



The Body Electric: An Anatomy of the New Bionic Senses

James Geary

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Marie, a sixty-three-year old Belgian woman, has been totally blind since the age of fifty-seven. But now, thanks to electrodes implanted around her right optic nerve, she can see lights, shapes, and colors again. Marie is one of a handful of people around the world who have had computer chips implanted in their bodies to extend, enhance, or repair their senses.

The idea of actually melding man and machine still seems futuristic, unlikely and a little scary. But in *The Body Electric*, James Geary examines the startling possibilities opened up by the merger of the biological and the technological. This remarkable convergence holds the promise of restoring sight to the blind and mobility to the paralyzed. It might also provide us with bionic senses, such as the ability to see infrared radiation or feel objects at a distance. By linking neurons in the brain directly to silicon chips, scientists are also exploring the possibility of creating virtual eyes, ears, and limbs on the Internet and allowing people to control appliances by thought alone. Machines, too, are getting silicon senses. Researchers are endowing computers with the ability to see, hear, smell, taste, touch—and conceivably think.

The Body Electric offers an accessible and astute survey of this exciting area of research with its potential commercial, medical and military applications. Drawing on fields as diverse as artificial intelligence and biology, *The Body Electric* asks: Are you any less “you” after a bionic implant? If all of our senses are electronically enhanced how will we tell the difference between virtual reality and the actual world? Will it matter?

The merger of our technology and ourselves is already beginning to change the way we see, hear, smell, taste, touch, and think about the world, opening the doors of perception just another crack.

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