

# Cyberpunk - Aspects and Expectations

Janne Järvinen

## The History of Times to Come

The term cyberpunk was first used in the mid 80's to describe a new literal "movement" or style in the field of science fiction. It was different from traditional scifi in almost everything. The attitude towards questions of "human values" and meaning of technology, life and vision of the future were but refreshing and exciting, also controversial. Those in favor of traditional "hippie scifi", as I like to call it, recented the thoughts of the future not being a bliss of high moral values and nice little people doing nice little things. The future in cyberpunk is dark, pessimistic and very down-to-earth in certain sense. I will name more of characteristics later but now I tell more about the beginning of the movement. First of all, this was the beginning of the age of personal computers, videogames, computer graphics, networks, hackers, crackers and microchips. Bulky and slow as they may have been, they were something new. The "creator" of cyberpunk is usually considered to be one William Gibson. Gibson's work is seen almost as the ultimate truth and it defines the right and wrong elements in cyberpunk. This is of course very much unorthodox in terms of postmodernity but science fiction in general likes to see subjects as a whole and thus set boundaries or limits to them. Cyberpunk is also firmly connected to the New Media, because it's main themes include the few "true" new media aspects of global networks and virtual reality. Gibson's first works *Johnny Mnemonic* and *Burning Chrome* were stirring the field of scifi but the jackpot was hit with the *Neuromancer*. It won several awards, including Hugo, Nebula and Philip K. Dick awards. In short, tells a story of a "console cowboy" who seeks his lost "netrunning" skills. This ability to function in cyberspace is the most valuable asset he has and he's willing to do almost anything to get it back. The book basically defines the cyberpunk genre and introduces many of concepts used today when discussing about the Net, cyberspace and other aspects in the field of new media. The term cyberspace, however misused nowadays, comes from Gibson's *Burning Chrome* and has reached popularity even among those who in fact don't know what they are talking about. Literary speaking, "Neuromancer" offers very little to new ways to write science fiction but it's view of the world and future has influenced our culture in one way or another. The other significant piece of work is Ridley Scott's adaption of Philip K. Dick's *Do Androids Dream Of Electric Sheep ?*. This movie (named *Blade Runner*) is the other of the two "True" cyberpunk works. As *Neuromancer* changed the visions of the future, *Blade Runner* changed the way to make movies out of it. It wasn't a success at the theatres, although it won the Hugo award. In fact, the producer is said to have said at the awards ceremony that perhaps someone would now go to see it. Nevertheless, the cult value of the film is beyond any doubt. Where *Neuromancer* was connected to issues of cyberspace, *Blade Runner* was about the streets, the technological advances, androids (replicants), geopolitical changes and of what happens when you put them all together.

At first however, the future trend was but an idea of few loosely connected writers. They were known as "the Mirrorshade Group" or only as "the Movement". The name "cyberpunk" was introduced by Gardner Dozois, an editor of the *Isaac Asimov's Science Fiction Magazine*, when he referred to the writers of certain style. He says to have picked the term "from the street somewhere". It was also the title of Bruce Bethke's short story a couple of years before, published in *I.A.S.F.M.* The catchy title was quickly acquired by the semi-official spokesman of cyberpunk, Bruce Sterling. He was publishing at the time a fanzine called *Cheap Truth*, in which traditional scifi was criticized and tossed around with variable precision or reason. Sterling and Gibson were friends and soon most of the other writers became, if not friends, at least to know one another. These pioneers included Lew Shiner, John Shirley, Rudy Rucker and Tom Maddox to name a few. The cyberpunks became known outside the

small world of science fiction literature and awoke interest in new areas. The postmodern academics noticed cyberpunk to fit in their view of the world today, which in itself is very postmodern. After all, scifi is usually seen "futile" and as something not to be taken seriously. The term also became known in non-scientific or -academic surroundings, such as Wall Street Journal and People magazine. The technological advances made in those times produced a great deal of hype and every self-respecting "hip" magazine had to publish something about "the media society", "the information superhighway" or "virtual realities" etc. Cyberpunk had its share or free publicity because it offered advanced models of the future. This regards mainly to the technological accomplishments, not so much to the pessimistic views it had or the cynical remarks about actual modern society.

## **The World Through Mirrorshades**

Next, I will name some of the themes or aspects which belong in my opinion to the cyberpunk genre. First of all, and what "the general public" usually forget, cyberpunk is a dark vision of the future. The industrialization has polluted earth to almost uninhabitable state, nature is suffering, all the animals have become extinct, except for those cloned from the DNA-libraries afterwards. The gap between the poor and the rich has got bigger, governments' authority is run over by multinational corporations, which care little about anything else than their profit. Crime levels increase all the time and violent solutions are being made for everyday problems. Most of the people live in comatose-like state and submit silently to the "new world order". Concepts like "the System" or "the Corporate" are present in almost every major cyberpunk story. The not-always-too-heroic heroes, "Cyberpunks" live on "the Edge" of the system desperately trying to make their weight in battle for a better society. This battle is not an open war against something, but an everyday behaviour and not accepting the part corporations have planned for them. Postmodern themes include globalization, commercialism, mixing of different cultures and ideologies in one huge media flow.

