Cyberpunk in the Nineties

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Years ago, in the chilly winter of 1985 -- (we used to have chilly winters then, back before the ozone gave out) -- an article appeared in Interzone #14, called "The New Science Fiction". "The New Science Fiction" was the first manifesto of "the cyberpunk movement". The article was an analysis of the SF genre's history and principles; the work "cyberpunk" did not appear in it at all. "The New SF" appeared pseudonymously in a British SF quarterly whose tiny circulation did not restrain its vaulting ambitions. To the joy of dozens, it had recently graduated to full-colour covers. A lovely spot for a manifesto.

Let's compare this humble advent to a recent article, "Confessions of an Ex-Cyberpunk", by my friend and colleague Mr. Lewis Shiner. This piece is yet another honest attempt by Someone Who Was There to declare cyberpunk dead. Shiner's article appeared on Jan 7, 1991, in the editorial page of The New York Times.

Again an apt venue, one supposes, but illustrative of the paradoxical hazards of "movements". An avalanche, started with a shout and a shove somewhere up at the timberline, cannot be stopped again with one's hands, even with an audience of millions of mundanes.

"Cyberpunk", before it acquired its handy label and its sinister rep, was a generous, open-handed effort, very street-level and anarchic, with a do-it-yourself attitude, an ethos it shared with garage-band '70s punk music. Cyberpunk's one-page propaganda organ, Cheap Truth, was given away free to anyone who asked for it. Cheap Truth was never copyrighted; photocopy "piracy" was actively encouraged.

Cheap Truth's contributors were always pseudonymous, an earnest egalitarian attempt to avoid any personality-cultism or cliquishness. Cheap Truth deliberately mocked established "genre gurus" and urged every soul within earshot to boot up a word processor and join the cause. CT's ingenuous standards for SF were simply that SF should be "good" and "alive" and "readable". But when put in practice, these supposed qualities were something else again. The fog of battle obscured a great deal at the time.

Cheap Truth had rather mixed success. We had a laudable grasp of the basics : for instance, that SF writers ought to work a lot harder and knock it off with the worn-out bullshit if they expected to earn any real respect. Most folks agreed that this was a fine prescription - for somebody else. In SF it has always been fatally easy to shrug off such truisms to dwell on the trivialities of SF as a career : the daily grind in the Old Baloney Factory. Snappy cyberpunk slogans like "imaginative concentration" and "technological literacy" were met with much the same indifference. Alas, if preaching gospel was enough to reform the genre, the earth would surely have quaked when Aldiss and Knight espoused much the same ideals in 1956.

SF's struggle for quality was indeed old news, except to Cheap Truth, whose writers were simply too young and parochial to have caught on. But the cultural terrain had changed, and that made a lot of difference. Honest "technological literacy" in the 50's was exhilarating but disquieting - but in the high-tech 80's, "technological literacy" meant outright ecstasy and dread. Cyberpunk was weird, which obscured the basic simplicity of its theory- and- practice.

When "cyberpunk writers" began to attract real notoriety, the idea of cyberpunk principles, open and available to anyone, was lost in the murk. Cyberpunk was an instant cult, probably the very definition of a cult in modern

SF. Even generational contemporaries, who sympathized with much Cheap Truth rhetoric, came to distrust the cult itself - simply because the Cyberpunks had become "genre gurus" themselves.

It takes shockingly little, really, to become a genre guru. Basically, it's as easy as turning over in bed. It's questionable whether one gains much by the effort. Preach your fool head off, but who trusts gurus, anyway ? Cheap Truth never did ! All in all, it took about three years to thoroughly hoist the Movement on its own petard. Cheap Truth was killed off in 1986.

I would like to think that this should be a lesson to somebody out there. I very much doubt it, though.

