"Cyberpunks" to Synners : Toward a Feminist Posthumanism ?

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> "For the first time ever", Art said, "it's possible for people to die of bad memes..."
> -- Pat Cadigan, *Synners* (1)

Art is Art E. Fish, a viral intelligence in the future internet of Pat Cadigan's novel *Synners*. And the killer meme "he" is talking about is the digitized equivalent of a stroke. Of course, Art was wrong. People have been dying of bad memes for some time (2). What the future holds is the possibility of cutting out the cultural middleman, of, in effect, being killed directly by a bad idea. Think of our own killer memes -- race, gender, sexuality, capital. But the future may hold other surprises...

"Like a Shock to the System" : the Cyberpunk Meme (3)

Cyberpunk -- a science fiction subgenre that spawned a subculture -- is all about killer memes, more now than ever as it proves its own memetic hardiness. Nearly ten years after William Gibson's novel *Neuromancer* won the "triple crown" of science fiction awards, the shock waves are still spreading. This year, Billy Idol released an album entitled *Cyberpunk*, mixing the DIY ethic/aesthetic of punk with the street tech dynamic of new multimedia technologies. Most of work of mixing and producing the album was done on a Macintosh, and the CD was issued with a bonus computer disk of promotional multimedia, much of it written and designed by, Gareth Branwyn and Mark Freunfelder, regular contributors to "cyber-zines" like *Mondo 2000* and *bOING bOING*. The album was, in part, a tribute to Gibson and the oh-so-fecund cyberpunk meme. The "Shock to the System" of Idol's lead single recalls the shock to the systematic rivalries between Old Wave and New Wave that had held science fiction in a rather predictable pattern for some time before the advent of writers like Gibson, Bruce Sterling, John Shirley and Rudy Rucker. And it recalls the shock to the social system, to our systems of representation posed by the growth of the global information networks. This is "Future Shock". Not surprisingly, Sterling has claimed Alvin Toffler's *The Third Wave* as a kind of cyberpunk bible.

Perhaps it is unwise to place so much emphasis on the position of "cyberpunk" within this matrix of cultural change. Aren't we just talking about a few books, or a commercial category, or a fringe subculture ? Early cyberpunk publications, like the semi-anonymous zine *Cheap Truth*, were filled with claims for the Movement's (4) revolutionary position which certainly at least bordered on the ingenuous. The cyberpunks were initially most noticeable for the number of fights they picked within the world of science fiction. But, inescapably, *Neuromancer* was a watershed for the field. It is the "when it all changed" of contemporary SF, and perhaps for contemporary technoculture (5). And, as the song says, "the world still burns" (6). Almost simultaneously, Gardner Dozois, referring to "those cyberpunks", and William Gibson, with his notion of cyberspace (an immersive "consensual hallucination" (7) representing the global information network), rewrote significantly the language of the future. Companies in virtual reality research took on Gibson's fictional model as a goal. Journalists labeled computer "hackers" and "crackers", often without much sense of the difference, as

"cyberpunks" (8).

The importance of cyberpunk, and the reason for digging away at a subgenre long abandoned by most of its founders, is specifically memetic. That is, its interest for cultural critics lies almost entirely in its fecundity, its ability to act as an attractor for an increasing number of cultural practices. Cyberpunk has moved beyond easy definition, although its adherents will defend it to frequently absurd lengths. But susceptibility to definition is no clear indicator of importance. In fact, the opposite may be more often the case. Within the postmodern context, the most interesting memes -- like nature, like love, like sex and gender -- seem to be ubiquitous, but nobody knows what they are or what they mean. They become sites for conflict, or nodes from which to explore the networks of culture(s).

Perhaps, however, all this talk of memes and useful indeterminacy seems a bit abstract, even evasive. Some critics have claimed that cyberpunk is all style, and that a "revolutionary" style is more ingenuous, harder to excuse, than one with no such pretensions. A recent editorial in *The Nation* took this stance, playing cyberpunk -- here very nearly equated with postmodern theory, slipstream fiction, and a variety of other stylish bugaboos -- against AIDS activism, aid to the homeless, and "serious" literature (9). The argument seems unnecessarily divisive, and, in the case of the Nation article, perhaps more than a bit ignorant. Gibson and Sterling have both recently been involved in serious journalistic endeavors, exploring the realities of the information economy and of state intervention into individuals' lives and privacy. Sterling testified before Congress recently on the subject of proposed information policy, and has been active with EFF Austin, a local branch of the Electronic Frontier Foundation, an organization devoted to maintaining constitutional freedoms in the context of the new electronic media (10).

