

Fiction That Bleeds Truth

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Cyberpunk has passed from literary fad to manic subculture, a vogue that's touched a generation of hackers and (dis)infotainment junkies whose ideal state is jacked into the matrix à la William Gibson's Case, and devouring data like so much spicy fruit. The market droids, sensing the craze, commodify the trend (cf. the Peter Max acid-trip shower curtains of the 60s), and (as always) attempt to divert psychic energies from exploration to consumption. The cynical component of the hacker mentality, however, seems above-average hype-resistant. Straight culture, ever hungry for facile analogies, may see cyberpunk and the hacker ethos as forms of adolescent rebellion, a negotiable accommodation. This worked in the 60s; radical will was broken not by violent suppression, but by a neat combination of accommodation and trivialization driven by market and fashion. The "revolution" became another cultural commodity, with a "shelf life" past which concerns evaporated and American culture at large moved on to the next fascination, having learned that you can package anything : politics, lifestyle, war....

60s culture trivialized radical ferment among the young, coining the term "generation gap" to assign safe relevance to energies that might otherwise feed rage and rowdiness. The perceived gap fed journalists and scholars for years as middle-class youth assumed a new status, as a kind of cultural elite, and an established source of revenue. At the same time that we taught the youth demographic to become "disaffected" (the Holden Caulfield act), we created a market for cultural identification, a market which split into factions (skaters, preppies, gangs), each of which identifies with a particular strategy for consumption. Cyberpunk was not so much a literary movement as an extension of postmodern experimentation that reaches back to the first cultural memes generated by radical shifts in perception (Leary's experimentation with psychotropics and McLuhan's vision of "the new media matrix", Buckminster Fuller's perception of "Spaceship Earth", his insight that "up" is really "out"). Larry McCaffery, in his casebook *Storming the Reality Studio*, presents cyberpunk and related fictional forms as the inevitable result of art responding to the technological milieu that is producing postmodern culture at large... SF's aesthetics can be seen as extending the implications of the surfictionist, metafictionist, and fabulist experiments of the 1960s in using its highly stylized codes and conventions to produce textual "meaning" in a manner as fully distinctive as the linguistic systems that give rise to meaning in a Shakespearean sonnet, a medieval morality fable, or a postmodernist story by Coover or Barth.

Fiction, imaginative storytelling, is fixated on bourgeois forms and ideas from the 18th and 19th centuries, i.e. typical novel and short story structures. The emphasis on what fiction was, in response to an archaic cultural milieu, has obscured relevance to what's happening now in all but this most visionary literary experiments. Today's most interesting fiction will, like cyberpunk, reflect new social and cultural realities which are inherently linked to evolving technologies and radical new perceptions of the nature of reality. SF author Rudy Rucker has proposed the evolution of an avant-garde fictional form called *transrealism*, a revolutionary form dedicated to "the breaking down of consensus reality", the myth of shared reality which, according to Rucker, is "a major tool in mass thought control". The superficial acceptance of consensus is a barrier to true community, in which diversity of thought and perspective is not only accepted and tolerated, but encouraged. If I must assume that you and I share the same reality, there is a danger in proximity : if we're close enough, I might learn that your internal reality differs from mine (which, of course, it inevitably will). If, on the other hand, I buy the myth that "we are all the same", the perception of difference implies that one of us is crazy, possibly evil. Extreme representations of this kind of situation can be found in historical accounts of Nazi Germany. A

fictional form that contradicts an assumption of shared reality, then, contradicts the fascist tendency which evolves from prevailing styles of social control. Experimental diversity in fictional form and content, then, has political as well as literary and cultural significance. It is a nonthreatening way to acknowledge and share diverse perspectives on reality, and thereby accommodate flexible new-world transitions and alternative modes of existence.