Rucker, Shiner, Sterling, Shirley and Gibson - the Movement's most fearsome "gurus", ear-tagged yet again in Shiner's worthy article, in front of the N. Y. Times' bemused millions - are "cyberpunks" for good and all. Other cyberpunks, such as the six other worthy contributors to *Mirrorshades: The Cyberpunk Anthology*, may be able to come to their own terms with the beast, more or less. But the dreaded C-Word will surely be chiseled into our five tombstones. Public disavowals are useless, very likely worse than useless. Even the most sweeping changes in our philosophy of writing, perhaps the weird mid-life-crisis conversions to Islam or Santeria, could not erase the tattoo.

Seen from this perspective, "cyberpunk" simply means "anything cyberpunks write". And that covers a lot of ground. I've always had a weakness for historical fantasies, myself, and Shiner writes mainstream novels and mysteries. Shirley writes horror. Rucker was last seen somewhere inside the Hollow Earth. William Gibson, shockingly, has been known to write funny short stories. All this means nothing. "Cyberpunk" will not be conclusively "dead" until the last of us is shoveled under. Demographics suggest that this is likely to take some time.

Cheap Truth's promulgation of open principles was of dubious use - even when backed by the might of Interzone. Perhaps "principles" were simply too foggy and abstract, too arcane and unapproachable, as opposed to easy C-word recognition symbols, like cranial jacks, black leather jeans and amphetamine addiction. But even now, it may not be too late to offer a concrete example of the genuine cyberpunk weltanschauung at work.

Consider Frankenstein by Mary Shelley, a wellspring of science fiction as a genre. In a cyberpunk analysis, Frankenstein is "Humanist" SF. Frankenstein promotes the romantic dictum that there are Some Things Man Was Not Meant to Know. There are no mere physical mechanisms for this higher moral law - its workings transcend mortal understanding, it is something akin to divine will. Hubris must meet nemesis; this is simply the nature of our universe. Dr. Frankenstein commits a spine-chilling transgression, an affront against the human soul, and with memorable poetic justice, he is direly punished by his own creation, the Monster.

Now imagine a cyberpunk version of Frankenstein. In this imaginary work, the Monster would likely be the well-funded R&D team-project of some global corporation. The Monster might well wreak bloody havoc, most likely on random passers-by. But having done so, he would never have been allowed to wander to the North Pole, uttering Byronic profundities. The Monsters of cyberpunk never vanish so conveniently. They are already loose on the streets. They are next to us. Quite likely WE are them. The Monster would have been copyrighted through the new genetics laws, and manufactured worldwide in many thousands. Soon the Monsters would all have lousy night jobs mopping up at fast-food restaurants.

In the moral universe of cyberpunk, we already know Things We Were Not Meant To Know. Our grandparents knew these things; Robert Oppenheimer at Los Alamos became the Destroyer of Worlds long before we arrived on the scene. In cyberpunk, the idea that there are sacred limits to human action is simply a delusion. There are no sacred boundaries to protect us from ourselves.

Our place in the universe is basically accidental. We are weak and mortal, but it's not the holy will of the gods;

it's just the way things happen to be at the moment. And this is radically unsatisfactory; not because we direly miss the shelter of the Deity, but because, looked at objectively, the vale of human suffering is basically a dump. The human condition can be changed, and it will be changed, and is changing; the only real questions are how, and to what end.

This "anti-humanist" conviction in cyberpunk is not simply some literary stunt to outrage the bourgeoisie; this is an objective fact about culture in the late twentieth century. Cyberpunk didn't invent this situation; it just reflects it.

Today it is quite common to see tenured scientists espousing horrifically radical ideas : nanotechnology, artificial intelligence, cryonic suspension of the dead, downloading the contents of the brain... Hubristic mania is loose in the halls of academe, where everybody and his sister seems to have a plan to set the cosmos on its ear. Stern moral indignation at the prospect is the weakest of reeds; if there were a devilish drug around that could extend our sacred God-given lifespans by a hundred years, the Pope would be the first in line.

