Cyberpunk - Terminal Chic ?

Nathan Cobb
24 November 1992

It was nearly midnight deep inside Venus de Milo, a dark and sweaty Boston dance emporium. The Shamen, a British musical duo augmented by an assortment of digital gewgaws, was unleashing a storm of high-energy technopop that was cyberpunk through and through. "We can see tomorrow in each other's eyes", they sang at one point as the bouncing crowd raised its collective fist, presumably in the direction of cyberspace.

But what was most interesting about the 800 or so raving souls in attendance was that they didn't look like they'd stumbled in from the set of *Blade Runner*. Instead, they were merely members of the Lansdowne Street night shift : postpunks, Eurokids, college students, young professionals, twentynothings, geeks, nerds, rastas, slackers and even a few bodybuilders in tank tops who appeared to have taken a wrong turn coming off the Tobin Bridge. Considerably more beer was chugged than the high-nutrient "smart" drinks that are touted as the cyberpunk libation du jour.

So you are forgiven for wondering if cyberpunk is an authentic subculture or a media buzzword.

Actually, it's both.

Forget for a moment that it was born as a word to describe a dark, morbid, near-future science-fiction movement of the 1980's. "Cyberpunk" is now more commonly a handy term for combining the related cadres of techno-bohemians-primarily hackers, crackers and phreaks - who populate the computer underground. But the word is also used to describe the trappings of this cantankerous, decentralized, and antiestablishment subset that have surfaced in popular culture. It is the hairy-eyed, obsessive wizards of today's computer netherworld who personify cyberpunk's foremost futuristic theme : the merging of man and machine.

For better or worse, the popularization of cyberpunk has made it analogous to surfing. A handful of computer jockeys have spawned a style and an attitude. It's no coincidence that Mondo 2000, a glossy quarterly magazine that trumpets the pop version of cyberpunk, likes to talk about "surfin' the new edge". Way cool.

And consider : Cyberpunk is only a corner of a much broader cyberculture-at-large, which includes an online worldwide population of middle-aged couch potatoes, wheezy academics, corporate pooh-bahs, govermnet drones, and on and one. "In the future it will be everywhere, but it won't be called cyberculture", says Stranger, a 17-year-old Miami high school senior who, like most hackers, prefers his computer handle to his real name. "It will just be called culture. A few years ago, people used to talk about "the emerging TV cuture". We no longer talk about a "TV culture" today. It's a given. Someday soon, no one will talk about "emerging cyberculture". Because it will be a given, too."

The pop culture version of cyberpunk cuts a wide bandwidth. "It's things like music, art and video done with a hacker sensibility", says Chris Ewen, a disk jockey at Man-Ray, a Cambridge music club that frequently features bands that fall into the cyberpunk catch basin. "It's using technology just to see if you can do it, just like someone would break into the AT&T computer system just to see if he could do it". The wizardry of the hacker meets the alienation of the punk.

Lisa Sirois of the South End, 23 years old, fits the image. By day she is a free-lance graphic designer who

hunkers down over a computer keyboard. By night, she simply switches terminals to help make the aggressive, dissonant, computer-generated music of D.D.T., a local band. She talks warmly of the computer hacker/cracker mantra that information should not be proprietary. And she speaks the musical language of Apple rather than Fender.

"We're no longer playing instruments, we're programming", she explains. "We sequence the music on a computer, store it on a hard disc, and then record it onto digital audio tape. Then, when we perform, we supplement it with live drums and keyboards. We're 'live' and on tape. We play on an electronic stage".

Cyberpunk's fast crawl to the surface has included not only pop music (industrial, postindustrial, technopop, etc), but also television (MTV, Saturday morning cartoons, the late *Max Headroom* series, etc.) and movies (*Total Recall*, *Lawnmower Man*, the Japanese *Tetsuo* series, etc). For historians, a new version of 1982's *Blade Runner*, set in darkened Los Angles in 2019 and the first and foremost cyberpunk movie, was recently reissued with much fanfare. A slick bi-monthly magazine called Wired, aimed in part at the cyberpunk set and financed in part by MIT Media Lab director Nicholas Negroponte, is due out in January and proudly touts itself as the Rolling Stone of technology. And the principals of Mondo 2000 -- "dominatrix" Alison Kennedy, who calls herself Queen Mu, and editor Ken Goffman, aka R.U. Sirius -- are giddy over the 60,000-copy first printing of their just-published cyberpunk sourcebook, *A User's Guide to the New Edge*.

