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News Archives.

October 06, 2005

Sex Organs Sprout Everywhere

(Note: *Not* work-friendly.)

You should have been there.

Billed by its organizers, the Amsterdam-based Institute of Network Cultures in collaboration with Katrien Jacobs and Matteo Pasquinelli, as "the first major international conference on netporn criticism," the Art and Politics of Netporn (September 30-October 1, Amsterdam) made happy bedfellows of Tod Browning and Kraft-Ebbing, Larry Flynt and Foucault.



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California dreaming. (See [UrbanDictionary.com.](#))



Morph by [Jenny P.](#), from [Project-P](#) by [Nexus.T.](#)

The always thought-provoking [Mikita Brottman](#) talked about Christian fundamentalist conjurations of the Net as a Devil's Triangle waiting to suck unsuspecting kids into the murky depths of porn addiction or, worse yet, the slimy embrace of pedophiles. The film critic [David Sterritt](#) talked about the visual grammar of porn films. Ayah Bdeir, a research assistant in MIT's computing culture group, talked about [spam, porn and otherwise, as a core sample of the mass unconscious](#)—a culture's free-associated thoughts about what it wants most. Matteo Pasquinelli talked about warporn, and the almost unbearably hilarious [Sergio Messina](#), a hip-hop musician, journalist, and Outsider theorist from Italy, riffed on what he calls "[realcore](#)," the up-close-and-in-your-face images swingers post of themselves in Yahoo groups. And [Rogerio Lira](#) talked about his experiments in "social nudity" on [Flickr](#), and how the posting of naked self-portraits there—his way of chipping away at normative notions of the body beautiful—ran afoul of Flickr's prudishness. And the irrepressible, unapologetically demented [Adam Zaretsky](#) presented "Why I Want to Fuck E.O. Wilson," a performance-cum-lecture that reimaged various paraphilic practices from a sociobiological perspective (with tongue very much in cheek) as evolutionary necessities for the species.

I opened the conference with a keynote lecture titled (with apologies to Burroughs) "Sex Organs Sprout Everywhere': The Sublime and the Grotesque in Web Porn." Among other things, I talked about the *kulturkampf* between the sex-positive armies of the night—porn-friendly feminists, activist sexologists, advocates for saner sex education, and unrepentant fetishists—and the neo-puritan right, whose abstinence-based curriculum threatens to do for sex ed in America's public schools what creationism has done for scientific literacy among the million.

Noting what I call the "Newtonian physics of contemporary society," in which every repressive action from the dominant

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Drive-by cultural criticism.

[Media Burn](#)

Media criticism. (Title courtesy [Ant Farm.](#))

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Advertisements for myself.

[Psychopathia Sexualis](#)

Human sexual response.

[Rant](#)

Ammonium Nitrate for the Soul.

[True Confessions](#)

But enough about me. Let's talk about me.

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Mark's Books



[The Pyrotechnic Insanitarium](#)

Terrorists, tabloid media, and Xtreme culture: To many, America seems like an infernal carnival, equal parts funhouse and madhouse—a "pyrotechnic insanitarium," to borrow a turn-of-the-century nickname for Coney

Island. Are we on the eve of an Age of Unreason?

culture is countervailed by an equally emphatic (if not always equally effective) reaction from transgressive subcultures, I argued that despite the right's unflagging efforts to turn back the clock to the days when people put pantalets on piano legs,

we're living in the Golden Age of the Golden Shower, a heyday of unabashed depravity (at least, in terms of online scopophilia and virtual sex) that makes De Sade's *120 Days of Sodom* look like *VeggieTales*. The Divine Marquis never imagined aquaphiliacs, a catchall category that includes guys whose hearts leap up when they behold babes in bathing caps, fanciers of underwater catfights, connoisseurs of submarine blowjobs, breath-holding fetishists, fans of simulated drowning, and, weirdest of all, people who get off on swimming and showering fully clothed, like Rein, the guy in Amsterdam who likes to take a dip now and then, in "business suits, dress shirts, and suit jackets—especially the one with two vents," he informs, on his site.

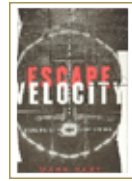


From [Rein's Bathing Album](#).

Nor did De Sade even dream of amputee worship, armpit fetishism, clown porn, or sneeze freaks, who rejoice at the thought of a nice, juicy honk, with plenty of spritz. Lactating transsexuals? Been there. Scrotal inflation?

MARK DERY ON THE EVE OF AN AGE OF CREATION.

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Escape Velocity

Wannabe cyborgs, machine-sex junkies, punk roboticists. Poised between Tomorrowland and Blade Runner, the digital fringe poses the fundamental question of our time: Will technology be used as an engine of repression or a tool of empowerment in the coming millennium?

[\[read more\]](#) or [\[buy now\]](#)



Flame Wars

Technopagans! Brain-jackers! Amok robots! An African-American cleaning woman reincarnated as an all-powerful cyborg! Before *Wired*, before the Web, there was *Flame Wars*, the mind-ripping anthology of essays on digital culture that launched the discourses of Afro-Futurism, cyberfeminism, and cybersex studies.

