to challenge the readers' ideas about technology and make them reflect on the ways in which it both shapes, and is in turn shaped by, individuals, society and culture. In his opening chapter entitled "Can we define 'technology'?" Nye adopts an anthropological and evolutionary perspective in reminding us that human beings are *homo faber*, natural toolmakers, and have been so for half a million years. Tools are essential in increasing the efficiency of human endeavor, whether it is for food or shelter or for erecting symbolic structures like the great pyramids. The way we seem to be embedded in our own technological devices makes the author ask the next important questions: "Does technology control us?" (Ch. 2) and "Is technology predictable?" (Ch. 3) to which he gives qualified and analytical "both yes and no" answers.

Nye's fourth query, "How do historians understand technology?" (Ch. 4) is perhaps the key question in the book. Here he outlines two different approaches to interpreting the history and advance of technologies, viz. the internalist and the contextualist approaches. "Internalists," according to Nye, "reconstruct the history of machines and processes focusing on the role of the inventor, laboratory practices, and the state of scientific knowledge at a given time (p. 56)." These histories have their uses, but Nye is far more interested in the contextualist approach which means "that machines and technical processes are parts of cultural practices that may develop in more than one way (p. 61)." Inventions or processes, like computer hardware and software, are also cultural constructions shaped by communication, news, commerce, marketing, politics and entertainment forming a social and cultural space.

The contextualist approach, as Nye defines it, bears on the development of American Studies itself. Starting in mid 20th century, American Studies became a way of breaching the sometimes impenetrable methodological and traditional walls built around academic disciplines in order to study issues and problems across the disciplines. The method in American Studies was to combine knowledge in different but related disciplines to obtain new knowledge and insight. Nye has defined American Studies as a set of discourses between disciplines (*AS in S*, No. 2, 1985). "American Studies is interdisciplinary. It is not about literature alone, or history alone, or any other discipline in isolation. ... American Studies is about breaking down the divisions between fields of study (Nye, 1995)."

When Janice Radway in her address to the 1998 ASA convention ("What's in a Name?") argued that American Studies should be redefined as ethnic, minority, gender, etc. studies, David Nye disagreed because it seemed to marginalize the "great themes" in American Studies: landscape/cityscape, environment, technology/industry, etc. introduced by Lewis Mumford, Henry Nash Smith and Leo Marx. This reviewer thinks that David Nye's background in "classical" American Studies has made him eminently qualified for adopting the contextualist approach. His academic training and scholarship have been influenced by the great names in the American Studies movement like Leo Marx and scholars and teachers such as Mary Turpie, Tremaine McDowell and Mulford Sibley in the program at the University of Minnesota. His work parallels that of Alan Trachtenberg and Cecelia Tichi in interpreting and defining the relationships between different social, cultural and material areas of endeavor and production.

Technology Matters is not limited to American Studies scholarship. It analyzes the relationships between technology and culture which are relevant anywhere and at any time, but it is conceived and written within the "great tradition" of American Studies. And since America is a technologically advanced civilization, it is natural that many examples of technological applications are found there. With Nye's wide knowledge of other continents and countries he is able to make striking comparisons and evaluations.

On the basis of the definitions and methodology outlined in the first four chapters the author advances his argument in a series of dichotomies in the next five chapters: Cultural uniformity or diversity (5), abundance or crisis (6), more or less work (7),

security or dangers (9) and expanding consciousness or encapsulation (10). The fear of cultural uniformity is e.g. contradicted by the diversification of the Levittowns according to individual taste, and “MacDonaldization” is tempered by multiculturalism. Whether we will have sustainable abundance or ecological disaster on our hands is within our power to decide. “Ultimately, the world’s carrying capacity is not a scientific fact but a social construction. Nature is not outside us, and it does not have fixed limits. Rather its limits are our own (p. 108).” There is, as Nye reminds us in his last chapter (11), “Not just one future.”

Like David Nye’s other books, *Technology Matters* is written in a clear and lucid style wonderfully free of any of the dense jargon and tribal language that, in this reviewer’s opinion, mar so much of contemporary writing in cultural studies, particularly in gender, identity and “body” studies. *Technology Matters* ought to be recommended reading for decision makers in government or corporate organizations, managers, politicians, economists, market analysts, environmentalists and social planners. And it ought to be read by a worldwide audience of concerned and committed citizens who can influence technological applications, market mechanisms and politics. It is especially important today to understand technology in order to effectively combat global warming and reduce the emission of greenhouse gases. That the book will also be published in French and German translation is good news. Hopefully this will give it an even wider readership.

Arne Neset

University of Stavanger

Arnold Rampersad, *Ralph Ellison: A Biography*, New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2007. 657 pages; ISBN: 9780375408274 hardcover; \$35.00.

Stanford University professor Arnold Rampersad – who authored the definitive biographies of Langston Hughes and Jackie Robinson and collaborated with Arthur Ashe on his memoir, *Days of Grace* – has done it again: he has written another thoroughly researched volume that leaves us to admire both his meticulous scholarship and his compelling prose. An instant classic in American literary biography upon publication, Rampersad’s most recent book sheds light on the artistic intelligence and psychological complexity of Ralph Ellison, who rocketed into fame with *Invisible Man* in the early 1950s and later excelled in the genre of the essay (and, to some extent, in the short story), but who also notoriously spent several decades wrestling with his second novel – a perpetual work-in-progress that was finally published posthumously in 1999, in heavily edited and condensed form, under the title *Juneteenth*. As Rampersad clearly knows, most scholars who will read this biography will be looking for an answer to one burning question: what was it exactly that so tragically immobilized Ellison as an artist after *Invisible Man*? Rather than being crystallized in one key sentence, the answer unfolds gradually, as befits a biography of more than 650 pages.

Ellison, as Rampersad convincingly shows, was nothing if not a proud man who felt he had to excel in whatever he did – and with his second Great American Novel