Escape Velocity Review

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Most books about cyberculture are either rants or raves, heralding the new utopia or dismissing it as utterly dystopian. What they have in common is that they focus on computer technology itself, assuming that it is unlike anything human beings have ever faced. But in *Escape Velocity: Cyberculture at the End of the Century*, Mark Dery takes a different approach. While he acknowledges that the technology is amazing and new, he shows that people's reactions to it actually have less to do with its amazing newness than with basic human drives that have been present for millennia.

Dery begins with a discussion of how the counterculture went from rejecting technology in the sixties to embracing it in the nineties. He cites *Whole Earth Catalogue* founder Stewart Brand's 1972 assertion that hackers had the same worldview as hippies but better technology, and goes on to talk about how altered states are now sought not through drugs but through computerized virtual reality. In the sixties Timothy Leary said, "Turn on, tune in, and drop out"; in the nineties, "Turn on, boot up, and jack in".

From there the author launches into an exploration of the fundamental motives behind such pursuits. He notes, for example, that when cyberians rhapsodize about transferring the mind from the body into an immortal machine, they are arguably describing "technotranscendentalism's version of born-again Christianity's 'rapture', in which true believers are lifted out of the mundane, into the parting clouds". In an age when religion has taken a back seat to reason, people's fear of death and their unmet spiritual needs, combined with a simple failure to comprehend new technology, can yield technopaganism. Freud's observation that primitives "believe they can alter the external world by mere thinking" is pertinent here, too : since thought, in the form of computer programs, can profoundly affect reality, it is no wonder that mysticism is on the rise. Even the technological elite are not immune. In *The Soul of New Machine*, Tracy Kidder quotes a programmer on the thrill of assembly language : "I could... talk right to the machine... I could talk to God".

Using Technology to Protest Technology

One of Dery's deepest concerns is the enormous power of technology. He has no sympathy for starry-eyed cyberians such as *Wired* editor Kevin Kelly, who claims that "technology is absolutely 100 percent positive"; the author's attitude is similar to that of cartoonist Tom Tomorrow, who has made this quotation a caption for an atomic bomb explosion in which one victim explains to the other that any distress experienced "is simply the result of your outmoded 'second wave' thinking". And Dery fears not only the misuse of technology but the potential of techno-utopian fantasies to distract us "from the devastation of nature, the unraveling of the social fabric, and the widening chasm between the technocratic elite and the minimum-wage masses". He notes, too, that much of the freedom technology grants us may be illusory. He invokes theorist Arthur Kroker of Concordia University in Montreal, who writes, "Technology allows the few to dominate the many... Technologies are enabling people but at the same time government and industry want to control the technologies that enable the masses".

This outlook has drawn Dery to the cyberpunk movement, which is driven largely by the fear of such government and industry control. With dozens of photographs of cyberpunk art and extensive interpretations and descriptions of written and multimedia works, *Escape Velocity* is an invaluable resource for anyone who

wishes to gain some understanding of that seemingly impenetrable world. Perhaps the most meaningful insight is that cyberpunks consistently use technology itself to protest technology.

For example, consider cyberpunk music - "electro-industrial rock with a grungy, sci-fi edge". Characterized by "pile-driver rhythms" that are "rammed home by drum machines or clanged out with the... sounds of heavy industry", the songs feature lyrics "hoarsely barked or recited in a future-shocked monotone". Those vocals are also "electronically processed to give them a fuzzy, metallic quality that makes them sound as if they've been synthesized by a computer". And in fact the lyrics are often explicitly about "body loathing, social control, and the fear of being superseded by machines".

The effect of all this can be overwhelming, which, as it turns out, is the intent in many cases. "Hemmed in on all sides by machines, the claustrophobic vocals embody the human condition in technoculture", Defy tells us. To put the matter in a larger context, he calls on musician Genesis P-Orridge, who observes that such developments mark a real change in the nature of popular music. Until recently, P-Orridge explains, the genre was predominantly based on blues and slavery, part of America's agrarian past; now the historical reference point for a significant strain of pop music is the Industrial Revolution.

Dery is not optimistic about the chances that the cyberpunk movement will effect a change in political consciousness, however. Counterculture activities are almost invariably coopted by the mainstream, he says, and for evidence he offers the commodification of rock music, "once too wild for television" and now "a necessary adjunct of TV's all-pervasive ad". The author also believes that cyberpunks frequently undermine themselves by defining art so loosely as to obscure any distinction between it and real-life events. For instance, he criticizes author Douglas Rushkoff for writing that "a homeless man dragging a cardboard box isn't foraging for shelter, he's engaged in 'social hacking'." Dery's view is that Rushkoff, in treating the man's struggle as if it were some kind of performance art, trivializes and even condones human suffering.

Bookstores are already filled with polemical works, and Dery is to be thanked for not adding to that pile but instead providing a way of sorting through the situation we find ourselves in. To be sure, he does not provide solutions to the problems he sees. But his plea for society to address them is compelling, and that is a firm step in the right direction. If nothing else, the reader is, at least temporarily, jolted out of the irresponsible and ineffective escapism that makes solutions impossible.