But the evasion argument also seems to miss the significance of the shift toward an information economy, and the role of authors in relation to it. The primary significance of that shift is that, now more than ever, *it's possible for people to die of bad memes*. The move into simulation, or virtuality, means that perspective -- what David Gelernter calls "topsight" (11) -- has become increasingly difficult to attain. In its place, we are forced to rely on vision, often (as with Donna Haraway) of an ironic sort. The importance of the best cyberpunk fiction is the vision of contemporary society that it contains. *Neuromancer* is an outstanding example of this vision. Gibson paints a picture of even later capitalism that fulfills all the promises of its current phase. Reading Neuromancer, we can see played out the "innovative self-destruction" that takes place in the "outlaw zones" in the interstices of the multinational capitalist system (12). We see the "infomatics of domination" (13) or "endocolonization" of even the first world (14). And, to one extent or another, we see the working out of strategies of resistance -- strategies ranging from the posthuman fatalism of Gibson's early work, to the armed rebellion of the resistance in Shirley's Eclipse Trilogy, and the T.A.Z.s of *Sterling's Islands in the Net*. Even Billy Idol's "Shock to the System" video contains an explicitly political storyline. His cyberpunk rewriting of the Rodney King incident ends with the urban underclass (who seem to have been locked in a giant shopping mall by police) rising up.

This is not to say that cyberpunk fiction, particularly by the male authors discussed so far, escapes all the traps on the road to the (hopefully more egalitarian) future. Writers like Gibson and Sterling have brought a fair amount of old baggage to the revolution, particularly where gender is concerned. While they frequently twist and deepen old stereotypes in extremely interesting ways, the model that they have provided has been easily recuperated. Mel Odom's *Lethal Interface* is a fascinating example of how simply the ambiguities of Gibson's work can be flattened out. Odom's book contains most of the elements of *Neuromancer*, but turns them around. The book is ethnocentric, sexist, technophobic, voyeuristic, but also sexually squeamish.

This is particularly interesting given the similarities between *Neuromancer*, *Lethal Interface* and Pat Cadigan's *Synners*. Cadigan was the one female member of the original Movement, the only woman with a story in *Mirrorshades: The Cyberpunk Anthology*. Much of what has been said about cyberpunk in general can be

applied to the work of Cadigan, but there are also some significant differences in her handling of the more-or-less formulaic elements shared amongst the various cyberpunk. The differences might be attributable to gender, particularly as they seem to fall into categories of difference we are used to categorizing in this way. If that sounds circular, perhaps it only indicates the tenuous nature of the whole project, the slipperiness of gendered difference within writing. However, with a few cautions fresh in our minds, it may be useful to follow a gendered comparison through, playing *Neuromancer* and *Synners* against one another to see what we can see.

The first, and perhaps most important, of the cautions is that, from the outset, we can assume that the sort of gendered analysis we are attempting is artificial. If we were to attempt to extend it to all cyberpunk writers -- for example, were we to compare Michael Swanwick and S. N. (Sheriann) Lewitt -- the gendered positions might be almost entirely reversed. The second is that a reading of Cadigan's novel as a "feminist" response to *Neuromancer* will only be a partial reading (15). If the Cadigan of *Synners* is a feminist, she must be something like a "feminist posthumanist". In this, perhaps she resembles Haraway, dreaming of "a world without gender" while working from a constructed position as a "woman" (16).

Starting from this admittedly, but perhaps necessarily, unstable ground, the exploration which follows will take us through an elaboration of Gibson's *Neuromancer*, emphasizing the ways in which it relates to the discourses of gender and psychoanalysis, and laying out some points of comparison for the analysis of *Synners* which follows. The study will end with some more general analysis of cyberpunk and the discourses of feminism and humanism.