We already live, every day, through the means of outrageous actions with unforeseeable consequences to the whole world. The world population has doubled since 1970; the natural world, which used to surround humankind with its vast Gothic silences, is now something that has to be catalogued and cherished.

We're just not much good any more at refusing things because they don't seem proper. As a society, we can't even manage to turn our backs on abysmal threats like heroin and the hydrogen bomb. As a culture, we love to play with fire, just for the sake of its allure; and if there happens to be money in it, there are no holds barred. Jumpstarting Mary Shelley's corpses is the least of our problems; something much along that line happens in intensive-care wards every day.

Human thought itself, in its unprecedented guise as computer software, is becoming something to be crystallized, replicated, made a commodity. Even the insides of our brains aren't sacred; on the contrary, the human brain is a primary target of increasingly successful research, ontological and spiritual questions be damned. The idea that, under these circumstances, Human Nature is somehow destined to prevail against the Great Machine, is simply silly; it seems weirdly beside the point. It's as if a rodent philosopher in a lab-cage, about to have his brain bored and wired for the edification of Big Science, were to piously declare that in the end Rodent Nature must triumph.

Anything that can be done to a rat can be done to a human being. And we can do most anything to rats. This is a hard thing to think about, but it's the truth. It won't go away because we cover our eyes.

This is cyberpunk.

This explains, I hope, why standard sci-fi adventure yarns tarted up in black leather fail to qualify. Lewis Shiner has simply lost patience with writers who offer dopey shoot-em-up rack-fodder in sci-fiberpunk drag. "Other writers had turned the form into formula", he complains in The New York Times, "the same dead-end thrills we get from video games and blockbuster movies". Shiner's early convictions have scarcely budged so much as a micron - but the stuff most folks call "cyberpunk" no longer reflects his ideals.

In my opinion the derivative piffle is a minor issue. So is the word "cyberpunk". I'm pleased to see that it's increasingly difficult to write a dirt-stupid book, put the word "cyberpunk" on it, and expect it to sell. With the c-word discredited through half-witted overkill, anyone called a "cyberpunk" will have to pull their own weight now. But for those willing to pull weight, it's no big deal. Labels cannot defend their own integrity; but writers can, and good ones do.

There is another general point to make, which I believe is important to any real understanding of the Movement.

Cyberpunk, like New Wave before it, was a voice of Bohemia. It came from the underground, from the outside, from the young and energetic and disenfranchised. It came from people who didn't know their own limits, and refused the limits offered them by mere custom and habit.

Not much SF is really Bohemian, and most of Bohemia has little to do with SF, but there was, and is, much to be gained from the meeting of the two. SF as a genre, even at its most "conventional", is very much a cultural underground. SF's influence on the greater society outside, like the dubious influence of beatniks, hippies, and punks, is carefully limited. Science fiction, like Bohemia, is a useful place to put a wide variety of people, where their ideas and actions can be examined, without the risk of putting those ideas and actions directly into wider practice. Bohemia has served this function since its start in the early industrial Revolution, and the wisdom of this scheme should be admitted. Most weird ideas are simply weird ideas, and Bohemia in power has rarely been a pretty sight. Jules Verne, General Verne, or Pope Jules is a much dicier proposition.

Cyberpunk was a voice of Bohemia - Bohemia in the 1980's. The technosocial changes loose in contemporary society were bound to affect its counterculture. Cyberpunk was the literary incarnation of this phenomenon. And the phenomenon is still growing. Communication technologies in particular are becoming much less respectable, much more volatile, and increasingly in the hands of people you might not introduce to your grandma.

But today, it must be admitted that the cyberpunks - SF veterans in or near their forties, patiently refining their craft and cashing their royalty checks - are no longer a Bohemian underground. This too is an old story in Bohemia; it is the standard punishment for success. An underground in the light of day is a contradiction in terms. Respectability does not merely beckon; it actively envelops. And in this sense, "cyberpunk" is even deader than Shiner admits.