[\[read more\]](#) or [\[buy now\]](#)

Culture Jamming

No fashion-forward Anti-Corporate Rebel wants to be caught dead at the next Reverend Billy protest without a copy of the manifesto that started it all. Buy into the anti-consumption craze that's becoming the lifestyle choice of the radical chic!

[\[read more\]](#)

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Done that. Wet dreams of Japanese schoolgirls in traction? Check. Breast-expansion fantasies of mammaries that balloon up to Goodyear blimp proportions, suffocating their smiling owners, or slither and puddle like some B-movie Blob, or clone themselves? Check.



Breast Expansion Morph, or BEM, by Mr. Licker.

Things are getting weird out there, so much so that *imaginary* obsessions such as exophilia, the "abnormal attraction [to] beings from worlds beyond earth" that is the subject of the underground novel *Extraterrestrial Sex Fetish*, are starting to sound downright plausible. Can we be far from the future foretold by J.G. Ballard, where car-crash enthusiasts get off on vehicular manslaughter and fans of Space Age snuff thrill to footage of astronauts being roasted alive during re-entry? In the introduction to his 1974 novel *Crash*, Ballard wondered if the android numbness induced by media bombardment—the "demise of feeling"—would open the door to "all our most real and tender pleasures—in the excitements of pain and mutilation; in sex as the perfect arena...for...our...perversions; in our moral freedom to pursue our own psychopathology as a game."



"Ero-goru" ("erotic-grotesque") Japanese hentai art.

Of course, the loosening of a society's moral corset can ensure that practitioners of loves that dare not speak their names breathe a little easier—remember, it was only in 1973 that the American Psychiatric Association deleted homosexuality from The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders—but it can also open the door to real-world *Videodromes*, where one man's psychopathic games are another man's theater of pain.



Iraqi victim of U.S. torture at Abu Ghraib prison, in Iraq.

As this is written, for example, the Web is abuzz with stories about U.S. soldiers taking trophy snapshots and making homemade music videos, set to kickass rock, of themselves booting a wounded prisoner in the face or puppeteering the arm of a corpse to make it wave or mugging for the camera around the charred corpse of what a caption gloatingly calls a "cooked Iraqi." Thomas Doherty, a film-studies professor quoted in an L.A. Times story about the scandal, gave one homemade video the Roger Ebert thumbs-up for its "contrapuntal editing—the beat of the tune and the flash of the images," judging it "a very slick piece of work." He quipped, "The MTV generation goes to war. They should enter it at Sundance." A star is born: the David Fincher of atrocity porn.

Images like the nauseating close-up of the dead Iraqi who refused to stop at a U.S. checkpoint, a mess of bloody pulp where his head used to be, are porn, albeit porn of the most atavistic sort. They're porn because the young, male viewers who look at them do so with a voyeuristic, high-fiving glee familiar to anyone who has ever watched hardcore videos

with a drunken gang of guys at a bachelor party. (The L.A. Times story describes the fiancée of one soldier walking into a room where her hubby-to-be "was showing [his war] videos to friends, who were 'whooping and hollering.'") They're porn because the carrion-feeders who might otherwise be peddling hardcore are now hawking video gore to the chickenhawks back home. They're porn because they poke a stiff little finger into the killer-ape part of our brains, right where the desire to fuck gets confused with the urge to fuck shit up. Exhibit A: ThatsFuckedUp.com, a site that offers one-stop shopping for war-core and amateur porn, sometimes in a single, sick-making image. One photo shows a prone woman, presumably an Iraqi, whose leg is a bloody stump, blown off by a land mine. Under the hem of her skirt, we can see her vagina. "Nice puss--bad foot," reads the wisecracking caption. Pardon my Wilhelm Reich, but could our queasy tendency to express our bloodlust in the metaphoric language of porn be (at least partly) the pathological cost of our repressed sexuality?

Posted by Mark Dery at [09:15 AM](#) | [Comments \(2\)](#) | [TrackBack](#)

September 27, 2005

Coming Attractions: Net Porn, Brown Power.

This blogging thing is thirsty work. Give me enough Premoistened Lemon Pledge Wipes, and I'd rather clean the Augean stables.

I've been under the hammer of a dozen deadlines, hence my absence from the bully pulpit.

That's my cover story, anyway.

Truth is, I'm having blogger's block. Every time I crank up the interface and stiffen my resolve with a few belts of screw-top Shiraz, I get this paralyzing what-does-it-all-mean? feeling. I'm not overly burdened by modesty, but blogging about my Diurnal Whatever reminds me too much of one of those Book of Lists entries where they inventory the objects found in the belly of a Great White. It's scarily close to that *This American Life* segment about the obsessive-compulsive geek who breathlessly narrated, into a handheld tape recorder, *everything* he did, no matter how mind-crushingly banal, *as he did it*.