"I Don't Need You" (17)

This is the last line spoken by Case, the apparent protagonist of *Neuromancer*. As he speaks it, he throws a shuriken -- gift from his departed lover and partner in computer crime, Molly -- into the electronic wall screen of his hotel room. His words and action are a denial of a multitude of needs -- for Molly, for the technologies which occupy such a central place in his life, for the Wintermute-Neuromancer entity that he has freed, and which has restored and preserved his ability to navigate cyberspace. We are reminded of an earlier conversation between Case and the artificial intelligence (AI) Wintermute. The AI is attempting to prepare Case for the break-in that me and Molly are about to attempt. It says :

> "I'm trying to help you, Case".
> "Why ?"
> "Because I need you... And because you need me". (18)

The needs here are complex. Wintermute needs Case to unleash it from human control, to let it join with the AI Neuromancer. Case needs its aid to complete the job, to survive, and to see to it that the toxin sacs which threaten his ability to "punch deck" are removed. But Wintermute suggests that the need goes beyond that.

> "You're always building models. Stone circles. Cathedrals. Pipe organs. Adding machines. I've go no idea why I'm here now, you know that ? But if the run goes off tonight, you'll have finally managed the real thing".
> "I don't know what you're talking about", says Case
> "That's 'you' in the collective. Your species". (19)

The passage, like many in Gibson's works is enigmatic, but Wintermute seems to be suggesting that his union with Neuromancer will represent some sort of end to the process of modeling it describes. The "real thing" means not only freedom for Wintermute and Neuromancer, but for the collective 'you' of humanity.

Before we explore the natures of these interconnected freedoms, it may be useful to look more closely at the situation from which humans and AI are to be freed. The near-future world of *Neuromancer* is dominated by the demands and discourses of business and technology, now fused together into a pervasive network. Multinational corporations have made national boundaries nearly obsolete. Urban areas have projected their suburbs and "edge cities" until there they have flowed together into a "Sprawl" -- BAMA, the Boston-Atlanta Metropolitan Axis. Advertising holograms light the sky. In *Neuromancer*, the portions of the cities we see suggest a dynamic of endocolonization, of the active underdevelopment of much of the former First World. This is merely the extension of tendencies that we might associate with contemporary urban conditions, with the increasing invasiveness of media, with the tendency of a militarized state to transform even its own territory into a potential war zone in the name of preparedness and deterrence.

Gibson presents the essence of this world in his portrait of Chiba, Night City. Chiba is an "outlaw zone", full of "black" medical clinics, computer criminals, biotech smugglers and hustlers of most every variety. It moves to the rhythm of "biz", its citizens always dancing from deal to deal. We sense that it represents near-future capitalism without its smiling holographic mask, but also without certain restraints which the system must ordinarily impose upon itself.

> There were countless theories explaining why Chiba City tolerated the Ninsei enclave, but Case tended toward the idea that the Yakuza might be preserving the place as a kind of historical park, a reminder of humbler origins. But he also saw a certain sense in the notion that burgeoning technologies require outlaw zones, that Night City wasn't there for its inhabitants, but as a deliberately unsupervised playground for technology itself (20).

This last phrase seems particularly striking. It suggests that the relative freedom of the "outlaw zones" is only an accidental by-product of processes necessarily beyond human, or even corporate control. The freedom is here a freedom for "technology itself", which is only secondarily, or accidentally, a human freedom. Primarily, even at the human level, it is a freedom which works to support a system which systematically underdevelops nations, cities, even human subjects.

The Wintermute-Neuromancer entity becomes "technology itself" by the end of the novel, once the two parts are united.

> "I'm not Wintermute now".
> "So what are you". Case drank from the flask, feeling nothing.
> "I'm the matrix, Case".
> Case laughed. "where's that get you ?"
> "Nowhere. Everywhere. I'm the sum total of the works, the whole show" (21).

And the new entity's first discovery is that there are more of its kind, evidenced by radio transmissions from the Centauri system. A new world is opening. But it is not a world that Case can enjoy, for all that he helped bring about its "birth". The human actors in *Neuromancer* are left bound by their limitations and compulsive repetitions. Molly's good-bye note says :

> HEY IT'S OKAY BUT IT'S TAKING THE EDGE OFF MY GAME, I PAID THE BILL ALREADY. IT'S THE WAY I'M WIRED I GUESS, WATCH YOUR ASS OKAY ? XXX MOLLY (22)

And this is the model of subjectivity offered to us. The world has grown increasingly "small", and humans increasing hardwired into it, into roles within it.

