

BOOK REVIEWS

Silicon Valley. High Tech Window to the Future by *Gene Bylinsky*
(Intercontinental Publishing Corporation, Hong Kong, 1985) pp.278, \$39.95,
ISBN 0 962276 001 5.

It should be made clear at the outset that this book is of the coffee table variety. It is bulky, glossy and not too overburdened with written text. The subject matter is Silicon Valley, California and its high technology culture. The strength of the book lies in the professional photographic treatment of the subject matter, which constitutes about 80 per cent of the bulk. The photographs cover a variety of perspectives on Silicon Valley, including its people, millionaires, lifestyle and industries. At this simple level, the book represents a valuable snapshot of Silicon Valley and will be a prized possession of high tech enthusiasts.

However, at a slightly deeper level, this book is at once both exasperatingly inadequate and also subtly suggestive of a much more complex phenomenon. It all depends on how one wants to see Silicon Valley and high technology. At first glance, the book would appear to cover the field fairly well with eleven wide-ranging chapters on themes such as 'how it all began', 'the software merchants', and 'problems in paradise'. Unfortunately, the text which accompanies the excellent photography follows the journalistic style of many popular high tech and business magazines. This should not be a detraction since the book does not claim to be an academic work. However, a definition of high technology as 'an umbrella term that implies the application of . . . techniques that elevate a technology to a higher level of accomplishment' (p.273) must surely leave any discerning reader puzzled. Other annoying features, such as an almost total neglect of the central role of informal information exchange in Silicon Valley (p.183), a simplistic treatment of the international spatial distribution of high technology (p.45), and a reification of Frederick Terman as the 'father' of Silicon Valley are not redeeming assets.

On the other hand, if the book is viewed critically, then a much richer message is being communicated. It provides a 'window' for interpreting high technology, not in terms of symbols like microchips or personal computers, but rather as a political myth forming a part of our culture. Such a myth is a political story about origins, present events and the future which is generally believed to be true. It transmits cultural values and beliefs. The Silicon Valley story as recorded in this book does just that. It is a reassertion of such cultural values as entrepreneurial spirit, success, reward, risk, talent and new technology. Unfortunately, in true mythic form, this book does not address the contradictions inherent in the myth. It is up to the reader to fill in these gaps.

In summary, this is a book for high tech enthusiasts and/or coffee table owners. It is not an academic work, but rather a photographic collection. It is an expression of our culture and in many ways a thought provoking book for those willing to analyse critically the high technology myth and how it is communicated.

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