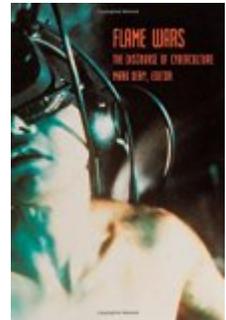




Mark Dery. *Flame Wars: The Discourse of Cyberculture.* Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1994. \$23.95, paper, ISBN 978-0-8223-1540-7.



Reviewed by Don Palm

Published on H-PCAACA (June, 1995)

This interdisciplinary collection of essays provides an impressive guide to the many sources from which our assumptions about cyberspace are drawn, and offers some suggestions as to how the internet may be affecting broader cultural issues. For editor Mark Dery, cyberculture is "a loosely knit complex of sublegitimate, alternative, and oppositional subcultures..." (8). But this collection also shows that cyberculture emerged from images and ideas that have been a part of cultural life for a hundred years or more. Several of the writers here warn of the seductiveness of the notion that cyberculture somehow eludes the material relations of the larger society, and an important theme running through most of the articles is the need for more conscious control of technology and culture.

Dery's reach in searching out the sources of cyberculture is imaginative and thorough. He has brought together writers from a variety of specialties (and many whose writings defy categorization), including science fiction (writers and critics, Scott Bukatman, Pat Cadigan, Samuel R. Delany, and Marc Laidlaw), cultural criticism (Anne Bal-

samo, Gareth Branwyn, Gary Chapman, Erik Davis, Manuel De Landa, himself, Julian Dibbell, Tricia Rose, Peter Schwenger, Vivian Sobchack, Claudia Springer, and Greg Tate), and the unique Mark Pauline, whose Survival Research Laboratories stage a spectacular form of technological performance art, using machines as the actors (more on that below). Many of these people are also academics, and some of them are a part of the many h-net groups (I hope that they will comment on this review or on the issues raised).

The first three articles, by Vivian Sobchack, Erik Davis, and Peter Schwenger, deal with symbols through which we understand cyberspace. Sobchack offers a smart reading of the contradictions in the ideology expressed in **Mondo 2000**, a hip magazine for the "New Edge" of cyberculture. The magazine encourages, she suggests, an escapist mythology of the internet—"mondoid libertarianism" (23)—at once uninterested in the real social impact of libertarian behavior on (or off) the internet, and preoccupied with merchandising to those mondoids.

From that warning about the allure of internet fantasy, a distinctly materialist analysis, the book makes a leap to Erik Davis's discussion of "techgnosis." In essence, Davis explains the ways a Gnostic apocalyptic vision has become important to New Age thinking, and important to many people who play central roles in imagining cyberspace. He explains Gnostic systems, in which icons provide access to power through information, and he draws on the thinking of Ihab Hassan, Philip K. Dick, and others, to show how "the notion of direct Gnostic revelation is resurrected" in this new cyberspace universe of information (51). Finally, he suggests an association between Lyotard's description of people in the post-modern condition-- as nodal points in communication networks--and the Gnostic vision of people evolving into a new kind of being.

Peter Schwenger follows with an essay that shows the apocalyptic imagery that is a part of post-modern aesthetics. He does so by describing a project called, **Agrippa (A Book of the Dead)**, by artist Dennis Ashbaugh and writer William Gibson (the original cyberpunk novelist). Gibson's role is central here; for the centerpiece of the work he provides a book manuscript on disk (evoking his cyberpunk books), a book encoded so that it will self-destruct as it is read. Similarly, the whole art piece, **Agrippa,** is filled with images of creation, destruction, and rebirth, and it is intended to resonate with the reality of cyberculture, as well with historical references, such as Gibson's father's work on the Manhattan Project.

Scott Bukatman, Marc Laidlaw, and Pat Cadigan then focus on the uses of cyberspace in fiction. Bukatman's piece "Gibson's Typewriter" sets the essential themes. Beginning with the irony that Gibson wrote **Neuromancer,** the original cyberpunk novel, on a Hermes 2000 manual typewriter, he describes the ways in which "the discourse surrounding (and containing) electronic technology is somewhat surprisingly prefigured by the earlier technodis-course of the machine

age" (73). The typewriter remains his main symbol throughout the essay. In researching the introduction of the typewriter, he uncovered many of the same proclamations of a revolution as now accompany the computer. He notes that the typewriter also created fundamental shifts in workplace responsibilities and in the gender composition of the work force (e.g., women, known as "typewriters," took over for male copyists [77]). Thus much of the information revolution and the transformation of society and culture had begun in the mid-nineteenth century. In the end, he finds he has been scooped by William Gibson in his general conclusion: "books may pretend, at times, ... to be about computers, but really they're about technology in some broader sense" (88).