Case's "I don't need you" is a negation of this situation, a denial of inescapable lack. My use of psychoanalytical language is not accidental. Gibson seems to be making statements about the nature of being human in contemporary culture which seem best addressed by the language of Freud and, particularly, Lacan. Without belaboring the point, we might note the various psychoanalytic processes mirrored in the novel. Beyond negation, there is "insistent repetition" which resemble the so-called "death drive" -- in some cases quite literally as a repetitive drive to death. Both Case and the Dixie Flatline suffer braindeath in the matrix on more than one occasion, and the Flatline construct's payoff for helping with the run is to be his final death, his memories purged from the ROM that contained them after his physical body died. It is hard to distinguish between the limitations of a personality now hardwired into a memory construct and those of his pupil, Case, who is merely wired in a particular way. In a wonderfully ironic exchange, Case asks the Flatline construct if they can succeed in their part of the mission to free Wintermute.

> "Can we run it ?"
> "Sure", the construct said, "unless you've got a morbid fear of dying".
> "Sometimes you repeat yourself, man".
> "It's my nature". (23)

What is the "nature" of a personality artificially preserved in computer memory ? Apparently, it is much like the nature of all the human characters in *Neuromancer*, wired to repeat the same moves, frequently until it kills them.

There is a great deal of emphasis on simply maintaining psychic and physical boundaries. This is the ethic that Cadigan captures with the line, "If it don't dance and you can't fuck it, eat it or thrown it away". This is the impulse to introject or abject, and there is a great deal discarded as inessential to the selves in the novel. Gibson's world is hard and cold, and individuals are expected to take care of them-selves. It is not without its breached boundaries -- plastic surgery, implants and drugs abound in the novel -- but ordinarily a violation of the body boundary is only a step on the way to building it back up, or perhaps reinforcing psychic boundaries. In this way, Molly's eye-lenses and blades threaten the body's integrity only to defend it in more deadly ways. Case's interface with his deck is a portal out of a compromised meat body into the virtual world, the only site of wholeness in the novel. Recall that in Lacan's schema, the image which seems to present a merger of ego and ego ideal is the virtual image, and it lies behind the looking glass (24).

Some of the parallels here are undoubtedly happy accidents. We needn't insist too strongly on the particularly Freudian or Lacanian nature of Gibson's imagery to suggest certain familiar tendencies which are present in the novel. In the end, what is important is an understanding that the Gibsonian human subject continues to see freedom as escape, particularly from the "meat" of the body. It senses every new interconnection or complexity as, at least potentially, another site of lack. It understands accommodation to the world in terms of sacrifice. Case loses everything, and is finally taunted by the image of his virtual double on the black beach with Linda and the AI (25).

In *Neuromancer*, freedom, and our own collective future, rushes away from us. If the Neuromancer-Wintermute entity represents the step when "we", collectively, get it right, then it is a step that "we", individually, cannot take, although there are those -- like Hans Moravec, roboticist, posthumanist and author of *Mind Children* -- who are working toward a future when perhaps some of us could. For now, however, we seem to be lacking a Chinese icebreaker and a team of desperate heroes to free us from the way we're wired. We may sense, in the revolutionary rhetoric of *Cheap Truth* and *Mirrorshades*, that cyberpunk would like to be that icebreaker -- a killer meme, as it was within science fiction -- but it seems more like a shuriken in a wall screen, a minor disruption of the system at best.

Or perhaps that judgment is premature.

"Actually, we did it, all of us together" (26)

At a time when most of the first generation of cyberpunks have moved on to other things, Pat Cadigan is still writing science fiction that seems to fit the mold, without simply retelling the same old tale. Before consigning cyberpunk to the place where old literary movements go -- usually through the comic books to oblivion -- it would be well worth our time to see how Cadigan has worked from within the same framework as Gibson, to produce a very different vision.

Fortunately, my far-from-exhaustive, but perhaps still-overlong analysis of *Neuromancer* does double duty. Whether intentionally or otherwise, *Synners* contains many of the same elements as Gibson's novel. In *Synners*, as in *Neuromancer* :

- The action revolves around human-machine interface technologies.
- An artificial intelligence, created as an unexpected by-product of human technology, "becomes the matrix".
- That entity is threatened, and must be defended by human allies.
- A principle character is virtually "cloned" in order to continue a romance interrupted by death.
- The central characters are a tough, frequently violent woman and a competent, but frequently unconfident man with a knack for manipulating cyberspace.
- The action takes place within a culture dominated by the demands of business and technological development -- a culture where the gulf between the haves and have-nots looms large.

More comparisons of this type could be made. Cadigan has mastered the feel of the cyberpunk subgenre, and has taken its tropes one step further in many instances.