There's something about this medium that convinces us that our merest flights of fancy, our wispiest free-floating musings, are Revealed Truths, outtakes from *Thus Spake Zarathustra*. One example: I browsed on over to the blog of a whip-smart cultural commentator and best-selling author who rarely fails to shock and awe, and the guy is blogging about...*snow*, for the love of Mike. He's got a bee in his bonnet about the fact that people only take photos of snow when it's a beautiful cottony blanket of virginal whiteness. But snow isn't always that way, Sweet Jesus; it gets GRUNGY, it sprouts dog dirt and stubbed-out cigarettes and why, oh *WHY* don't people take photos of it *then*, huh? HUH? Are they *AFRAID* to reveal the awful, unspeakable truth of...Dirty Snow?!? (Imagine white-knuckled hands tugging at your lapels, here...)

But this sort of thing is oil on the ruffled waters of the Dery soul compared to self-anointed Masters of the Bloviosphere like this [Jeff Jarvis](#) guy. Style dies screaming in the man's hands. His prose is so soul-killingly beige that somewhere the shades of Strunk and White are weeping tears of blood.

And the extravagant self-regard, the Alpha Weenie arrogance that drips from the man's every oracular pronouncement on The Obvious! There's more hubris in a single Jarvis entry than all of Sophocles laid end to end. Why, when, say, [the levees fail again in New Orleans](#), do some people feel the need to POST A NOTE TO THAT EFFECT? Is it the Cokie Roberts effect—the chattering class's presumption that it must have something, *anything* to say about *everything*? (Joan Didion famously said that she left New York because she didn't have an opinion about everything.) The newswire chatters, and out comes the late-breaking news, and the Jarvises of the bloviosphere labor mightily to bring forth a quip about *Commander in Chief*, or Hurrican Katrina, or the International Freedom Center at Ground Zero, or why it's "appalling" that transit officials are suing over the copyright of subway maps (oh, the humanity...). Why, these people have an opinion about *EVERYTHING*. The only thing worse than this leveling wind of smug, self-important pontification is the obsequious claque of flipper-clappers that will Post A Comment, seconding [virtually anything](#) the Amazing Karnak says.

(By the way, is it just me, snark monkey that I am, or is there a delicious irony in the all-knowing, stentorian style adopted by some of these Titans of the Bloviosphere? Isn't this the selfsame monologic, "I Speak, You Listen" old-media model

they're always decrying? For all their arm-waving about "citizen journalism" and "social networks" and "my readers are my editors," most of these self-appointed evangelists of the New Media Order deliver their commandments with all the self-effacing understatement of some biblical Hairy Thunderer, inscribing His Laws in stone with a fiery finger. It's the Great Men model of history, come back to haunt us. Talk about a pathetic phallacy...

Compare this Old Testament filibustering to the model inherent in the intellectually nimble, effortlessly brilliant [bOING bOING](#), whose added value comes as much from the community of minds that enriches the editors' already supersmart posts by tacking on links that further nuance the original idea or comment ironically on it.)

That's the short version of why I've let this blogging thing twist in the wind for awhile.

And speaking of smug, self-important pontification, I'll be doing a keynote lecture, "Sex Organs Sprout Everywhere!: The Sublime and the Grotesque in Web Porn," in Amsterdam, at the [Art and Politics of Netporn conference](#), September 30 and October 1. Come help me live out my flickeringly brief fantasy that I, too, am a Promethean Bringer of Fire. I wouldn't be anything without you, the little people.

Oh, and the Sept./Oct. issue of *Print* magazine includes my feature on cholo/Chicano visual culture.

Posted by Mark Dery at [10:50 PM](#) | [Comments \(15\)](#) | [TrackBack](#)

July 06, 2005

In Search of Ancient Astronauts



Tomorrowland rocket ride, Disneyland, circa 1960. Courtesy [The Imaginary World](#). © [Dan Goodsell](#) 2005.

My essay, "In Search of Ancient Astronauts: A Requiem for the Space Age," appears in the new [Cabinet](#) magazine, issue 18.

Key Concepts:

Ray Bradbury, "Rocket Summer," aeronautics workers in Southern California in the '60s and '70s, Tomorrowland, children's books on space travel, Willy Ley, Chesley Bonestell, Lester Del Rey, the Apollo moon missions, NASA snafus, "space migration," rocketeer theology, the Jetsonian church architecture of Robert Des Lauriers, Cape Canaveral and the high-tech sublime, mummified astronauts.

"In Search of Ancient Astronauts" is my latest contribution to the self-assembling book I'm writing, a drive-by cultural critique and anti-memoir titled *Don Henley Must Die* (I'm open to subtitle suggestions).

By "self-assembling," I mean: Written as a series of free-floating essays, orbiting around a central theme. With luck, the finished book will feel hypertextual, rather than merely...disorganized. The idea is to avoid linear chronology, which stinks of autobiography, and to embrace a connectionist paradigm, rather than the usual rhetorical structures used in essays. Think Didion and [Davis](#) starring in a [nortec](#) remake of [Almost Famous](#). Or something like that.

