



Escape Velocity: Cyberculture at the End of the Century

Mark Dery , Laura Hammond Hough (Designed by)

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An Unforgettable Journey into the Dark Heart of the Information Age

In *Escape Velocity* Mark Dery takes us on an electrifying tour of the high-tech subcultures that both celebrate and critique our wired world: would-be cyborgs who believe the body is obsolete and dream of downloading their minds into computers, cyber-hippies who boost their brainpower with smart drugs and mind machines, on-line swingers seeking cybersex on electronic bulletin boards, techno-primitives who sport "biomechanical" tattoos of computer circuitry; and cyberpunk roboticists whose Mad Max contraptions duel to the death before howling crowds.

Timely, trenchant, and provocative, *Escape Velocity* is the first truly critical inquiry into cyberculture-essential reading for everyone interested in computer culture and the shape of things to come.

Escape Velocity: Cyberculture at the End of the Century Details

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From Reader Review **Escape Velocity: Cyberculture at the End of the Century** for online ebook

Florin Pitea says

Here's a Romanian review on my blog: <http://tesatorul.blogspot.com/2010/03...>

Glen Engel-Cox says

“Escape velocity is the speed at which a body...overcomes the gravitational pull of another body,” begins Mark Dery in his non-fictional amalgamation of the current state of computer culture, **Escape Velocity**. Dery uses the concept as a metaphor for what is happening to the many memes—concept viruses—of the on-line and turned-on and their relation to the greater society (mainly American, although some service is given to Japan and Europe). Like the emergence of the Internet (and the ‘net concept of on-line connectivity) into the mainstream, the ideas of body sculpting, merging with machines (either virtually or prosthetically), and transhuman growth, among others, are just below the cultural surface, according to Dery.

To be a cultural historian to the fast-paced world of computers is a difficult one, because the cyberculture, far more so than any subculture before it, is as varied in its parts as it is separated geographically. It exists on change. In ways, the myriad differences in the cybercrowd is what makes it a culture rather than a cult—it encourages the free range of expression from left to right, and all the fringes top and bottom, and there is no single authority to consult. Mark Dery’s job, therefore, was to piece together a picture of a living community that is less than 30 years old and is more malleable than one of his favorite images, that of the T-2000 liquid-metal android from the movie *Terminator 2*. He assembled this jigsaw by grabbing at the outward manifestations of the culture—its art—rather than focusing on the nuts and bolts of how it came and stays together. Dery’s goal was to achieve a focus on where cybernauts and cyberpunks are headed, rather than where they have been. Within the cybernetic expressions in print, screen, music, body art, performance, and philosophy lie the seeds of a cultural revolution that began with the home computer, according to Dery.

Any cultural representation requires a polymath to untangle the multitude of threads that bind it together. When that culture is the front end of the runaway train of technology, the examiner must also be moving at the speed of information. Dery, for the most part, rises to the challenge, able to quote both fiction writers and art critics, social commentators and “hackers” within the same page. His profiles of those on the fringe and those with the mainstream are balanced, except when he pauses to regroup his thinking at the end of each chapter and his own impressions slip in. One of the most rewarding aspects of Dery’s compilation is that he went beyond the most visible proponents of cyberculture (William Gibson, Mark Pauline of the Survival Research Laboratories, Hans Moravec) to also get the equally important contributions that have not engendered cultish followings (in fiction, for example, Dery quotes the work of Pat Cadigan and John Shirley as well as that of Gibson and Bruce Sterling), as well as progenitors to the culture (again in fiction, the work of Philip K. Dick and J.G. Ballard).

As a document of fact about what happened and is happening in the computer subculture, **Escape Velocity** is hard to fault. But Dery’s goal was to portray where the culture is headed (in his eyes into the larger mainstream), and it is herein that trouble lies. To extract the future of society from this mismatch of ideas would be like portraying the future of cinema in the 1960s by examining both *Easy Rider* and *La Dolce Vita*. Yes, these movies had a profound effect on the cinematic culture at large, but it was subsumed into the larger

whole. Dery quotes Gibson's oft-touted refrain, "The street finds its own uses for things." Just so, the mainstream often finds its own uses for the street, as evidenced in the music business by the commercialization and marketing of punk, rap, and grunge, each a thriving subculture at one time.

Escape Velocity is an intriguing volume, and Mark Dery is to be commended for attempting to achieve a cyberculture gestalt. For those interested in what is happening "in there," **Escape Velocity** is a one-stop shop, a veritable sourcebook of cyberdom.

Anya Weber says

So how about it, ladies--would you rather be a goddess or a cyborg?

"Escape Velocity" examines our changing relationships to our bodies, minds, spirits, and especially the technology in which we currently float, twist, and dream. Who else but Mark Dery would draw such elegant parallels between bodybuilders and cyberpunks, or between cyborg technology and James Brown's "Get Up (I Feel Like Being a) Sex Machine"?

Dery wrote this book over 15 years ago, and some of his subjects, such as certain performance artists whose work he goes into in great depth, no longer feel relevant. But tons of other content here does, from the discussion of early versions of cybersex on the online bulletin boards of the mid-1990s to his examination of the links between punk music and cyberpunk science fiction.

Notable also for Dery's ultra-clear, and useful, applications of critical and literary theories to unexpected subjects. Normally I'd run screaming from a paragraph about "post-structuralism," but Dery breaks it down painlessly and actually makes it do work.

This is a denser and somewhat more difficult read than Dery's *Pyrotechnic Insanitarium*, but it's full of fascinating insights about where technology is leading us, and vice versa.

Elisabet Roselló says

Un imprescindible en mi estantería. Repasa y hace una crítica inspiradora, desde el punto de vista académico, de la cibercultura. Evidentemente muchas perspectivas han quedado obsoletas, fue escrito hace 20 años, y la cibercultura y la sociedad digital ha ido cambiando paulatinamente, pero la base de todo lo escrito por Dery sigue siendo de gran referencia para hoy en día.