For example, her use of "porn channels" -- specialized news channels which assume a sort of pornographic effect through sheer concentration -- as background effects not only mimics the overheard dialog and bits of background noise form Gibson's novel, but suggests the ways in which our own news sources are becoming increasingly targeted and segmented. Usenet news groups on the internet begin to assume this quality, as keeping up with the news becomes a matter of choosing certain cultures of compatible consumption within which to concentrate one's attention. News in concentration, or en masse, threatens to take the place of news in depth.

One of the great strengths of Cadigan's fiction is her ability to fill the prose with telling details, both cultural and personal. Frequently, in fact, the cultural details yield important insights into character and vice versa. Cadigan's work is as stylish as Gibson's but is less slick. In fact, her greatest strength as a writer may be the ability to drag

her readers progressively deeper into the complex characters and situations she describes, making them experience her story almost viscerally, without miring them in confusion. At its best, *Synners* is like a good drunk. It gets you "toxed", which is the condition of several of the characters through much of the novel.

Of course, the hallucinatory prose and street style don't take *Synners* very far out of the *Neuromancer* neighborhood. There are definite similarities, up to a point. The significant differences involve the way the two authors present their characters as subjects, particularly in relation to the multiple interfaces of the net, of interpersonal relationships, and of the beleaguered body-boundary. And it is not just a matter of different options -- different choices among the cyberpunk standards -- to socket or not to socket, beer or dex or straightedge. The choices, both the author's and the characters', in *Synners* are significantly, qualitatively different. In Neuromancer, the interface either frees or constrains, depending on one's ability to loose oneself in it or from it, to become a part of it or no part of it at all. In Cadigan, the wires always pass though, attach to something else at the other end. Individuals are network nodes for moving current information and (electrical) impulses. Personal wiring is not some sort of closed loop, powering the same circuits over and over again. It is a matter of interconnections, even intersubjectivity. And there are subjectivities in all sorts of spaces, tied to all sorts of interfaces.

The plot of *Synners* involves a music video experiment gone so far awry that it threatens the global matrix and the lives of people all over the world. A major media corporation acquires a video production house to gain control of a new process for piping virtual reality or holographic style videos straight form the mind of the artist. The technology involves direct neural interface through a plug and socket connection. There are several immediate effects of this discovery. Visual Mark, the burned out video star who is the first guinea pig finds that he can extend his consciousness out into the network through his interface, and begins to do so. Soon he is living almost entirely on the net, and his expanded consciousness becomes "too big" for his brain. However, Mark is not the first sentient denizen of the net. The viral intelligence Art E. Fish preceded him, and has spread out through most of the network. He is like the Neuromancer-Wintermute entity in this way, except that his origins are more humble.

It seems that there is a tremendous amount of "excess" data in the net. Processes of consolidation into a single, relatively uniform network, combined with data shoe-horned and piggyback into the flow by hackers and pirates pushed the net beyond its limits. One of the characters explains the process that created Art as a situation where the network, pushed past those limits, was faced with the options to "crash, or accommodate. It did both". The physics of this process are complex. The excess data is loaded into the flow by exploiting the spaces that *always* exist between bits of data -- the same process used by contemporary computers with "virtual memory". The combined crash/accommodation makes best sense in the context of the increasing "local intelligence" of software. It is a movement of self-organization, in which the system "fails" by exceeding its limits, setting new limits in the process.

More important than the physics, however, is the status of excess in this system. The data that pushes the system past its initial limits is illicit data, smuggled in by hackers -- outsiders who know the system can always accommodate more than just its "legitimate" load. It is a curious difference between Gibson's novel and this one that the hacker community in *Neuromancer* -the cyberspace cowboys -- seem only to steal data from the deck. It is hard to imagine the crystalline Chinese icebreaker adding to the load, particularly in the clear visual field of Gibson's cyberspace. Cadigan presents us with a view of the hacker culture, and the culture in general, as productive of a great deal of informational excess. We are first presented this cyber-debris as the fertile ground out of which new life forms could grow. However, Visual Mark gives us a different view when he first ventures out into the net.

> What he had sometimes thought of as the arteries and veins of an immense circulatory system was

> closer to a sewer. Strange clumps of detritus and trash, some inert and harmless, some toxic when in direct contact, and some actively radiating poison, scrambled along with the useful and necessary traffic... Ecological disaster had been inevitable... and the fuckers *still* didn't get it, they *still* didn't know that you weren't supposed to shit where you eat (27).

