

system that systematically and intentionally denies equality of access to the American dream. To suspect that a grand conspiracy is denying millions of Americans the opportunity for a baccalaureate degree is far-fetched. In fact, vocational-technical programs, while far from perfect, are often overenrolled and in great demand by students. True, some colleges do not include enough "democratic citizenry" courses in their curricula, but this is a recognized problem and is being addressed.

Unfortunately, students often drop out of the degree program after learning a skill and becoming employed. The fact that this happens is more a societal problem, rooted in the profit motives of American culture, than a problem of higher education. Furthermore, the claim that transfer programs have suffered is true of only some institutions. Evidence shows that students who attend the first two years at a community college make higher grades and have a higher completion rate in baccalaureate programs than students who begin their college career at a four-year school.

The value of the work is in its unique viewpoint on the development of the community college movement and its analysis of how that development brings to light weaknesses in the higher educational system in general. The text demands the reader's attention for its consideration of the larger issues of class, society, and equality in American culture. However, the book ends its analysis with 1985, and many of its sources are at least ten years old. No reader should use this volume to determine the current state of community colleges.—*W. Lee Hisle, Austin Community College, Austin, Texas.*

Poster, Mark. *The Mode of Information: Poststructuralism and Social Context.* Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Pr., 1990. 179p., alk. paper, \$16.95 (ISBN 0-226-67596-3 pbk.). LC 90-34770.

The "mode of information" is the phrase Mark Poster has coined to designate the massive cultural changes that he sees occurring in postindustrial societies

under the impact of electronically mediated communications. Technologies like digital recording, television, databases, and computer writing do more, he argues, than merely facilitate our ability to produce, store, manipulate, and transmit data. These tools also drastically alter our relation to language and thereby transform the ways in which we constitute ourselves and connect with others. This vision of the human universe revolutionized by electronic media recalls Marshall McLuhan's 1960's prophecy of a postprint "global village," but Poster's "mode of information" is different—distinguished both by its focus on language as the crucial site of change and by his emphatic politicization of the process.

Four basic premises organize Poster's book. First, electronic communications radically destabilize the traditional bond between linguistic signs and their referents. Second, this disruption of language's representational logic subverts the self as a rational, autonomous subject capable of knowing and controlling the objective world. Third, this rational self, regarded historically, was the dominant form of consciousness during the West's capitalist, imperialist past and can unambiguously be equated with "the adult, white, male subject" and its "associated forms of patriarchy and ethnocentrism." And finally, poststructuralist theory, specifically the thought of its leading French exponents, offers a uniquely appropriate vocabulary for describing both the linguistic changes caused by electronic communications and their political impact on the ties "between the state and the individual, between the individual and the community, between authority and law, between family members, between consumer and retailer."

Poster's opening chapters promote his poststructuralist methodology by attacking the failure of modern political theory—both liberal and Marxist—to recognize "the qualitative transformation of social relations" that stems from the electronic media's assault on linguistic representation. Poster ascribes this failure to the inability of social scientists to free themselves from the totalizing logic of ref-

erential language—an inability that leaves them blind to the role language itself plays in the organization of reality. In contrast, poststructuralists presuppose the primacy of language in the formation of consciousness, and it is their concepts that Poster subsequently employs to analyze the cultural significance of different types of electronic communications.

These later chapters concentrate, in fact, on rather routine elements of postindustrial life and are the book's most engaging. Particularly provocative is Poster's treatment of TV ads, which uses Jean Baudrillard's political economy of the sign to argue that television commercials establish "a new linguistic and communications reality." Emphasizing their imaginative splicing of different semantic and visual codes, Poster shows how ads sever words from conventional associations to create a hyperreality of free-floating signifiers that "promises a new level of self-constitution, one beyond the rigidities and restraints of fixed identity." But while boldly proclaiming the liberational dimension of TV ads, Poster also acknowledges their enhanced power of social control, which "makes possible the subordination of the individual to manipulative communications practices."

A similar ambivalence governs Poster's discussion of databases, which proceeds under the rubric of Michel Foucault's twin concepts of surveillance and discipline. On the one hand, because databases are free from the spatio-temporal coordinates of speech and writing, they constitute a new language formation that undermines traditional modes of cultural discipline. On the other hand, the "structure or grammar" of digital computers is so rigidly nonambiguous that it produces "an impoverished, limited language that uses the norm to constitute individuals and define deviants." From this latter perspective, databases appear not as the avant-garde of a utopian democracy of free and abundant information, but as a sinister tool of reactionary surveillance. This dual perspective is also present in the two concluding chapters, which invoke Jacques Derrida on computer writing (including both word processing and electronic mail) and Jean Lyotard on computer science.

For librarians, Poster's book is especially valuable for the reflection it encourages about the electronic instruments so important to our professional lives. Most often, we regard computers as passive tools of our ambitions to serve patrons more efficiently and effectively. Poster enables us to understand that these machines are also active forces in our cultural environment, which are subtly but profoundly reshaping us in their own image. Sensitivity to this fundamental fact of cybernetic reality is, perhaps, no less urgent than mastering a new set of commands for the latest database.—William McPheron, *Stanford University, Stanford, California.*

Black Bibliophiles and Collectors: Preservers of Black History. Ed. by Elinor Des Verney Sinnette, W. Paul Coates and Thomas C. Battle. Washington, D.C.: Howard Univ. Pr., 1990. 236p. (ISBN 8-88258-031-0). LC 90-4458.

Like so many facets of black history, black bibliography and book collecting have been neglected areas in American intellectual history. *Black Bibliophiles and Collectors: Preservers of Black History* is one of the recently published books that attempts to remedy this deficiency.

This collection of essays and commentaries was originally presented at Black Bibliophiles and Collectors: A National Symposium, a 1983 conference held at Howard University. Grouped under nine topics treating various aspects of collecting and organizing black materials, the fifteen essays and commentaries by established black scholars, bibliophiles, and librarians are uneven in quality. Many present little new information to anyone familiar with black collections and black scholarship. Some essays, however, will reward even the seasoned practitioner. Together, they provide a useful introduction for the novice to the subject, making the book an essential purchase for library school libraries.

The venerable Dorothy Porter Wesley's encyclopedic contribution "Black Antiquarians and Bibliophiles Revisited, with a Glance at Today's Lovers of Books," is a fascinating and informative discussion of black collectors from the early nineteenth century to the present. In this peripatetic