Is Cyberpunk Dead ? An Interview with Bruce Bethke

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"Genuinely original is always a tough sell."
- Bruce Bethke

"Our new heroes won't be our old heroes."
- Dr. Joseph Hurtgen

Cyberpunk is a word Bruce Bethke came up with in 1980 and was the title of the short story he wrote about a group of teenage hackers, which is considered the first cyberpunk story. Two years later, *Blade Runner* came out, but the genre would not be fully solidified until the seminal work *Neuromancer* by William Gibson in 1984. Meanwhile, others worked to develop the genre, including Pat Cadigan, Bruce Sterling, Rudy Rucker, Michael Swanwick, and John Shirley, and here we are decades later with over six hundred books.

I had the honor of speaking with Bruce Bethke the other day, and he told me when he came up with the word *cyberpunk*, he never dreamed we'd still be discussing this forty years later. The following is based on, and paraphrased from, the discussion with Bruce and author / critic Dr. Joseph Hurtgen. In the configuration of the cyberpunk term, *Cyber* was the easy part of the word, it was the *punk* that would truly create something new.

Mark : Can you give us a brief basis of cyberpunk history first?

Bruce : Right before cyberpunk started, fantasy was huge. But it was merely a rush to see who could copy Tolkein's writing style the quickest. Sci-fi had been degraded into endless Star Trek type novels. The great sci-fi legends weren't at the top of their game anymore and were just rehashing their old ideas. Science fiction had become "self-referential metafiction".

Cyberpunk was originally written in the early 80's at the height of the Cold War by authors who lived through Vietnam and had grown up reading Vernor Vinge, John Varley, John Brunner, Kurt Vonnegut, and Phillip K. Dick. It explored ideas of social organization in a critical, almost anarchic and nihilistic manner. This went beyond sci-fi's obsession with aliens and space. The heroes were no longer good guys, they were antiheroes on the fringes of society speaking up against the horrors of their generation. It just needed one thing - commercial appeal.

Once *Stars Wars* was released in 1977, the world realized that sci-fi could be a major money maker, and publishers were willing to put a lot of money into all sub-genres of sci-fi, including cyberpunk. The glory days lasted until 1986, when the genre died, only to be reawakened for a moment by *The Matrix* to die again. It died, according to Bruce, because no one was doing anything original; they were expected to fill a niche with a marketing formula.

Mark : Ever since the Gutenberg printing press, trends have come and gone in increasingly fast cycles due to the speed of information transfer. Like dark wave, alternative music, dubstep, trap, and other media genres, you get about a half decade out of them and they change. Was cyberpunk merely the victim of this fashion cycle, or was it indeed an originality issue, or both?

Joseph : If cyberpunk was ever a victim of fashion cycles, the loss of interest in the genre was less with the fans and more with its original writers. As you've already noted publishers and writers have constantly released more cyberpunk literature - over 600 titles! The readership isn't bored with c-punk. The subgenre has staying power because its themes have become more visible in society since the '80s. In our '20s, AI is real and becoming more real, making the Turing test look too easy. The human genome is fully mapped and medical therapies involving genetic alteration / recombinant DNA are accelerating. Multinationals (the stacks) are wealthier and more powerful. Our ultra cities are spaces marked by hyper-surveillance with citizens subject to draconian disciplinary measures. The symbiosis between flesh and human consciousness with computer technology and technological miniaturization is flowering.

But let's return to the fashion cycle. Consider that the formulators of the genre were innovators, creative types. They wanted to pump new life into a stagnating genre, not develop a new version of science fiction that they could then profit from by endlessly rehashing. If you look at the career trajectory of Bruce Sterling, for example, you'll note that he doesn't write sequels. He doesn't do trilogies. He's never had any interest in mining the cyberpunk vein until the gold was gone. He never needed to. Though Gibson does write in trilogies, they aren't true trilogies. His version of the "trilogy" is a snarky way of subverting the publisher's playbook. You know, he tosses the next manuscript down and says, "here's the sequel", even though it's clearly not a sequel. He rarely even has a reappearing character across his books. Gibson's first sequels, for example, were related loosely in theme with his cyberpunk urtext *Neuromancer*. But if you've read those books, *Mona Lisa Overdrive* and *Count Zero*, then you know that the story doesn't build across books.

The other tension here is that the cyberpunks weren't quite as original as commonly conceived. For example, James Blish rigorously explored genetically or technologically altering human subjects in the '40s and '50s - check out *The Seedling Stars*. A. E. van Vogt considered the transformation of societies as a result of advanced computerization - *The World of Null* - A. E. van Vogt didn't call his computers artificially intelligent and Blish didn't drop his primogenitures into cyberspace, but most of the raw material that the cyberpunks refashioned was all there in the science fiction from the previous half century.

Bruce Sterling has responded to the question of the cyberpunk movement by saying that it was useful to develop friendships with other like-minded writers. By uniting under the banner of cyberpunk, lots of mostly Texan writers in the '80s sold a lot of books. But they didn't intend to call themselves cyberpunks. That term had a lot of appeal and became affixed to them even though the writers initially referred to as cyberpunks had wide-ranging interests and sometimes wrote books that didn't fit into the cyberpunk brand by any stretch of the imagination. So, neither was their abandonment of cyberpunk planned. They wrote science fiction. Sterling notes that because he was termed a cyberpunk in the '80s, he's always had the term follow him, always will.

