Cyberpunk and the Post-Industrial World

The Cyberpunk Project

In Larry McCaffery's introduction to *Storming the Reality Studio*, he discusses the evolution of a new network of political and economic systems as the setting for cyberpunk literature. This new "post-industrial" world is an information society where tangible goods have been replaced with images and abstractions, and mass consumerism is the ideal.

Historically, the economy has been broken into three sectors : agricultural, manufacturing/industrial and services. Since WWII, and the rapid development of technology, there has been a shift from industry to services to high technology. There has been a global movement away from local and nationalistic sources of economic and political control toward multinational ones. This shift has been called the "post-industrial", "the third wave" and the "information economy" among other things. This new stage follows the earlier stages of market capitalism and the imperialistic stages and is organized around knowledge for the purpose of social control and the directing of innovation and change.

Alvin Toffler, along with his wife Heidi Toffler, has written extensively about society, culture, technology and the "third wave". The premise of Toffler's work is that human history fits into patterns and we are currently living in a third pattern, or wave, called the information or knowledge age. It is driven by digital technology and corporate demands. Economics can be defined as "the science of the allocation of scarce resources". In the third wave, knowledge/information is the primary resource among which our society and economy is built. Centralization, bureaucratization, and rationalization are characteristics of the third wave world. Postindustrial societies are dominated by information, services, and high technology more than the production of goods. Advanced industrial societies are now seeing a shift toward an increase in service sectors over manufacturing and production. The U.S. is the first country to have over half of its work force employed in service industries including government, research, education, health, sales, law, banking, advertising and chemistry.

The rise of behemoth, nationless corporations and multinational capitalism has led to cut- throat competition and the commoditization of information. High-tech advancements and products -- such as super computers, videophones, surveillance tools and prosthetic body parts -- have created new markets and consumers. In this post-industrial world, markets for the simulated experiences and copies of original experiences have been created. The post-industrial workplace could be argued to be characterized by schizophrenia, dislocation and depth lessness, all of which relate to Fredric Jameson's vision. Post-industrial culture is therefore one in which the image has become paramount and in which this image has replaced reality (Baudrillard).

According to Greil Marcus, these industries have "turned upon individual men and women, seized their subjective emotions and experiences, changed those once evanescent phenomena into objective, replicable commodities, placed them on the market, set their prices, and sold them back to those who had, once, brought emotions and experiences out of themselves - to people who, as prisoners of the spectacle, could now find such things only on the market".

It follows that we have created this post modern, post-industrial world by expanding capitalism's operations. Jameson called it a "new and historically original penetration and colonization of Nature and the Unconscious". This accelerated rate of technological development has altered the way humans perceive themselves in the world. This breakdown of binary oppositions keeps with post modern theory and the dissolution of established

barriers or norms. The components of a post-industrial society - dissolution of traditional social/political/cultural boundaries and the proliferation of high tech products, goods and abstractions - are central to cyberpunk literature.

Art, music and literature have felt the impact of this changing economic paradigm. The post industrial world has prompted artists and musicians to incorporate new or changing mediums to exhibit their work. In many cases, people are recycling previous forms or genres to exhibit dystopian views of present society. Much of the art and music focuses on a post industrial, post modern world where traditional boundaries have broken down or have disappeared. Society, race, religion and economic barriers have been have been lumped together. Mass confusion and paranoia abound. Take for an example the lyrics to "God Police", a song written by Declan Barry for the band Non Intentional Lifeform.

Watch them cut and burn and take. One religion, one god, one love, one state. Everyday mindfucks and so many rapes. Cut the throats of the non-believers, three cheers for the glories decievers, bullets in your pockets and prayers for tea. We'll be there on every corner, no more whores giving social disorder, ten pissed angels to look after you. Black bread and brown bread tea thoughs, sexual subversions in gos little boxes. All under his all rapists eye. Sucking me dry sucking me bone dry. I got the fear of god in me, don't believe a word of it, god police. Close your eyes and see what god will take from you, close your eyes and see what he can do.

Many of these themes (religion, power, societal control) are expanded upon in the films/reading of this cyberpunk unit.

In *Videodrome*, a film about societal control, we see technology being used to dehumanize humanity. In *Videodrome*, Professor Oblivion is convinced that the reality of TV is more important than that of everyday life.

> *Television determines the quality and nature of life. The whole purpose of the Cathode Ray mission is to patch derelicts back into American consumer culture.*

Spectacular Optical, the evil multi-national company behind Videodrome, "sells missile guidance systems to the first world and eyeglasses to the third world" perhaps to promote a vision of capitalism.

In the *Gernsback Continuum* we read of the commoditization of a world that never really existed, yet is sold back to the public in the form of images. *Rock On* details the life of Gina synthesizer who is systematically raped to recreate rock 'n roll music of the twentieth century. There is a sense of nostalgia, yet horror as one reads the story. The human has, in a sense, been dehumanized and turned into another commodity for mass consumption. In Gibson's *Burning Chrome*, two rebels/hackers risk there lives to break in and steal the memory off of Chromes's mainframe. There are no tangible goods, only the digital information for which they are willing to risk their lives. There are no boundaries, physical or imaginary. One can transcend time and space by hacking into a computer terminal.

Post-industrial society contributes to a dystopian view of the future by reinforcing the notion of a world where information is prized above all else and humanity is deconstructed and subjected to the forces of capitalism.