In my bylines, I call this book-in-progress a search for the

cultural psyche of Southern California, where I grew up in the '70s, amid San Diego's badlands, borderlands, and suburban sprawl. Several recent essays—the seed DNA for book chapters—have appeared in *Cabinet*, evidence of editor Sina Najafi's intellectual courage, and of the panoramic sweep of his fascinating little magazine.

(If you're unfamiliar with *Cabinet*, I've written a quick backgrounder [here](#). Or you can just wander over to their site, and poke around. FYI, *Cabinet* is available at bookstores such as Barnes & Noble, as well as other outlets, [around the country](#). Alternatively, it can be bought [directly](#) from the publisher.)

As always, here's a teaser to seduce you into buying the magazine:



Image courtesy Dreams of Space website. © [John Sission](#) 2005.

In Chula Vista, the San Diego suburb where I grew up in the '60s and '70s, rocket summer was an unchanging mental season for anyone whose father worked in the aeronautics industry, as my stepdad did.

My stepdad worked on the tailfins for the sleek, swept-wing fighter jet that knocked Tom Cruise out of the spotlight in *Top Gun*—the

legendary Grumman F-14 Tomcat, which entered military service in 1972. He had a hand, too, in the engine nacelles for the DC-10, the 727, and the 737; the thrust reverser for the 747; the exhaust system for the Concorde; and the space shuttle boosters.

Little wonder, then, that my mental skies were crisscrossed with the contrails of SSTs and the fiery plumes of ascending moonships.

I lived with one foot in the future, a parallel dimension where supersonic travel, jetpacks, lunar vacations, and offworld colonies under geodesic domes were already a reality. Disney's Tomorrowland fueled my fantasies. Once a year, on Rohr night, when the park opened its gates to Rohr employees only, I thrilled to the space-jock jargon and simulated microgravity of the Flight to the Moon (brought to you by McDonnell-Douglas) and the Incredible Shrinking Man effects of the Adventure Through Inner Space (brought to you by Monsanto). By moonlight, Tomorrowland's aerodynamically cool monorail and spaceport architecture made the master-planned technocracies and interstellar odysseys in my stepdad's Isaac Asimov novels and Popular Science magazines seem suddenly, thrillingly real.

But Tomorrowland only literalized the Visions of Things to Come floating around in postwar America. Space evangelists such as Willy Ley, Wernher von Braun, and Lester Del Rey spread the gospel of space exploration and colonization through children's books that were equal parts edutainment, pulp SF, and boys' adventure story. Ley's inspiring tract, *The Conquest of Space* (1949), cut the die for the genre: ringingly romantic evocations of space travel, brought to life by the superreal clarity of Chesley Bonestell's artwork. Bonestell's views of *Saturn Seen From Titan*, *The Surface of Mercury*, and *Exploring the Moon* were stills from a movie not yet made, one that every schoolkid was

certain he would one day star in. "The younger generation of rocket engineers is just beginning," wrote Ley, in 1951. "They are of the new generation to which space travel is not going to be a dream of the future but an everyday job with everyday worries in which they will be engaged." While my stepdad built the casings for the boosters that launched the moon rockets, I climbed Bonestell's dramatically lit lunar ridges, plumbed the depths of their shadowed craters. I teleoperated the spiderlike robots in Ley's *Space Stations* (1958), assembling a huge, ring-shaped spacelab high above the earth. I flew through the cosmic void in Lester Del Rey's *Space Flight: The Coming Exploration of the Universe* (1959), propelled by the jetpack in my weirdly medieval metal spacesuit, mechanical claws sprouting from my gloves and boots.

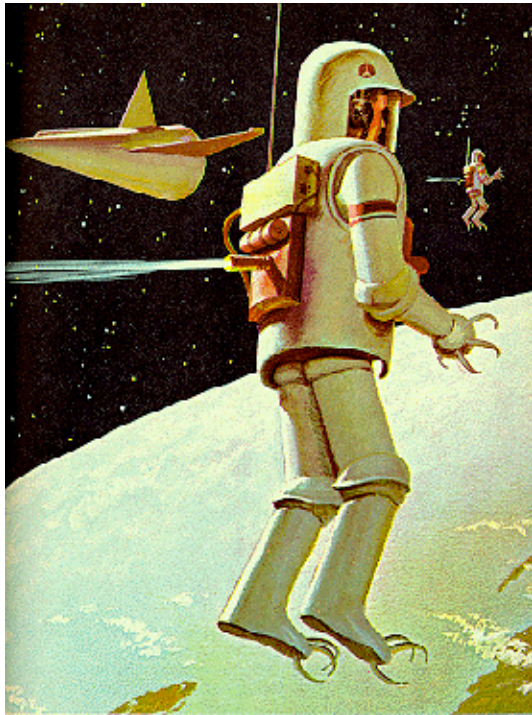


Image courtesy Dreams of Space website. © [John Sisson](#) 2005.

Like the rest of my generation, I was itching for liftoff. Tang was in our mother's milk; the course of our fantasies was plotted by books like Mae and Ira Freeman's *You Will Go to the*

Moon (1959), whose perky text managed to make lunar colonies sound as cozily familiar as the suburbs:

You can see more from the top of this hill. Look! Do you see that house? That is the moon house. That is where you will live on the moon.