Marc Laidlaw and Pat Cadigan then elaborate on the ways the past and "our real lives" (Cadigan, 112) have shaped and will continue to shape the science fiction of cyberspace. Thus all three of these articles remind us that the many ideas we use from science fiction as we try to make sense of cyberspace have been developed first as literary devices.

Cadigan's article, largely an excerpt from her novel, **Synners,** leads to the next section of the book, which deals with gender and race in this cultural context. Anne Balsamo and Claudia Springer each identify important cultural continuities in the treatment of gender in cyberspace, even as they see new relationships opening. Balsamo uses literature, such as **Synners,** to discuss how "technology serves as a site for the reinscription of cultural narratives of gendered and racial identities" (138). Springer, using many of the same sources, carefully maps the ways in which sexuality and gender remain entwined with interpersonal relationships even in the world of absolute mind (or disembodied words) in cyberspace.

To discuss race, Mark Dery includes the transcripts of interviews he did with three black writers: Samuel R. Delany, Greg Tate, and Tricia Rose. Their point of departure is the role of blacks in

science fiction, and all three discuss the continuing problem of establishing a past from which a future might be imagined for black Americans. Their interviews are peppered with interesting observations: e.g., about the role of blacks as marginal in a genre, science fiction, that is itself marginal (188-89, 211), about the association of technology with magic (192, 212), and the connections of hip-hop to science and technology (213-15).

The extended discussion of science fiction and the imagining of cyberspace ends with those interviews, and the next two articles offer the book's most concrete descriptions of the experience of cyberspace. Interestingly, they both deal with sex. Gareth Branwyn provides a thorough journalistic account of the ways people can find sexual encounters in cyberspace, and how they experience it. He couches the article in a discussion of our evolving sense of "reality," and how that reality may change as we move into a world that includes such activities as "teledildonics" (the safe sex of the future)(233-34).

Julian Dibbell uses a case of MUD-rape as the central problem in an important short story about community building in the internet (a MUD is a Multi-user Dimension, a place where simultaneously several people can take on personas and engage socially). This story economically recreates the psychological, ideological, and theoretical world of the internet. The use of an extreme example, a rape case perpetrated within a MUD, might seem inflammatory, but Dibbell lays out the experience of each participant realistically, and with a perceptive understanding of many gender and psychological issues. The crux of the story is the debate over how the rapist should be treated--does he deserve the "death penalty" of exclusion from their ether community? And the precision with which Dibbell creates the debaters' positions, recreating similar discussions going on all over the nets, is admirable. He includes here, also, a fascinating discussion of reactions to this story as it made its way through various nets.

The final three selections deal with the extent to which the internet and computer technology may control culture. Manuel De Landa provides in a tour de force review of literature from evolutionary theory to linguistics to game theory in economics and political science. He offers a lucid synopsis of the ways computer modeling has combined with genetic sciences to change the metaphors we may view as most useful in understanding both the natural world and the social sciences. This summary shows the conceptual power available through cyberculture.

Mark Pauline and Gary Chapman, in turn, argue for the need to consciously control the culture and uses of technology. Pauline describes a performance art piece produced in Austria by his Survival Research Laboratories. Here most clearly is the cyberpunk culture to which Dery referred when he spoke of alternative and oppositional elements. Pauline's intention is to startle people into consciousness about the uses of technology. He applies machines to anything but their intended uses. In Austria he attempted to offend Austrians into a reaction to the Croatian war going on just across their border. He featured searing noise levels, a "very dumb bomb" crashing down randomly upon hapless machines that wandered into its space (291), and homoerotic depictions of soldiers.

Mark Chapman's concluding essay, influenced by the Frankfurt School, is a straightforward call for more conscious and critical control over the "'technological imperative' that compels us to automate wherever and whenever possible" (302). The essay expands on Pauline's argument-by-performance. It also serves as the perfect conclusion for this volume, by focusing attention on the fact that "more than any other machine the computer is principally a *concept*" (301).

The book ends with a brief but helpful glossary of key concepts.

On balance, the book focuses most on literary sources, and it spends less time on the actual ex-

perience of the net than on exterior sources of net culture, but it is consistently smart and bold in its analysis. As a collection, it will make you conscious of the many assumptions you bring to understanding this new cultural space, as well as make you aware of the complex of ideas that have combined in the making of a more general cyberculture.

[With the exception of Julian Dibbell's piece, this book originally appeared as a special issue of the *South Atlantic Quarterly* (vol. 92, no. 4).]

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at <https://networks.h-net.org/h-pcaaca>

Citation: Don Palm. Review of Dery, Mark. *Flame Wars: The Discourse of Cyberculture*. H-PCAACA, H-Net Reviews. June, 1995.

URL: <https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=78>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.