# Cyberpunk Lives !

### Ben Iglauer

For the last 7 years, it has been trendy to say that cyberpunk is dead. This all may have began in the late '80s, when many of the premier cyberpunk science fiction writers were declaring that the subgenre they founded had become cliched beyond belief, and lost the edge of originality it once had. People like John Shirley, Bruce Sterling, and William Gibson were saying that the original work was no longer being down in the Genre.

It was just after the gulf war, a war that let the country watch a cruise missile strike through the viewing lens of the missile, when I had the opportunity to see Gibson read from *The Difference Engine* at Black Oak Books in Berkeley, California. Gibson described is fears of becoming pigeon holed not just as a science fiction writer, but as a "cyberpunk". He reiterated that the edge of the science fiction genre had moved away. That same year, Thomas Disch, an old "new wave" writer, had an essay printed in the New Yorker about how science fiction has in general a juvenile oriented literature, cyberpunk as being based on slick hollywood movie sets (ala Blade Runner), and dismissing William Burroughs as a "gross out".

To an extent it was true. In science fiction literature, many of the superficial conventions of cyberpunk had become cliched. Neurojacks, console cowboys, rebels on designer drugs, mirror shades and black leather, etc. had all been appropriated into boring, formula tales of detectives, cops, lone heros, and militarism. There was even a flurry of cyberpunk role playing games, which were not based on any particular work, but on the common devices of the genre as a whole : yakuza, implant weapons, mega-corporations -- cool games, but not necessarily a sign of a vibrant and original literature.

But while some of the devices that the genre had started with may have lost their metaphoric punch, the essence of cyberpunk had not died, but was in fact thriving to an extent that no other form of science fiction ever really has. Scientists, consciously imitating the genre, were creating virtual reality and biofeedback interfaces for computers. Hackers in Germany were arrested for using the internet to access and transport information to the KGB (one of them, Pengo was a serious Gibson fan, and even wore black leather). The Secret Service raided Steve Jackson Games, stealing their computers, and delaying the printing of GURPS Cyberpunk. People, calling themselves "cyberpunks" faced off against the US government's efforts control encryption technologies. Only perhaps in the space program can science fiction be said to have such a profound resonance in our understanding of where we are, and what we are about as a civilization.

Artists far outside the genre like Mark Pauline, Negative Land, and Kathy Acker, were innovatively utilizing a cyberpunk understanding in their work. Magazines like *Mondo 2000*, *bOING bOING* and *Wired* appeared; magazines that were not devoted to cyberpunk literature, but to what was now being called "cyberpunk culture".

The essence of cyberpunk can not die, because it is an insight into what it is to be a human in the kind of post industrial, capitalistic, technological civilization that we are a part of. Every time a homeless person asks you for a quarter while listening to his old Sony walkman; every time you read about AIDS, Singapore, the violence initiative (to drug inner those inner city residents designated as the most likely to become violent), chip heists, PGP, work place surveillance, or global warming; every time you log into the internet, donate sperm, or "borrow" a piece of software, you are taking part in a reality that cyberpunk speaks to. It uses metaphor to up the volume on this reality. The louder, the better.

Even after the epitaphs, cyberpunk literature (often called "post-cyberpunk" now) is not only remaining vital, but seems to be getting better. *Virtual Light* is William Gibson's greatest work yet, Neal Stephanson's *Snow Crash* is hilariously Pynchonesque, and Jack Womak's books (*Terraplane*, etc) are brutally emotional, and poetic.

William Burroughs said that language is a virus from outer space. Metaphors, if they find a suitably ripe host, reproduce and spread rapidly, transforming their symbiotic partners in the process. As cyberpunk metastasizes throughout the culture, we start to see strange symptoms manifest, like Billy Idol recordings (Niel Young really beat him to it by more than 10 years with Trans), post-apocalyptic B action flicks, and cyber buzz words. These are not signs that cyberpunk is dead, but signs that it has taken over its host, and is in the process of devouring it.