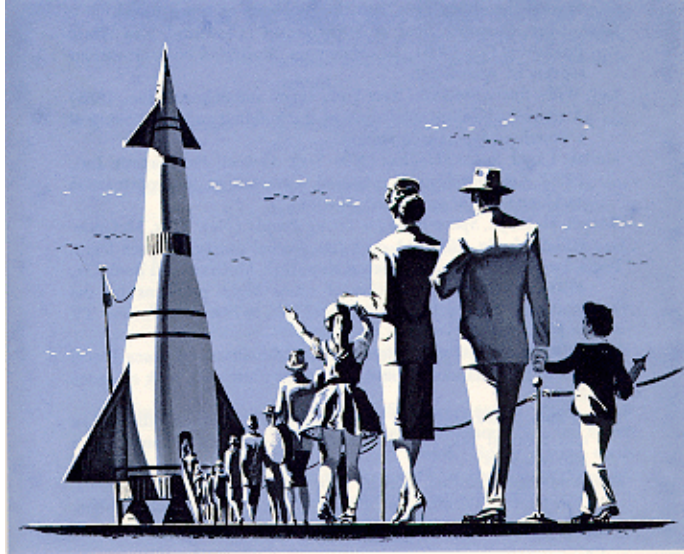


Image courtesy Dreams of Space website. © [John Sisson](#) 2005.

Posted by Mark Dery at [10:48 AM](#) | [Comments \(3\)](#) | [TrackBack](#)

June 03, 2005

Sunshine/Noir



Sunshine/Noir: Writing From San Diego And Tijuana, edited by Jim Miller, is out, and I've got a lengthy essay in it, titled "Loving the Alien: Or, How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Become Californian." It's an autobiographical rumination on the ontological migraines I suffered as a palely loitering lit geek, growing up among San Diego's Malibus Barbies and Earring Magic Kens.

Here's the opening graph, as a teaser:

"Born in Boston and raised in New England until I was five, I felt like Robinson Crusoe on Mars when we moved to San Diego. Marooned in a suburban development, I rode my Sting-Ray down gridded streets, past lookalike tract homes. If I squinted hard, I could almost imagine I was one of the crabgrass frontiersmen in Ray Bradbury's *Martian Chronicles* (1950), homesteading in some extraterrestrial

Levittown. To someone from 'Back East,' the climate was alien: It never snowed, it rarely rained, and on the hottest days the sun seemed as if it was about to go nova."

The anthology also features Sandra Alcosser, Jimmy Santiago Baca, Marilyn Chin, Mike Davis (yes, *that* Mike Davis), Hal Jaffe, Jimmy Jazz, Steve Kowitt, Sue Luzzaro, Victor Payan and Perry Vasquez, and David Reid.

A professor of English and labor studies at San Diego City College, Jim Miller is an activist historian, hell-bent on exhuming the bodies buried beneath the Chamber of Commerce-approved official history of America's Finest City. He's fanning the flames of what passes for dissident intellectualism in San Diego, where the Life of the Mind dies screaming (or did, at least, when I languished there, as a teenager). Along with Mike (*City of Quartz*) Davis and Kelly Mayhew, he co-edited the trailblazing collection, *Under the Perfect Sun: The San Diego Tourists Never See*, a portrait of Dorian Gray the city's real-estate moguls, jackleg politicians, and right-wing talkshow hosts would dearly love to consign to the Index Librorum Prohibitorum, if only they could.

Now, through CityWorks Press (a non-profit literary press founded by the San Diego Writers Collective), Miller has published this compendium of nonfiction and fiction writings on the San Diego-Tijuana sprawl.

"In the introduction to the anthology, Jim Miller...explains the anthology's title by pointing to San Diego's paradoxes: the city's rich history is compromised by its push to grow; no other city in California has as large a gap between rich and poor; and the carefree image the San Diego tourist industry promotes is undermined by a constant military presence," writes Kelly Davis, in her *San Diego CityBeat* feature on *Sunshine/Noir*. "Such dichotomies prompt 'attempts to explore the meaning of

place,' Miller writes. The anthology seeks to do just that."

Davis also wrote the sharp, stingingly funny introduction that prefaces the big, fat chunk of my essay excerpted in this week's *CityBeat*, an irreverent upstart that's blowing the doors off the city's other alternative newsweekly, *The San Diego Reader*.

Actually, it's the cover story; how cool is that?

Read her [intro](#) to the excerpt from my essay, and the [excerpt itself](#).

Note: If you're reading this in SoCal, there's a combine book-launch party, art exhibition, and book signing for *Sunshine/Noir* at ICE GALLERY, 3417 30TH ST (AT UPAS), NORTH PARK, SAN DIEGO on SATURDAY, JUNE 11, at 7 PM. It's free. Perry Vasquez writes, "An exhibition of art from *Sunshine/Noir* will also be on display, featuring the work of Yukimi Levas-Anderson, Michael Mesa, Mario Chacon, Eugene Brown, Hendrix Knowles, Alessandra Moctezuma, and Perry Vasquez." For more info, call (619) 244-9302.

