

Mark Kingwell, *Dreams of Millennium*

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Kingwell, Mark. *Dreams of Millennium*, Toronto: Penguin, 1999. 372 pp., paper, \$16.99, ISBN 0140283080.

Kingwell offers a cohesive translation of our befuddled present, with references tied firmly to past ambiguous, transitional periods. Many readers who wish to understand our current situated-ness in the Western world will find here a carefully crafted, introspective study into what is occurring, and, to a limited extent, why it occurs. Beyond explaining the latest cultural trends ("Ah, that's what my prof/my kid/that filmmaker was trying to get at!"), *Dreams of Millennium* may prove to be a time capsule of current culture. As things continue to change, become "new," and yet replay as more of the same, this text may serve as a valuable reference-list of our age.

Dreams of Millennium covers an eclectic range of topics to illustrate the author's inferences on our culture's state of millennial anxiety and dread. Kingwell discusses "stuff" we have and don't want, and vice versa; he considers loss of faith, vulnerability, and distancing; the frequencies at which contemporary sensibilities oscillate in "late-modern" culture. Simultaneously compelling and a little disturbing, particularly when his words ring true, he has deftly threaded together a panoply of images, sentiments, happenings and artifacts. This is *Zeitgeist à la Rivotril*. Juxtaposed examples include body-modification, Church of the SubGenius and Luddites, Bahai and Descartes, JFK and Arthur Kroker, "The Simpsons" and St Augustine, Ayn Rand and Anne Rice.

Following three brilliantly written introductory sections, Kingwell's wide-ranging eight chapters wind forward and backward through time to provide the reader with some "...clear-eyed reflection on our accelerated culture" (p. 12). The eight chapter titles aptly describe the book's content: Shards of Apocalypse, The Prophet Zone, To Have and Have Not, The Virtual Future, Our Bodies Our Selves (my favourite), The Truth is Out There, The Best Lack All Conviction, and Faith No More. Each chapter reads as a self-contained mini-text on a specific theme. Examples include end-time prophecies throughout history (Chapter 1), material and intellectual endowment of the "overclass" versus the underclass (Chapter 3), culture and

communication in the Western world's technologized social structure (Chapter 4). The author's talent for writing is evident in that, for all the information covered, a great cohesiveness has been consistently maintained.

The value in *Dreams* lies in its thick description of current Western thought, projects and products. Kingwell's considerations are specific to current cultural consciousness and resulting tendencies, although his range of examples spans many seemingly diverse worlds — the evening news, classical works, pop culture and counter-culture. While a great deal has been thrown into the stew, the author does depict an off-kilter bricolage, accurate to the nature of our times. Readers not familiar with Kingwell's many obscure references should not avoid the book, nor should those who advocate a full separation of "academic" from "street" culture. Both zones of knowledge, which Kingwell has richly interwoven for the reader, work to illuminate the direction of Western millennial cultural identity. What has resulted is a unique source-book, to which a wide audience may turn for an overview of our age.

Smoothly written in a forthright style, the book's interlinked topics are not difficult to digest. Through this approach, Kingwell has achieved his goal of providing a text accessible to a wide audience. It is unfortunate, however, that the author did not delve into deeper philosophical discussion. The eight chapters seem to taper off before a more compelling conclusion can be reached.

Hollow statements are offered throughout in Kingwell's attempt to describe our society's state of over-riding ambivalence. He states, "We must hold onto reality; it's all we've got" (p. 266, Chapter 6). In Chapter eight ("Faith No More") the author posits, "Uncertain and anxious, we find the dominant forms of pre-millennial belief are thus either dark and brutal...or fuzzy and cosy...Both responses demonstrate a worrying loss of faith *in ourselves*" (p. 330). Such generalizations are not overly difficult to accept when one stops to consider the hope, dread, and responsibility of choice that are indeed conditions of living (p. 349). Still, one is left with a desire for Kingwell to get to "the heart of the matter." Although clearly profiled, his thesis of millennial angst and its implications, signs and symptoms could be pushed farther. An impression remains

that the pieces of evidence precede an evocative fundamental core that could have emerged, had the author not stopped short.