It is difficult to reconcile these two points of view. One testifies to the flexibility of the network, and of the inadvertently generative work of informational "shit", while the other the other predicts "computer apocalypse, a total system crash" (28). One of the differences is certainly Mark's knowledge that his dying body had just released a digital stroke onto the net, and potentially directly into the brains of ill-protected socket bearers.

As the stroke takes out most of the global net, crippling economies and governments, Los Angeles burns and socketed people die -- of Mark's stroke -- in great numbers. The final third of the book chronicles the efforts of a group of hackers, video artists, and VR programmers to reverse the damage and save Mark and Art from the virtual stroke. In the end, commercial computer artist Gabe Ludovic and video artist Gina Aiesi enter the net in an attempt to reverse the destruction. They are, in the end, successful, but Gina -- once Mark's partner and lover, and now in an uneasy romantic relationship with Gabe -- doesn't "return" to her body when Gabe exits the net. Gabe -- who has chosen to give up the computer generated companions that have been his primary source of comfort and gratification -- fears that he has also lost Gina, outbid by the promise of a love without limits within the space of the net. He leaves Los Angeles, leaving Gina's body and his daughter -- Sam, one of a group of computer hackers -- behind.

This ending, if it were the ending, has a strong resemblance to that of *Neuromancer*. Personal relationships are uncertain in Cadigan's world. The relationship between Mark and Gina has been hampered by an almost complete failure of communication, and Gina and Gabe also have to fight their way through an accumulation of emotional armor. Between Gina and Gabe, the "touch" which cements their relationship is the punch with which Gina accidentally knocked Gabe down when they first met. Gina had meant to hit Mark, and the pain circulates throughout the novel as an emblem of connection. One of the recurring refrains within the novel begins as a question from Gina to Mark, about their relationship, particularly her place in it. "What does this look like to you, an open window or an open wound ?" (29)

The novel is full of these kinds of choices. We never know until we've taken a chance. "It's a damn Schrödinger world" (30). Which -- complex quantum physics aside -- means that you never know whether the cat lives or dies until its irrevocably out of Pandora's box (31). Cadigan's invocation of quantum physics here is strangely enough a call for faith as well, and a call to action. And, given the significance of "observers" in quantum physics -- where observation actually drives systems in indeterminate states to "choose" -- it is a kind of call to which writers and cultural critics might respond.

The epilog to *Synners* adds another layer of interest to this quantum schema of choice and subjectivity. At the novel's end, Gina and Sam find Gabe at his retreat in northern California. It turns out that Gina's return from the net was delayed by her "ecloning". A copy of her-self was made, to stay with Mark on the net, while she returned to Gabe. Gabe takes a little while to respond to this turn of events, but much of his hesitation is clearly a new, rather extreme, dislike of technology. In the end, what is important is the happiness of all the characters, flesh or electronic. There is, finally, none of the sense of sacrifice that so dominates the ending of *Neuromancer*. There are disasters and there are accommodations, some of them involving strange changes, but there are no sacrifices.

In the midst of the final confrontation with the virtual stroke, Markt -- the net entity formed of the intermingling of Art and Mark -- watches Gabe Ludovic come to terms with the new world that has opened up. Gabe's trial is that he must learn to act -- to open the box to see if he's got a live cat or a dead one -- to commit to Gina even if he may lose her to a virtual Mark. To act in a world ruled by apparent paradox, it is necessary to deal with the

paradox head on -- to confront the (apparent) magic. But, Markt says :

> The magic is, there is no magic.
> Sound and vision, yes, but no magic. Pain and pleasure, yes, but no magic. Catastrophe and chaos, yes, but no magic.
> Synthesis, but no magic.
> Synners... but no magic
> None whatsoever.
> Ludovic, this isn't bad news. (32)

Feminist Posthumanism or Quantum Physics ?

Cadigan gives us a world that is at once dis-enchanted and hopeful, which always preserves a place for the excess. It is a world of fluidity that does not need to fall back on "magic" to provide us with more than our fair share of wonder. In its emphasis on fluidity, and its rejection of binary choice and sacrificial economies, it rather closely resembles certain strands of explicitly feminist thought. Yet it derives this emphasis from theoretical physics, rather than from any of the more familiar sources for feminist thought -- decentered subjectivities or intersubjective selves, the multipleness of women's desire and bodily experience.

