

A Dark Future

The Cyberpunk Project

In the shadow of the near-future lies a monster.

Beside the "cyberpunk" stories of the late 80's, with their charismatic free-booters wresting the prizes of their quests from the jaws of menacing institutions with the highest of tech, were darker visions of the next fifty years. Where the Gibsons and Sterlings and Bairds wrote of their cybernetic ronin, maveric corporate net-meisters and techno-loners, writers like Jack Womack and Richard Paul Russo took us for a stroll down the mean streets of societal bad gone out of control.

The cyberpunk fiction, for all of its dark imagery, is at heart a hopeful future. The gap between rich and poor has become inconceivable, the cities are all there is, society has seen displacement rendering it hellish and unrecognizable. But there's an egalitarian out, through the net. The underclass of hacker / anarchists, through wit and technology, can get justice, make the big score, grab the iridium chip. Hardware and software offer the democracy of universal access to the machineries of the cyberspace which underlie everything. Those who quest may succeed. The truth may be gleaned, if you've got the right code.

This plays to our best-case hopes for the future, extrapolating from what our world looks like today. The positive side of our societal evolution is made flesh; the unavoidable tomorrow of too many people, too little distribution of resources, and too much concentration of wealth is balanced by the elegance of our technology and the beauty of our weapons. Given the tools, anyone can fly the data storms of the cyberspace place and win. But what about the worst-case, of not our hopes, but our fears given substance ?

Jack Womack's *Ambient* is the hell New York of our nightmares. A horrible accident has given birth to a race of monsters and their acolytes, an endless, pointless war is being fought overseas and in the hearts of our cities, and the only people with any hope of just staying safe and fed are the obscenely rich (who own everything) and their lick-spittle, bourgeoisie servants. Richard Paul Russo's Carlucci stories exist in a left-coast Hades that was San Francisco. The city's core is a no-go zone of unspeakable depravity, surrounded by autonomous zones catering to cultural division and warlording. Russo's society has taken the characteristic demon of our world, the serial killer, and evolved it into its future incarnation.

It may be less disturbing to read about Neil Stephenson's burbclaves and new Victorians, or Bruce Sterling's data havens, or even William Gibson's Chiba City black medical clinics, and these are indeed wildly popular fictions. The stories that play to our fears rather than our hopes, though, are just as important to our speculation on things to come. The darkness and hopelessness of the Bad Future is as instructive as the ambiguity of the hopeful cyberfuture, and, as in its cousins of crime noir and horror, just as entertaining.