Time and chance have been kind to the cyberpunks, but they themselves have changed with the years. A core doctrine in Movement theory was "visionary intensity". But it has been some time since any cyberpunk wrote a truly mind-blowing story, something that writhed, heaved, howled, hallucinated and shattered the furniture. In the latest work of these veterans, we see tighter plotting, better characters, finer prose, much "serious and insightful futurism". But we also see much less in the way of spontaneous back-flips and crazed dancing on tables. The settings come closer and closer to the present day, losing the baroque curlicues of unleased fantasy : the issues at stake become something horribly akin to the standard concerns of middle-aged responsibility. And this may be splendid, but it is not war. This vital aspect of science fiction has been abdicated, and is open for the taking. Cyberpunk is simply not there any more.

But science fiction is still alive, still open and developing. And Bohemia will not go away. Bohemia, like SF, is not a passing fad, although it breeds fads; like SF, Bohemia is old; as old as industrial society, of which both SF and Bohemia are integral parts. Cybernetic Bohemia is not some bizarre advent; when cybernetic Bohemians proclaim that what they are doing is completely new, they innocently delude themselves, merely because they are young.

Cyberpunks write about the ecstasy and hazard of flying cyberspace and Verne wrote about the ecstasy and hazard of Five Weeks In a Balloon, but if you take even half a step outside the mire of historical circumstance, you can see that these both serve the same basic social function.

Of course, Verne, a great master, is still in print, while the verdict is out on cyberpunk. And, of course, Verne got the future all wrong, except for a few lucky guesses; but so will cyberpunk. Jules Verne ended up as some kind of beloved rich crank celebrity in the city government of Amiens. Worse things have happened, I suppose.

As cyberpunk's practitioners bask in unsought legitimacy, it becomes harder to pretend that cyberpunk was something freakish or aberrant; it's easier today to see where it came from, and how it got where it is. Still, it

might be thought that allegiance to Jules Verne is a bizarre declaration for a cyberpunk. It might, for instance, be argued that Jules Verne was a nice guy who loved his Mom, while the brutish antihuman cyberpunks advocate drugs, anarchy, brain-plugs and the destruction of everything sacred.

This objection is bogus. Captain Nemo was a technical anarcho-terrorist. Jules Verne passed out radical pamphlets in 1848 when the streets of Paris were strewn with dead. And yet Jules Verne is considered a Victorian optimist (those who have read him must doubt this) while the cyberpunks are often declared nihilists (by those who pick and choose in the canon). Why ? It is the tenor of the times, I think.

There is much bleakness in cyberpunk, but it is an honest bleakness. There is ecstasy, but there is also dread. As I sit here, one ear tuned to TV news, I hear the US Senate debating war. And behind those words are cities aflame and crowds lacerated with airborne shrapnel, soldiers convulsed with mustard-gas and Sarin.

This generation will have to watch a century of manic waste and carelessness hit home, and we know it. We will be lucky not to suffer greatly from ecological blunders already committed; we will be extremely lucky not to see tens of millions of fellow human beings dying horribly on television as we Westerners sit in our living rooms munching our cheeseburgers. And this is not some wacky Bohemian jeremiad; this is an objective statement about the condition of the world, easily confirmed by anyone with the courage to look at the facts.

These prospects must and should effect our thoughts and expressions and, yes, our actions; and if writers close their eyes to this, they may be entertainers, but they are not fit to call themselves science fiction writers. And cyberpunks are science fiction writers - not a "subgenre" or a "cult", but the thing itself. We deserve this title and we should not be deprived of it.

But the Nineties will not belong to the cyberpunks. We will be there working, but we are not the Movement, we are not even "us" any more. The Nineties will belong to the coming generation, those who grew up in the Eighties. All power, and the best of luck to the Nineties underground. I don't know you, but I do know you're out there. Get on your feet, seize the day. Dance on the tables. Make it happen, it can be done. I know. I've been there.