Mark : Can you explain how cyberpunk has changed over the decades, if at all?

Bruce : A depressingly mountainous amount of the self-identified cyberpunk fiction I see now is stuck firmly in the 1980s. It's not new, fresh, or original. It's paint-by-numbers imitation Gibson. It's *Blade Runner* fan fic, or *Akira* fan fic, or worse, wannabe *Shadowrun* or *Cyberpunk 2077* media tie-in fic. I would dearly love to see a new form of SF emerge that reflects the baseline of now, and begins a whole new series of extrapolations that creates a new consensual vision of a different future. But I think that as long as you're intentionally labeling your fiction as "cyberpunk", you're deliberately handicapping yourself.

Mark : As an author who erodes the boundaries of genre, do you agree that new cyberpunk authors are better off exploring a new form of fiction that speaks more to the pains of our generation and dropping the term cyberpunk, due to the ways that labels constrain us? What would this new fiction look like?

Joseph : Because cyberpunk was almost immediately abandoned by its progenitors, or, better, because

cyberpunk never had any hard-coded protocols that its not always wiling adherents followed, it's useful to redefine cyberpunk as cyberpunking, a practice of considering the implications of technology and modernity for the near-future on human society. If the result of cyberpunking looks dystopian, cyberspatial, or genetically modified, it's because the rise of fascism, technologically infused reality, and eugenics is ever with us.

As humans take to the stars, cyberpunking will look more like space opera, but expressing what the genre will do turns nebulous. It doesn't do much good to say that a given genre will do what another genre has done, even though it seems certain that various science fiction subgenres will merge and get revised in various ways.

However, let's consider a definition that's at the core of what literature is supposed to accomplish - it tells the story of humanity, of man and his culture, of his struggles, his aspirations, his victories, his failures, of the trajectory of man's cyclical rebirth and entropy. Science fiction is tasked with revising that tale as what it means to be human is altered. I frequently ask people their thoughts about living double the current lifespan of mankind. I also ask them what they think it would be like to live forever or if they'd like to. Surprisingly, I almost never hear someone say they'd like immortality. I imagine people don't allow themselves to think of it because accepting the certainty of death is a powerful and age-old motivation for structuring life. But that's why we have to ask such questions. Because man wouldn't be the same if his lifespan were doubled, tripled, or pushed out toward the boundaries of forever, the life of stars, galaxies, the universe. We are on the cusp of doubling our lifespan, by the way. Well, Jeff Bezos and the billionaire class are. And altering the human so that it is undying is theoretically possible. We've just got to override hard-coded aging processes in our biology. We'll need new stories to make sense of a radically changed existence. Our new heroes won't be our old heroes.

Mark : How has cyberpunk changed over the decades in your opinion?

Joseph : Cyberpunk has been such a useful story type that, broadly conceived, it hasn't really had to change all that much. Gibson extrapolated from the nascence of networked computers and gave us cyberspace, a new way of imagining human consciousness and the systems that make up our societies, whether financial, military, political. One of the difficulties with discovering something like cyberspace is that it's hard to escape. Like once you discover that the apple keeps falling back to the ground, you can't abandon that framework. Gravity is ever with you.

But there's so much to the story of man relating to a technologically oriented world controlled by systems of capital that we can keep retelling it and continue finding new aspects to that world, new aspects to ourselves really.

But I'm taking on the broad picture here. What specific kind of changes or developments have you observed in cyberpunk?

Mark : I think the fears have changed that inspire science fiction as a whole. The fears that sci-fi had forty years ago are, hopefully, less relevant today. We've sent rovers to Mars and haven't found aliens. The Cold War is no longer at its peak like it was in 1983. The internet took off in 1991 without many of the fears that authors thought this tech would bring coming to fruition.

I think sci-fi today is addressing different fears. In cyberpunk books like *Europa* by Elias Hurst there's this fear of isolation, something that the youngest generations are experiencing at record-high levels, in your book *Sherman* there's this fear of ethnocentrism and our nation's honor being made a mockery of, in *The Man with No Name* by Tanweer Dar there's a fear of A.I., and in Hoshi and the Red City Circuit by Dr. Dora Raymaker there's a fear of human rights being lost for those who are neurodiverse (such as autistic persons).

While some books have covered these topics, we're basing conflict on a wider range of fears now that represents our zeitgeist. This makes sense, since in the past ethnocentrism was considered a virtue, A.I. didn't exist, and

mental illnesses hadn't been rightfully described nor was there a great concern for sufferers' rights (assuming the illnesses are described properly now which is a separate topic). In other words, they weren't considered problems.

Let me close with Bruce Sterling's comments last year in 2019, "I would not dream of telling a young science fiction writer today to write like a cyberpunk. As a wave crashes to the shore we don't lament the ocean's death, as it brings fresh oxygen. I'm not upset about cyberpunk being dead, or alive."