In the "pre-preface" (Who Dreams of the Millennium?), added to this second edition in January 1999, Kingwell provides the book's deepest disclosure, and serves to demarcate the intentions of the succeeding pages in two particular ways. First, he speaks of cultural dreams as revealing the hidden language of the soul, proposing that the millennium is more than a date, but "...rather, a psychological space...an intimation of mortality, an opportunity for assessment, a locus of fear, a chance for hope. It is time itself put into question" (p. xxvii). He encourages us to take the opportunity to reflect on who we are. His unfortunate second message reneges on the first, however, pulling the reader in an opposite direction: "This book is a cultural report, not a political tract" (p. xxxi). *Dreams of Millennium*, as Kingwell seems to admit here, is mostly well written surface analysis. "...My only regret...is that I did not put my political cards on the table..." (p. xxxi).

As Kingwell himself acknowledges, "To be any good, a book has to keep its limitations in mind: you can't say everything at once" (p. xxxi). True. But, perhaps those readers — academic or otherwise — looking for a deeper analysis would benefit from a greater emphasis on underlying meaning and ramifications, accompanied by a shorter list of eccentricities to support the point. See, for example, Neil Postman's book *Technopoly* (New York: Knopf, 1992), or the documentary film *Synthetic Pleasures* (Caipirinha Productions, directed by Iara Lee, produced by George Gund, 1995) as supporting information.

Recent discussion by Kingwell has been more discerning, such as his address to the University of Toronto Alumni Association on 22 June 1999. The Web-cast of his talk, entitled "Storage/Retrieval, Reflections on Information, Technology and Information-Technology," is a more focussed (yet related) reflection on current culture. Here he articulates, with characteristic eloquence, how we are "buried alive in cultural sludge" and "bombarded with product" in a "de-contextualized information environment" that creates a sense of "upgrade angst" due to our age's "fascism of speed." (www.alumni.utoronto.ca/groups/utaa [meetings/annual general meeting/video clips/Mark Kingwell's address])

What is notable in Kingwell's speech is that he presses further into the topic to explore possible circumstances and solutions to an info-culture as such. Could "off-grid living" be

the answer? How should we respond to the dizzyingly overloaded environment? Will we be able to recognize a state of "self-defeating surrender to the overwhelming imperative to consume"? His strongest message may be that "...as people overwhelmed by cultural *content*, I think we feel a need for more *context* — a way of making sense of the barrage. And yet, of course, that worthy project has an alarming tendency to decline into mere trendspotting" (www.alumni.utoronto.ca/groups/utaa [meetings/annual general meeting/video clips/Mark Kingwell's address]).

Contrast between the book and the above-mentioned speech illuminates the crux of the matter, voiced by the author himself (albeit in another context). Had he pursued the thesis further, *Dreams of Millennium* could have contributed a rich source for those pursuing the study of eschatology or postmodernism, or delving into the subject matter of philosophy, cultural studies, information/media studies and history of science. At Kingwell's conclusion, Jean Baudrillard's words serve well to admonish both author and reader: "Even theory is no longer in the state of "reflecting" on anything anymore. All it can do is to snatch concepts from their critical zone of reference and transpose them to the point of no return, in the process of which theory itself too passes into the hyperspace of simulation as it loses all "objective" validity..." ("Pataphysics of Year 2000," in *L'illusion de la fin: ou La grève des événements*, Paris: Galilée, 1992; Also at www.uta.edu/english/apt/collab/texts/pataphysics.html (6 July 2000)).

Dreams of Millennium does make for interesting reading, but one should approach the text as a description of one person's discernment; *prescriptive* it is not. Herein lies my concern that Kingwell's book might be overlooked in a few years' time, when we have all grown accustomed to living with the digits "200_". After all, the average consumer enjoys a continual hunt for the *new*, or at least the hunt for directions to the "next big thing." This book will appeal to those individuals for the time being. As an academic source, however, a deeper investigation by the author might have provided greater intellectual significance, and therefore improved the prospects of the book enduring as a classic text of our time. In its present form, *Dreams* may provide an interesting starting point for an individual's query into "What's going on."