Incidentally, [Vasquez](#), who did the cover art for the anthology, reproduced above, is an astonishing artist and cultural activist focusing on Chicano and crossborder/bicultural issues. Check out his droll, barbed work at his site, [Apollo 13](#).

Posted by Mark Dery at [02:46 PM](#) | [Comments \(5\)](#) | [TrackBack](#)

May 11, 2005

**Pomosexualities,
robopathologies, Afrogeeks:
Discuss.**

UPCOMING LECTURES

Thursday, May 19:

San Francisco

"The Sexual Grotesque: Pomosexualities and Robopathologies on the Web." (Details below, after address and directions).

Rx Gallery (part of Blasthaus) Realspace, LLC
132 Eddy Street @ Mason Street San Francisco,
CA 94102 1 Block west of Powell Street BART
For MapQuest map and directions, click [here](#).

TIME: 7:30pm; doors open at 7pm.

PHONE: (415) 756-8825

WEBSITE: <http://www.rxgallery.com>

Lecture synopsis:

Posthuman relationships with anatomically accurate androids called RealDolls, extreme *bukkake*, ultra-violent Japanese hentai cartoons: Depending on your perspective, the Web is a libidinous interzone—a torture garden of unearthly delights—or a sinkhole of depravity.

What are we to make of the runaway proliferation of fetishism, in the Web age? (Tentacle rape, anyone? Decapitation fantasies? Amputee worship?) Is fetishism becoming the default modality of our post, post, postmodern sexuality? If so, is it transgressive or repressive—one more example of the iron cage of techno-industrial rationale constricting our desires, or an inspiring example of subcultural sensibilities rebelling against normative notions of sexuality?

As well, what are the cultural politics of the Web-enabled "democratization of exploitation": the niche-marketing of nonstandard body types that, ironically, realizes the feminist dream of dethroning normative notions of beauty by peddling the flesh of the morbidly obese and the mind-crushingly ugly. Does this stuff subvert the Beauty Myth? Or is it simply extending its exploitative logic to the far margins of society?

"Sex organs sprout everywhere," wrote William S. Burroughs, in *Naked Lunch*. Even as the self-appointed morals czars of the Bush administration try to childproof the Web, exotic new toadstools spring up in its danker corners. In "The Sexual Grotesque," I'll examine the Newtonian physics of our culture—the equal and opposite reactions of official culture and the Web's sexual underworld.

Saturday May 21:

Santa Barbara

LECTURE: "Beyond Afrofuturism"

[Afrogeeks conference](#) at UC Santa Barbara
I'll be doing a keynote address from 9:15 AM-10:45 AM, along with two other keynote speakers.

DETAILS:

AfroGEEKS Conference
UCSB Center for Black Studies
4603 South Hall
University of California
Santa Barbara, CA 93106-3140
Ph. 805.893.3914
Fax: 805.893.7243
Email: afrogeeks@cbs.ucsb.edu

If you make it to either event, do come up and say hello.

Posted by Mark Dery at [05:23 PM](#) |
[Comments \(0\)](#) | [TrackBack](#)

Mexico City Mash-Up



With [Daniel Rosenberg](#) in Mexico City, at Cabinet magazine's "Nostalgia" conference. (Thanks for the photo, Daniel!)

Just back from Mexico City, where I lectured on nostalgia (lecture title: "The Dismemberment of Things Past") at the Museo Rufino Tamayo, as part of *Cabinet* magazine's "Nostalgia" conference, and, later, solo at the Casa del Lago (lecture title: "Evil Empire," a Baudrillardian critique of late-imperial America's geopolitical arrogance and excess).

Thanks to the bush-beating efforts of Pacho, director of the Casa del Lago, and Francisco Caballo of the National University of Mexico (*mil gracias*, gentlemen), I racked up some press. The whip-smart cultural critic Fran Illich (of Borderhack! fame) introduced my Casa del Lago lecture, then [blogged](#) it. (Fran just sent a note—July 12—to say that he reviewed my Casa del Lago lecture for [Modem Radio](#). If you habla espanol, check out the MP3 of Fran's [review](#), nestled in his 50-minute, techno-propelled program on digital culture.)

And a few media outlets interviewed me: [La Jornada](#) ("Soy patologo cultural; la vida en EU esta enferma, afirma el critico Mark Dery") and [El Universal Online](#) ([here](#) and [here](#)). There's also a full-page write-up, embedded in [this PDF](#), which makes mention of my forthcoming anthology of cultural criticism. (Search for my name, to find the article in question.) Published in Spanish only by the UNAM press, it will be titled *Nitrato de amonio para el alma*—"Ammonium Nitrate for the Soul."

