David E. Nye, *Narratives and Spaces: Technology and the Construction of American Culture, Representing American Culture* series, *1*. Exeter: Exetei University Press, 1997. xii + 224 pp. ill. ISBN: 0 85989 556 4; paper; £12.50; ISBN: 0 85989 555 6; hardcover; £32.50.

Exeter University Press and editor Mick Gidley auspiciously open their new *Representing Arnerican Culture* series with David E. Nye's *Narrntives and Spaces: Technology and the Construction of American Culture*. A specialist in social and cultural readings of technological history, David Nye is a prolific writer on Amcrican Studics subjects: his

clear and eminently ieadablc style combines solid scholarship, original Pacts, ideas and theories into an enteitaining, informative wholc – and *Narratives and Spaces* does not fail to delight The ten thematically arranged chapters are dividcd into thiee parts 1 *Spaces,* II: *Narratives* and III *Narratives in Space* (given the interplay between teclinology and cultuie as well as tlie complex relationship betwccn tlie facts of and imagination about technology in thc Uiiitcd States, liowccver, no chapter is as easily categoiized as these overall headings might inclicate). All but one have appeared in European and American journals oi as prc publications ovci tlie last few years before being rewritten and edited lor this volume

Since addiessing the interconnection bctwccn historical method and postmodern theoiy in *The Invented Self An Anti-biography from Documents of Thomas Edison* (1983), the strength and grace of Nye's arguments and standpoint have developed Hayden White remains an inspiration for his discussion of tlie state ol tlicory and method in curient history writing, while Jacques Derrida is applied in a jargon-free way to fictional issues of representation and narratrve which intersect with historical instances and facts to construct our social landscapes Technology, and history writing about it, as Nye rnakes clear, can nevei bc free of subjective perceptions and alternative narratives *Narratives in Space* seeks to cliallcnge realist history writing by addiiig another textual version, and to 'put theory into dialogue with particulai instances' (6)

Part 1 addresses a number of instances and narrative typcs The opening chapter examines the impact of touiism on the visual construction of natural sites/sights and the experience of space Uaing Niagara Falls and the Grand Canyon as examples, and covering thc changes from an 1830s train culture to a present day car culture, Nye shows how diffeieut visual constructions and landscape ideals clash, and how tlie large vistas and concentrated series of lookouts at both locations have put today's auto-motivated tourist at an (intendecl) disadvantage For ecological reasons, tlie Grand Canyon park services have resisted cxtcnding road and hotel facilities (oiiginally geared foi inodciatc iail tourism) to cater lor thc modcin motorist's flcxible 'point ol vicw' Instead, just outside the park, visitors may take in a hypcr ieal Grand Canyon at the TMAX cinema Technology allows them many more and different visual experiences than they could have enjoyed theinselves, given constraints on time, money and accessibility Chapter Two charts anothci instance the electrification of tlie American West between 1880 and 1940, from its role in advancing the settlcment of foui distinct wests (tliosc associated with mining, urbanization, agriculture and, conveisely, thc wilderness) to the way the spectacle of light becamc part of tlie West's self-perception Challengiiig Turner's mythic, undifferentiated and vacant West settled by individual farmers, Nye shows how the fai West, for instance, was urbanized and industrialized before agriculture (dependent on electricity and artificial irrigation) was madc possible Electricity is here an cxample of a real, technological conquest ol space wherc Turner's agricultural conquest was rhetorical A third chaptci deals with Wright Morrrs' 1948 photo-novel *The Home Place*, rural landscapes, values and documentaries

Aftei discussions of space and presentation, the tliree chapteis of Part II turn to narratives and iepiesentations of tcchnologies Nye first parades four diffeient points of view, myths and counter myths about New Deal electrification, evaluating thc iival claims

ol private utilities and government agencies concerning the clliciency and effect on rural society of the strategies adoptcd Chapter Five then ponders 'Energy' as a iecent narrativc concept – powei with spatial elasticity – and devclops a classificatoiy system to deal with different encigy narratives (for example, of abundance, scarcity and ingenuity) present in presidential rhetoiic as well as the writings of Scott Fitzgerald Thc final chaptci (which parallels the discussion of Wright Morris by evaluating Doctorow's *World's Fair* (1985) on the borderline between definitions o1 history, autobiography and fiction) continues the central theoretical discussion of narrative strategies and classification

The four chapters ol Part III pursue tlie themes of Parts I and II at their intersection. One chapter looks at how Amcrican corporations catering to the public influenced lighting stratcgics al world's fairs between 1881 and 1919 Eponymous inventors or famous engines may have been central at first, but a diive towards theinatic unity via elcctrical control took over in later stages Nye then concentrates spccilically on the 1919 New York World's Fair, whcre European governments unsuccessfully tried to court an American public massively opposcd to cnteiing the impending European war through national displays which came across as old-fashioned, unimpressive and static compared with the dynainism and entcrtainment Favouied by American corporate exhibits The third chaptci exainincs the lack o1 public support for NASA's space program in the 1960s and the problems of creating and inaintaining space-flight as a 'media event ' Nye points out that television was an insufficiently dramatic medium foi relaying the spiritual, sublime qualities of a lift-off, but gained narrative quality once cameras secured access to tlie capsule The final chaptci follows threc stages in the computerization of society and discusses the links between postmodernism and today's decentralized, intcrnet-dominated use of personal computers Drawing on tlie work of Jean Francois Lyotard, Nye's evaluation of the new role of capitalist pioduction and consumption in a postmodcrn society, in terms of language, images or landscapes, closes the ciicle between the 'natural' space of the Grand Canyon and cyberspace

One bclici which Nye seeks to discredit (in favour ol social constiuctionism) is technological detcrminism the iclca that machines initiate cultural changcs Thc crux, in Nye's woids, is that '[m]achines do not simply appear People invent and shape them within a larger context, which includes visual practices and narrative strategies' (2). The argument should not bc the simple one about whcther machines make us or wc them, nor is it Nye's chapters juggle narrativcs which within some six catcgories 'present technologies as deterministic forces' (179), thc social effects of which range from automatic progress to apocalypse Technology has no master narrative, therefore, but many alternative ones, allowing us to deal with it in a variety of ways – including accepting it as a 'natural' part of life In illustrating man'? active role in tlie man-machine-nature relationship, Nye also addiesscs ecological and other similar concerns raised by the ways in which man's technological interference with the American landscape has made it more of a 'manscape '

Narratives and Spaces is a very handy collection of many of Nye's shortci pieces which will also open up his oeuvre to new ieaders who can find electrification, early rail-tourism, the interplay between the natural and technological sublime and othcr subjects rcseaicheil in depth in his other recent books, such as *Electrifying America* (1990) and

American Technological Sublime (1994) The introduction should bc of particular inteiest to readers, including those who think thcy h w c no truck with issues related to the wiiting of technological history More generally, tlie wealth ol material dealt with and the scholarly qualities of the book will malte it useful as a teaching tool and to specialists ın equal measure

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