

FLAME WARS

The Discourse of Cyberculture

Edited by Mark Dery

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'The medium is the message', Marshall McLuhan proclaimed in the 1960s and with the development of the Internet, this dictum proved prophetic. On the Internet, society is shaped by the medium itself, and the collection of essays in this book offer a precognitive glimpse

of mainstream culture a few years from now, when ever-greater numbers of individuals will be part-time residents in virtual communities.

The Internet is an umbrella term used to describe a massive world-wide computer network. It originated in the USA more than twenty years ago when the Defence Department developed an information network that could be defended against nuclear attack. The net has since evolved into the most important communication breakthrough since the Gutenberg Bible, knitting individuals, communities and countries together and connecting approximately fifty million people in fifty countries. The Internet is not owned by anybody, is not run by anybody, is not censored by anybody. The first truly democratic and independent medium has no boundaries and virtually no restrictions.

The World Wide Web was designed in 1989 by Tim Berners-Lee to facilitate transfer of information through the use of hypertext. During the 1990s net usage has expanded tremendously and the terminology has become part of a global discourse. Surfing, the electronic highway, cyberpunk, cyberspace and virtual reality define the parameters of our communication and determine the meaning of our lives. 'Bit by bit we are being ... transformed into cyborgian hybrids of technology and biology through our ever more frequent interaction with machines, or with one another through technological interfaces' (p.6).

Baudrillard (p.7) refers to 'the desert of the real' where the shreds of the territory 'are slowly rotting across the map'. In the book *Flame Wars* the desert of the real, the surreal and the virtually real are explored by some of the most innovative writers in the electronic community.

Vivian Sobchack sets the scene with *New Age Mutant Ninja Hackers: Reading Mondo 2000* in which she discusses the magazines that try to chart the territory. *Mondo 2000* evolved from two previous underground publications, namely *High Frontiers* and *Reality Hackers*. The magazine proclaims its own position as 'surfing' the 'New Edge' of an electronically configured social formation called 'cyberculture'.

In *Techgnosis, Magic, Memory and the Angels of Information*, Erik Davis superimposes the notion of information on an arcana of esoteric, religious and mythological traditions. In an erudite article Davis shows how memory, cryptography and gnostic cosmology use metaphors and allegories to map cosmic space and how the same kind of mapping takes place in cyberspace.

Cyberpunk science fiction features prominently in the collection of essays with frequent references to William Gibson. Agrippa, or, *The Apocalyptic Book* by Peter Schwenger, tells of a short story by Gibson that can be read only once. When activated, the computer disc confined in the book runs once, then a built-in computer virus destroys the text, leaving a blank disk. In *Gibson's Typewriter*, Scott Bukatman philosophises about the fact that the seminal cyberculture novel, Gibson's *Neuromancer* was written on a manual typewriter. Both these essays draw attention to the ultimate effect the electronic reconstruction of the world has on the landscape of the mind.

In *Black to the Future: Interviews with Samuel R. Delaney, Greg Tate, and Tricia Rose* the dearth of black science fiction writers is discussed while *Virtual Surreality: Our New Romance with Plot Devices* by Marc Laidlaw takes a look at the intersection between technology and fiction.

Teresa de Lauretis suggests that in every historical period, certain art/literary forms have become central to the historical vision of a given society. In the essays *Synners* by Pat Cadigan, *Feminism for the Incurably Informed* by Anne Balsamo, and *Sex, Memories, and Angry Women* by Claude Springer, the authors explore cyberpunk mythologies in relation to a new feminist cultural formation built in cyberspace. Science and technology are not isolated from ideological influence but are part of the social orders from which they emerge and which supports them.

Sex on the Internet is discussed by Gareth Branwyn in *Compu-Sex: Erotica for Cybnauts* where every computer information service has, lurking within its bits and bytes, an active sub-culture of users engaged in text-based sexual exchanges. In *A Rape in Cyberspace; or, How an Evil Clown, a Haitian Trickster Spirit, Two Wizards, and a Cast of Dozens Turned a Database into a Society*, Julian Dibbell transverses the superhighway to a virtual reality mansion called LambdaMOO where he assumes the virtual persona of a dolphin, experiences the virtual rape of another character and tries to make sense of the curious blurring of boundaries between the database and real life.

The various formations of cyberspace and virtual reality depicted in these essays provide recreational and aesthetic pleasures. Travelling in cyberspace means that 'the lived meaning of space, time and subjectivity has been radically altered by electronic technologies in an experience that may be described, and cannot be denied' (p.9). The writers in this book have certainly attempted to describe the experience and as such the book is highly recommended for anybody interested in the phenomenon of the Internet and the issues surrounding the discourse of cyberculture.