Both lectures went swimmingly, thanks to my gracious, ultra-competent hosts (Pacho, Francisco, and, at the Museum Tamayo, the extraordinary Pip Day). For me, the standout speakers at "Nostalgia" were co-panelist Daniel Rosenberg (whose forthcoming collection, *Histories of the Future*, sounds fascinating), Luc Sante (an inexhaustible fund of historical lore, gemlike insights, and weirder-than-fiction True Facts), and the scary-smart, deadpan-funny [Sven-Olov Wallenstein](#). Happily, there's a chance that *Cabinet* and the Museo will publish the papers presented in a bilingual anthology, sometime in the near future.

The true spotlight-stealer, though, was the city itself, a paradoxical, precolumbian mash-up of blood and poetry, raw sewage and French perfume, Dickensian misery and Gibsonian futurism—a mongrel metropolis straight out of *Blade Runner* (complete with techno-Aztec corporate citadels to rival that movie's Tyrell pyramid).

The ancient *Mexica's* heliocentric cosmos has given way to the contemporary worship of ceaseless circulation, whether of liquid capital or cars. Mexicans are forever en route, orbiting the city in their cars or, more likely, immobilized in the Godard-ian traffic jams that are the city's enduring contribution to installation art.

At the Museo Antropologia, I marveled at the

precolumbian fashion fetish for cranial deformation through headbinding. Just as certain demographics in contemporary culture favor, say, Buns of Steel while others worship the steatopygous Butt, some of the precolumbian peoples preferred to bind infants' skulls around the temples so that the crown of the head flared out, for a brachycephalic effect (think "lightbulb"); others bound the upper part of the skull to create a sloping forehead (think "conehead"). I once asked a neurologist, at a cocktail party, if cranial deformation produced not only a different-shaped brain but a different sort of *mind*, on the presumption that the artificially enlarged braincase would permit certain parts of the brain to expand to larger-than-normal proportions, while other areas of the brain would be constricted. He rattled the rocks in his glass nervously and edged toward the buffet, muttering only that the jury was out...

My only regret is that I wasn't able to indulge in the Xtreme gastro-tourism I'd anticipated, from *escamoles* (black ant larvae) to *gusanos de maguey* (butterfly larvae) to *chupalines* (fried grasshoppers). I'm convinced entomophagy is the culinary shape of things to come, the only sane solution to overpopulation, solid-waste crises, and increasingly extreme meteorological phenomena (brought to you by global warming). Insects are a high-protein, low-fat food source, far healthier for you than, say, beef. They're also an excellent source of vitamins and minerals, such as phosphorus and iron—not to mention our last, best hope for avoiding the Soy lent Green option. And there's gazillions of the damn things: Beetles, for instance, make up the largest order in the animal kingdom; there are an estimated 350,000 named species of them, worldwide. "Crunch all you want; we'll make more."

Posted by Mark Dery at [09:11 AM](#) |

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April 10, 2005

Coming Attractions: Two Lectures in Mexico City, a Dery Anthology in Spanish, and...A *Shovelware* Giveaway!

April 29/30: I'm speaking at a conference on nostalgia, hosted by *Cabinet* magazine in partnership with the [Museo Tamayo Arte Contemporaneo](#), in Mexico City. (Details [here](#).) Luc Sante, Celeste Olalquiaga, and others, me among them, will be picking apart the notion of nostalgia. I'll be lecturing and sitting on a panel about time machines (!) with Daniel Rosenberg (editor of [Histories of the Future](#)) and Simon Shaffer, the author of a history of time machines. (Rosenberg did the supercool history of timelines that appeared in a recent *Cabinet*. Have a [look](#).)

May 4: Anne Coulter TreasonWatch™ Alert! Card-carrying Fifth Columnist Gives Aid and Comfort to the Enemy! I'll be giving a talk (working title: "Fear Factor: The United States as Evil Empire--a de Tocquevillian meditation on America the myth, the monster, the geopolitical menace") at [The National University of Mexico's Casa del Lago](#).

In conjunction with my visit, the University is bringing out a Spanish-language anthology of my writings, *Ammonium Nitrate for the Soul: A Mark Dery Reader*. It will include excerpts from *Escape Velocity* (already published in Spanish as [Velocidad de Escape](#)) and *The Pyrotechnic Insanitarium*, as well as essays on culture jamming, guerrilla semiotics, cultural resistance (such as Star Trek "slashing"), aesthetic philosophy (specifically, the New Grotesque), and the slippery politics of transgressive subcultures in a marketplace culture.

(If you're a Spanish-language reader and would like to reserve a copy, ping me, and I'll pass your e-mail on to the publisher.)

If you're in the area, do drop by and say hello, especially if you're a local. My fractured Spanish is strictly of the Ugly American party animal variety, more commonly associated with fratboys bellowing for another round of Jell-O tequila shooters. But our goodwill will bridge the language gap, I'm sure.