Sirius, speaking from the rented northern California mansion that Mondo 2000 uses courtesy of the inheritance of the royal Mu, declares that "Hollywood is going nuts trying to figure out what to do about cyberpunk. We're constantly getting called by studio people looking for ideas, looking for advice". Sirius' own latest idea is to peddle 67 weeks' worth of an infotainment TV show that combines computer graphics and live action. "We're trying to sell it as a cyberpunk Pee-wee's Playhouse for rock'n'roll adults", he explains.

Meanwhile, back in the computer underground, such ventures are generally viewed with deep and characteristic cynicism. Connected via telephone to vast and unmapped computer networks that facilitate electronic (not to mention terse and silent) rather than personal communication, linked to thousands of specialized electronic "bulletin board" systems where information is squirreled and exchanged, disembodied hackers and crackers make up a creative and sometimes nefarious community that holds little tolerance for outsiders. "People who don't even own computers go around saying 'Cyberific !'" snorts Kingpin, a Boston teen-ager who prefers his nom de hack. "I feel these people are standing on our ground. It's kind of like they've intruded on us".

Yet Kingpin is a role model for the pop culture notion of cyberpunk. He is part of a semi-outlaw village that maintains its own language, traditions, values, rules and heroes. Its residents often invade corporate academic and government computer systems without invitations. Kingpin himself casually lists the names of a local bank, a national credit bureau, a federal agency and even a fast-food chain whose computer systems he has cracked.

Or consider Rogue Agent, somewhat older than Kingpin, to whom hacking and cracking are full-time occupations. He, too allows as how he's visited his fair share of local computer systems, including those of Motorola, Inc., Digital Equipment Corp. and Lotus Development Corp. Like other hackers who delve in cracking, he defends himself by pointing out that his visits are made purely for "browsing" purposes. But what about invasion of privacy ? "That's a tricky one", he replies, before adding a common cracker theme : "I feel that if people put their faith in a system that isn't secure, they deserve whatever happens".

The cyberpunk future includes the likes of a computer-generated artificial environment known as virtual reality (not so futuristic, perhaps : VR arcade games are already here). It includes dreams of virtual sex (not so futuristic, either : textbased "sex" already exists on computer networks. Call it Phone Sex : The Next Generation). It includes further developments in robotics, artificial intelligence, even artificial life. More to the point of punk, it includes "smart drugs", legal substances that allegedly increase mental capacity.

"Cyberpunk is the natural inheritor of that American cultural movement that called itself beatniks and later hippies", says John Perry Barrlow, a writer, Wyoming rancher, Grateful Dead lyricist and co-founder of the Electronic Frontier Foundation, a computer civil rights organization. "You have a group of bohemians armed with digital technologies and a certain kind of gloomy optimism. I see a great deal of dyspepsia about technology along with a willingness to embrace anything that comes along. Cyberpunk seems to be filled with grim predictions about the future coupled with a willingness to hasten its advent by whatever means possible".

Whether a real subculture of a gleam in Hollywood's eye, cyberpunk tends to fill the rest of us with uneasiness and even fear. We see the cyberpunk as a bad-ass bogyman who works the back alleys of an electronic neighborhood that we don't know at all. He's a resident. We're immigrants. He's stoked on technology. We're techno-dopes. He's the future. We're the present.

Bruce Sterling of Austin, Texas, admits to being a tad baffled by cyberpunk's elevation from literary genre to pop phenomenon. As one of the best known of the cyberpunk science-fiction writers, Sterling is a true cyberpunk laureate. He was there at the genesis. "'Cyberpunk' will be written somewhere on my tombstone", he muses. "There's nothing I can do about it. But I can't wait for the day it goes from being popular culture to being high culture. Because I've got my tux ready for my Nobel Prize ceremony".