The Story That Was Plugged In

The Cyberpunk Project

Cyberpunk is, as its authors would have it, a revolutionary new genre. The Movement is made up of radical new authors breaking from traditional SF ideology and prose. The style evokes a sense of fear and paranoia while overloading the reader with information. Aside from these indefinable feelings evoked by the genre, cyberpunk contains several concrete, identifiable themes in every story. The central theme is about fringe characters -- outsiders -- living in a grimy, seedy world ruled over by huge, all-encompassing megacorporations. The megacorps permeate the world of these characters with an impersonal, hopeless aura. One can either work for them as a wage-drone in mediocrity, or against them as against gods in a pitiful fight to outwit them. The cyberpunk world is completely overwhelmed, infused, and inundated by corporate technology such as decks, the Matrix, "prosthetic limbs, implanted circuitry, cosmetic surgery, genetic alteration" (Sterling xiii), and artificial intelligences. The megacorporate philosophy that everything can be bought and sold, like the technology that is bought and sold, makes human life cheap and worthless. Technology has replaced humans, much like machines today have already replaced workers on the assembly line.

The Girl Who Was Plugged In is an exquisite example of cyberpunk, although it was published about a decade before the Movement. The story examines characters on the fringe of society; characters who are unaccepted and unaccepting of mainstream society. In the tradition of Gina and Rickenharp the rock-and-roll dinosaurs, Mona the prostitute, and Case the burned-out decker, P. Burke is a prime example of such an outcast. In her original and final form, Burke is "the ugly of the world" (Tiptree 45). She does actually worship the corporate gods and comes to love living in the luxury of society, but she would gladly throw it all away for Paul. Although born into the corporate hierarchy/family, Paul is as much an outsider as Burke. He's a revolutionary fighting the good fight against the megacorporate entity of GTX with the corp's own equipment, making shows "pregnant with social protest. An underground expression" (Tiptree 66). This fits with Sterling's comment that cyberpunk is due to the "overlapping of worlds that were formerly separate : the realm of high tech, and the modern pop underground" (Sterling xi).

If Burke and Paul constitute the punk archetypes of the story, then the high tech, the cyber, elements of the story are everywhere to be seen. Sterling claims that the "tools of integration -- the satellite media net, the multinational corporation -- fascinate the cyberpunks" (Sterling xiv). Global Transmissions Corporation certainly spans the globe with its power and influence, thanks to its "worldwide carrier field bouncing down from satellites, controlling communication and transport systems all over the globe" (Tiptree 46). Three-di television, automated inbuilt viewer feedback, and suncars are just a few of the everyday wonders of Burke's world. But what makes this story true cyberpunk fiction is the technology that penetrates the human body. Sterling claims that the technology of cyberpunk is "pervasive, utterly intimate... under our skin; often, inside our minds" (Sterling xiii). Paul tells Burke that "on the coast the police have electrodes in their heads" (Tiptree 68). This is also the case with the implants and jacks in her head which allow Burke to perform the eccentric projection into the body-waldo of Delphi. It brings to mind Sterling's talk of "techniques radically redefining the nature of humanity, the nature of the self" (Sterling xiii). Burke's identity, her self, is truly redefined in the body of Delphi. She comes to think of herself as Delphi, wants to be Delphi, wants to escape her ugly body and live within Delphi forever. Not only is the nature of Burke's self questioned, but Delphi's is as well. It is unclear in the end whether Delphi might have actually come into existence some little bit. She stirs in her sleep, speaks, smiles, nuzzles, and kisses as if she might actually be invested with consciousness. Even though Burke is dead, the body of Delphi tries to hang onto life for some time, speaking, walking, and affirming her identity. If she

does have a consciousness within her, it is unclear whether it is her own, or just an extension of Burke.

Burke's struggle for love and Delphi's struggle for life mean nothing to GTX except potential embarrassment and profit loss. The impersonal character of the corp is plainly shown. Even the directors of GTX are said to be "absolutely unremarkable" (Tiptree 46). Burke is merely an employee to make their tool Delphi a profitable investment. The corp execs cannot empathize with the likes of Burke. Mr. Cantle wonders to himself "what gutters do they drag for these Remotes" (Tiptree 52). He is totally unable to sympathize with Burke and cares about nothing more than her usefulness to the corp. His sleazy sales pitch to Burke is merely intended to brainwash her and to make her think that what she does is right. Delphi is only as valuable as she is useful, for "Delphi's complaints will be endured as long as her Pop Response stays above a certain level" (Tiptree 65). She is thought of materially as a "fantastic cybersystem" and an "investment" (Tiptree 74) that GTX does not want to lose. Her monetary importance is all that keeps the corp from killing her or stopping the project. Her life is only worth what the corp makes from it.

As the all-encompassing, dispassionate megacorps are a central facet of cyberpunk, so is the worthless struggle against them. This struggle is similar to the characters of tragedy fighting fate and the gods. The air of overall hopelessness in the genre is fueled by the realization that the heroes cannot win. Tiptree calls the reader "zombie" and "dead daddy", ridiculing the reader for being one of the mediocre wage-drones of society. However, to go against the corps, to be something other than a corp type, would be like going up against a pantheon. Tiptree talks much about the beautiful gods which Burke worships and even comes to join. But the corp even rules the gods. It is useless to resist, as Paul tells Delphi : "They've got the whole world programmed ! Total control of communication. They've got everybody's minds wired in to think what they show them and want what they give them and they give them what they're programmed to want -- you can't break in or out of it, you can't get hold of it anywhere" (Tiptree 69). Even though Paul asserts this to Delphi, he tries to go against GTX with her anyway. He sadly fails, but the only thing that's really lost is Burke, which it seems does nothing but cause Paul to grow "in human wisdom and resolve" (Tiptree 79). In one of the typically tragic romances of cyberpunk, in a way reminiscent of Case and Molly, Paul never sees Burke again. Hope is lost, love is lost, and justice is forgotten. The sole recipient of justice of any kind is the sharp-faced lad, who is sent into another unhappy time continuum. Nevertheless, his punishment is a mere afterthought, like a postscript to the story. Paul eventually even becomes a director of GTX, the corp which he tried to fight and change. He claims that he is "using the advantage of his birth to radicalize the system" (Tiptree 79), but the story's tone insinuates that he replaces his father, just like machines have already replaced workers on the assembly line.

Works Cited

Sterling, Bruce, ed. *Mirrorshades*. New York : Ace Books, 1986.

Tiptree, James. "The Girl Who Was Plugged In". *Warm Worlds And Otherwise*. New York : Ballantine Books, 1975.