



# The Pyrotechnic Insanitarium: American Culture on the Brink

*Mark Dery*

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From the far left to the far right, on talk radio and the op-ed page, more and more Americans believe that the social fabric is unraveling. Celebrity worship and media frenzy, suicidal cultists and heavily armed secessionists: modern life seems to have become a "pyrotechnic insanitarium," Mark Dery says, borrowing a turn-of-the-century name for Coney Island. Dery elucidates the meaning to our madness, deconstructing American culture from mainstream forces like Disney and Nike to fringe phenomena like the Unabomber and alien invaders. Our millennial angst, he argues, is a product of a pervasive cultural anxiety—a combination of the social and economic upheaval wrought by global capitalism and the paranoia fanned by media sensationalism. The Pyrotechnic Insanitarium is a theme-park ride through the extremes of American culture of which The Atlantic Monthly has written, "Mark Dery confirms once again what writers and thinkers as disparate as Nathanael West, Fyodor Dostoyevsky, Sigmund Freud, and Oliver Sacks have already shown us: the best place to explore the human condition is at its outer margins, its pathological extremes."

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