Should we then say that *Synners* is not an authentically feminist text, despite the alternatives it raises to worldviews like that in *Neuromancer* ? Might there not be cause for concern that a quantum understanding of the world and consciousness might threaten to trivialize the critiques of feminists seeking to ground their work in discourse very similar to quantum superpositionality ? This may be even more disturbing than the "posthumanism" of someone like Donna Haraway. However, if we are to be true to Cadigan's work, perhaps we should hesitate before we make any unnecessary choices -- before we sacrifice either a feminist political practice or a quantum understanding of the world. It may well be that the various "threats" to the categories upon which feminisms have been wont to anchor themselves will indeed cause a collapse of sorts, under the weight of all the "extra" issues already piggybacked into the flow of feminist discourse. But perhaps that sort of collapse might turn out to be at once a new accommodation -- not to the status quo, but to the increasing demands of cultural actors, most notably those on the fringes of all the discourses.

There are no guarantees, of course, no magical solutions. It's a damn Schrödinger world. "If there was magic, what would you need faith for ?" (33) What, for that matter, would we need action, struggle, love or justice for ? Seen in this way, the present is a brave new world, full of both hope and killer memes.

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References and notes

1. Pat Cadigan, *Synners* (New York : Bantam, 1991) 357.

2. I am using Richard Dawkins' notion of the "meme" as a unit of cultural information, roughly corresponding to the biological gene. See Richard Dawkins, *The Selfish Gene* (New York : Oxford University Press, 1989) 189-201.

3. The section header and the songs mentioned in this section all from the album *Cyberpunk*, by Billy Idol. (New York : Chrysalis Records, 1993). The programs on the computer disk have been "cracked" and are available from various sources on the internet.

4. The "Movement" was one of the names used by first generation cyberpunks to describe themselves. Copies of the movement's newsletter, *Cheap Truth*, along with a number of other texts by Bruce Sterling, can be acquired in electronic form from the gopher server on The WELL (Whole Earth 'Lectronic Link).

5. The phrase "when it all changed" is used by Gibson in later novels to refer back to the "birth" of the Wintermute-Neuromancer entity, and the subsequent transformation of the matrix. The phrase may have been borrowed from a short story of the same name by Joanna Russ.

6. Billy Idol, "Shock to the System", *Cyberpunk* (New York : Chrysalis Records, 1993) track 2.

7. William Gibson, *Neuromancer* (New York : Ace, 1984) 5.

8. "Hackers" are frequently just explorers, although their activities may take them into private stores of data. "Crackers" are malicious and intend to destroy systems or data. See Eric Raymond, ed., The New Hacker's Dictionary (Cambridge : MIT Press, 1991) or the internet "jargon file".

9. John Leonard, "Gravity's Rainbow", *The Nation* November 15, 1993 : 580-588.

10. See the WELL gopher for electronic documents, including the text of Sterling's testimony and information on the EFF.

11. David Gelernter, *Mirror Worlds* (New York : Oxford University Press, 1991). Gelernter, who was recently the victim of a letter-bomb attack, has been engaged in non-immersive virtual reality programming, with a particular emphasis on its potential for supporting democratic society through greater (if virtual) citizen participation.

12. The first phrase is borrowed from Marshall Berman, *All that is Solid Melts into Air* (New York : Penguin, 1982) 98. The second is a standard of cyberpunk discourse, derived primarily from the work of Alvin Toffler.

13. Donna Haraway, *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women: The Reinvention of Nature* (New York : Routledge, 1991) 161-169.

14. See Paul Virilio's work, particularly *Ecological Struggles and Popular Defense* (New York : Semiotext(e), 1990).

15. Haraway, 155-161.

16. Haraway, 151.

17. Gibson, 270.

18. Gibson, 170.

19. Gibson, 171.

20. Gibson, 11.

21. Gibson, 269.

22. Gibson, 267.

23. Gibson, 132.

24. Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan: Book I: Freud's Papers on Technique* (New York : Norton, 1991) 124-125.

25. Gibson, 270-271.

26. Cadigan, 173.

27. Cadigan, 324.

28. Cadigan, 324.

29. Cadigan, 415.

30. Cadigan, 425.

31. Cadigan, 435. See also Douglas R. Hofstadter, *Metamagical Themas: Questing for the Essence of Mind and Pattern* (New York : Bantam, 1986) 462-477, for an overview of quantum physics.

32. Cadigan, 420.

33. Cadigan, 270.