I'm tremendously excited about this, my first visit to Mexico City. Having grown up in the South Bay borderlands of San Diego, I'm fascinated by Mexico and all things Mexican, from the Eero Saarinen-esque architecture of Felix Candela (which I hope to see, when I'm there) to Frida Kahlo (hyped to the gills, yet well worthy of that hype, and then some) to the *rasquache* bricolage of the squatters' colonies (*colonias*) around Tijuana, monuments to misery and official neglect that nonetheless manage to be inspiring and even vibrant, in spots. Like many bobo gringos, I'm blown away by the subversive wit, supersaturated garishness, *telenovela* melodrama, precolumbian melancholy, and postmodern ad-hocism of the culture that has given the world *lucha libre*, narcocorridos, *Alarma!* magazine, the *fotonovela*, and the street graphics collected in *Sensacional!*, to mention only its vernacular contributions.

So, if you know Mexico City, tell me: Where should I go, and what should I see? What unfrequented corners of the Hidden City, unknown even to *Lonely Planet* backpackers, should I search out? Where can I find barbequed iguana, fried grasshoppers, mummified monks, saints' heads in vitrines, brutalist architecture, incense-scented cathedrals, the carnivalesque, the grotesque, or simply a nice place to savor a *herradura* tequila or an ice cream from La Michoacana, shaded from the noonday sun? I'm interested in places and things that will stimulate the intellect, dazzle the eye, or enchant the palate. (I'll be in *serious* foodie mode when I'm in Mexico, on the prowl for Xtreme Cuisine of every sort, as

long as it isn't the sort of thing that will invite *turista*.)

Alternatively, suggest the *one* book I should read as my skeleton key to the deeper meanings of one of the world's deepest cities.

Clue me, dear readers. Whoever leads me to the most extraordinary find—I'll be the judge of that!—gets a copy of the "Sea" issue of *Cabinet*, with my essay, "Dead Seas."

Posted by Mark Dery at [02:15 PM](#) | [Comments \(7\)](#) | [TrackBack](#)

January 17, 2005

National Psychogeographic

My essay, "Dead Seas: The Psychogeography of Southern California," appears in the new [Cabinet](#).

This is the latest in a series of essays I've been writing about growing up in the San Diegan suburb of Chula Vista, in the late '60s and '70s.

If you're unfamiliar with the magazine, it's a wonderfully arcane compendium of critical theory and personal essays, combining the braininess of, say, *October* (but not its effete, '80s theory-jock snobbery) with, say, the omnivorous approach to cultural commentary of, say, *The Believer*. No, no; that's not right. Oh, hell, just buy the damn thing.

(FYI, *Cabinet* is available at bookstores such as Barnes & Noble, as well as other outlets, [around the country](#). Alternatively, it can be bought [directly](#) from the publisher.)

Each issue has a theme; this one's is The Sea. Besides my essay, there are articles on "The Sunset Coast: The past within the present at the English seaside"; "The final voyage of Horatio Nelson"; "The Generation of the Jolly Roger"; "The science of rogue waves"; and "Utopia Beneath the Waves: Narcis Monturiol's

submarine dream." Plus, there's an awesome postcard of a Kraken, the legendary giant squid of Scandanavian mythology. Too cool. Here's what you get, in this one-time, satisfaction-guaranteed-or-your-money back essay:

- Tales of growing up "in the Silurian age," in San Diego's South Bay
- an homage to the prehistoric seascapes of the Czech scientific illustrator Zdenek Burian
- an exhaustively close reading of prog-rock artist Roger Dean's '70s album covers that wrings more hermeneutic juice out of Yes's *Tales from Topographic Oceans* than Rosalind Krauss could squeeze out of Matthew Barney's entire goddamn *oeuvre* (I interviewed Dean at length for this section)
- a meditation on the influence, on Salvador Dali's soft watches and lobster telephones, of the "grandiose geological delirium" of the micha-schist formations of Cape Creus, near his home
- and some apocalyptic, here-comes-the-flood premonitions of SoCal buried under a biblical deluge, when the polar caps melt.

And here's a teaser, to seduce you into buying the magazine:

According to Dali biographer Ian Gibson, one writer concluded, on visiting Cape Creus, "that Dali could only be fully understood if one took into account this extraordinary landscape that had shaped his thinking."

An instructive phrase: "That had shaped his thinking." It makes us wonder: Which came first, the neurotic or the rocks? Do landscapes touch off sympathetic

vibrations inside us because they
resonate with childhood
experiences, remembered or not?
Dali once observed that his
"mental landscape" resembled
"the protean and fantastic rocks
of Cape Creus." Did the vaginal
clefts, phallic spurs, and fecal
blobs of its tortured,
metamorphic rocks mirror his
sexual psyche, a battleground of
(barely) repressed homosexuality,
ravenous orality, and shameful
anality? Or was Dali, in some
weird way, shaped by the
landscape he grew up in? The
Situationists coined the term
"psychogeography" to describe
"the study of the precise laws and
specific effects of the
geographical environment,
consciously organized or not, on
the emotions and behavior of
individuals." Is there a
psychogeology—a study of the
psychological effects of the rock
formations we grew up around?
Are there igneous, sedimentary,
and metamorphic personalities?
Is there a stratigraphy of the
soul, a petrology of the psyche?

Posted by Mark
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