


AN UNFORGETTABLE JOURNEY INTO THE DARK HEART OF THE INFORMATION AGE

# ESCAPE VELOCITY

CYBERCULTURE AT THE **END** OF THE CENTURY

MARK DERY



An unforgettable journey into the dark heart of the Information Age, *Escape Velocity* explores the high-tech subcultures that both celebrate and critique our wired world: cyberpunks, cyberhippies, technopagans, and rogue technologists, to name a few.

The computer revolution has given rise to a digital underground—an Information Age counterculture whose members are utilizing cutting-edge technology in ways never intended by its manufacturers. Poised, at the end of the

century, between technological rapture and social rupture, between Tomorrowland and *Blade*

*Runner*, fringe computer culture poses the fundamental question of our time: Will technology liberate or enslave us in the coming millennium?

Mark Dery takes us on an electrifying tour of the high-tech underground. Exploring the shadowy byways of cyberculture, we meet would-be cyborgs who believe the body is obsolete and dream of downloading their minds into computers, cyberhippies who boost their brainpower with smart drugs and mind machines, on-line swingers seeking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.

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*Cyberculture at the End of the Century*

MARK DERY



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mobility, and rearranged the internal organs; the bustle thrust the buttocks up and back, approximating "the posture of a female animal in heat."<sup>35</sup>

The remodeling of the female body in accordance with bourgeois ideals did not end with the passing of the corset and the bustle. The consumer culture of industrial modernity merely emphasized the economic subtext of such practices. In the 1920s, writes Stuart Ewen, advertising educated American women "to look at themselves as things to be created competitively against other women: painted and sculpted with the aids of the modern market."<sup>36</sup>

In *The Beauty Myth: How Images of Beauty Are Used against Women*, Naomi Wolf indicts the unattainable ideal promulgated by the beauty industry—a pernicious fantasy that has made crash dieting, eating disorders, cosmetic surgery, and the onset of a chronic self-loathing rites of passage for too many American women. In cyberculture, notes Wolf, digital systems have enabled the creation of truly posthuman paragons of beauty: the impossibly flawless models in ads and fashion layouts in women's magazines exist only as digitized photos, retouched with computer graphics software. "Airbrushing age from women's faces is routine" even in general interest publications, she reports, and "computer imaging . . . has been used for years in women's magazines' beauty advertising" to remake reality to corporate dictates. This issue, she contends,

is not trivial. It is about the most fundamental freedoms: the freedom to imagine one's own future and to be proud of one's own life. . . . to airbrush age off a woman's face is to erase women's identity, power, and history.<sup>37</sup>

Inverting the relationship between replica and original, this unreality fosters a postmodern psychosis. "As frozen, photogenic images—in ads or style magazines—become models from which people design . . . themselves, extreme alienation sets in," writes Ewen. "One becomes, by definition, increasingly uncomfortable in one's own skin."<sup>38</sup>

The union of computer technologies with Wolf's beauty myth may one day spawn creatures not unlike Pris, the Pleasure Model android in the movie *Blade Runner*. Cosmetic surgeons have already begun using computer programs to create previews of postop results by manipulating a patient's

digitized photo. According to an article in the *San Francisco Examiner*, "The elusive 'perfect face' has been quantified and put into a computerized 'facial template.' By comparing a patient's face with the template, doctors can determine which features need correction."<sup>39</sup>

The process inspired Brian D'Amato's *Beauty*, a roman à clef about the messy collision of postmodernism, plastic surgery, and the beauty myth, set in the New York art world. In D'Amato's novel, an artist's obsession with Renaissance portraiture bears strange fruit: In an avant-garde surgical process, Jamie Angelo peels off his girlfriend's face and replaces it with synthetic skin on which he sculpts a countenance worthy of a quattrocento beauty, based on a computer composite of the most exquisite features in art history. The plot takes a ghoulish turn when things begin to go horribly wrong with Angelo's not-yet-ready-for-prime-time handiwork.

"We're closer to the era of total-reconstruction surgery than people think," says D'Amato. "The same computer-imaging techniques described in *Beauty* are already in use in plastic surgery clinics all over the world. . . . When the type of surgery described in *Beauty* becomes available, there will be people out there who will want to push the edge of the envelope."<sup>40</sup>

In a poetic sense, vanguard artists are already applying post-modern quotation to human anatomy. The role of computer imaging in creating ideals of beauty, and in the surgical revision of living tissue in accordance with those ideals, is addressed in what the *National Review* art critic James Gardner calls the "Art of the Body," a nineties redux of seventies body art. Riding the crest of this latest wave is the French performance artist Orlan.

Nowhere do body politics, the avant-garde's imperative to shock, and the pathologies of a culture drowning in images and obsessed with appearances come together more arrestingly, or disturbingly, than in Orlan's operating theater. Since 1990, she has undergone cosmetic surgery seven times as part of *The Ultimate Masterpiece: The Reincarnation of Saint Orlan*, a "carnal art" work-in-progress designed to transform her face into a collage of famous features. Her surgeons' hands are guided by a "facial template" assembled from digitized details of famous paintings. The composite face has Mona Lisa's forehead; the eyes of Gerome's *Psyche*; the nose of a Diana attributed to the School of Fontainebleau; the mouth of Boucher's *Europa*; and the chin of Botticelli's *Venus*.

"*Escape Velocity* is without doubt the best guide I have read to the new computer culture that will soon dominate our lives. Mark Dery is witty and provocative but always sane and thoughtful. As he shows, the cyber-crazies are already circling around us. . . . *Escape Velocity* will help us keep them in our sights."

—J. G. Ballard

"*Escape Velocity* is extraordinary—a rare book that is both scholarly and compulsively readable. Stimulating, perceptive, and a hell of a lot of fun."

—Pat Cadigan, author of *Fools*

"Cyberculture has long needed a savvy critique by someone who understands what it is all about. Mark Dery goes beyond letting the air out of the tires of techno-utopia. His report from the hairy fringes of cyberculture forces us to examine the possibility that literal lust for technology is not just seducing us, but converting us into something other than human."

—Howard Rheingold, author of *The Virtual Community: Homesteading on the Electronic Frontier*

"Totally informed, Dery is a reliable navigator in the new cultural terrain of virtuality, steering the reader between the Scylla and Charybdis of cyberhype and technophobia. His sure-sighted critique emerges from an exhaustive ethnographic survey of the rituals, participants, ideas, and literature in the field."

—Andrew Ross, author of *The Chicago Gangster Theory of Life*

"Dery's writing evinces a love of language and a clarity of meaning that are rarely brought to these subjects. A worthy book."

—R. U. Sirius, founder of *Mondo 2000* and author of *The Cyberpunk Handbook*



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