## **My Mother is a Cyborg !**

Another important aspect in cyberpunk is the cybernetics invading the human bodies. The word comes from the Greek word "kubernétés", "steersman". Cybernetics is also a science "of control and communications in animals and machines". In this case, cybernetics mean artificial bodyparts, which are usually considered better than their human counterparts. Cybernetics enables people to increase their physical abilities, enhance their sensory systems. Much like we are doing now with our artificial heart transplants, limb prothesis or even with plastic surgery with all the boob jobs and facelifts. Some people include more details to this "early cybernetics", but I require some kind of "practical merging with body" before I accept it. A pirate's wooden leg or a hooked hand isn't enough. Nor are filled teeth. This is because of their "lack of intelligence". I would however define my mother as an early cyborg because she has her iris replaced with a plastic lens. Unfortunately, it is not working properly, so that suggests that we are not yet living in cyberspace just yet. Furthermore, cybernetics in the cyberpunk world is more like a rule than an exception. It is used not only as an enhancement, but as a decoration or status symbol. Such use requires more advanced technology than what can be offered today. Daily shutdowns and infinite numbers of different problems is something one would not probably want in one's body. In addition, not many are yet ready to "go borg" and show their replacements with pride. The term "cyborg", "a human that is part machine", dates back to the 60's, when a scientist Manfred Clynes described with it the advances in biomedical engineering. Some people name Mary Shelley's "Frankenstein" as the first cyborg but it is more like an early android, an artificial life form. The effect on cyberpunk can however be clearly seen. This

theme of man inside a machine fits also into the postmodern theories. The search for new experiences and attempt to separate mind and body, being post-human "can" be achieved by turning your body into metal, ceramic alloys and plastic and by changing your natural sensors, such as eyes, into electronic devices.

## **Surf's Up !**

Another famous and widely spread concept of cyberpunk is cyberspace. And also in this occasion the hype has done its thing. The general "definition" of cyberspace is everything even remotely connected to Internet, the 3-D animation, telecommunications, all of them combined and so on. In short, it is used to name any kind of modern information transfer. The "cyberpunk cyberspace" is something yet to be constructed. It is a virtual space with unlimited number of users, who are interactive with each other, in real-time. Users "jack in" with their neural interface, a connection between a brain and a computer-generated 3-D reality. Users can see each other as "icons" and do things by using different computer programs, also in visible form. The users, "netrunners", will feel the actions they take or what is done to them. The best comprehension of this nowadays can be achieved in virtual reality spaces, with data glasses and data suits. A more easier way is to go to a video arcade and play such games as "T-mek" or any other simulation, where the playfield is bigger than one's field of vision. The feel of "reality" and "being there" is similar to when watching a good movie, even though there is action outside the screen. The cyberspace would be a replica of the real world, with certain geological distances and proportions. The shapes of buildings and cities would be authentic, even though there are no real restrictions for making them fantastic or surreal. The physical forms of data glow in neon colours and seem like hanging in the "air". This has had influence on designing virtual sites and 3-D interfaces, where different services would show as "buildings", like for example the "CyberGate" production. In a way, cyberspace is currently the closest and most advanced item of future cyberpunk world. Although most of the real "space" is only animated visions, the simulation technology shows what cyberspace would probably look like. Most famous work in this area is done by such organizations as M.I.T., of course, but also by Combined Arms and Tactical Training Center and Defence Advanced Research Projects Agency, both part of the U.S. military. As with Internet, first steps in simulation technology are taken by military forces. Although simulations cannot teach people actual combat skills, due to the so far uncounted variables, it can teach how to fly a jet fighter or drive a tank and most of all, it can teach co-operation. We can now use \$40 million simulators, connect them together and run scenarios of real battles in real landscapes. The noise, trembling and terrain situations will effect the users inside the simulators. The ultimate video game, "the Nintendo war". The tactical rehearsals are possible before joining actual battle. Simulation technology has reached a point in which satellite photographs are being transformed automatically into digital, 3-D virtual landscapes. This data is then stored into databases in hi-tech tanks and fighters. This basically means that troops are unaffected by weather or visibility and sometimes know the battleground better than their opponents. This happened in "the War in Southwest Asia", also known as the Persian Gulf war. The soldiers are staring more at monitors than crosshairs. Fortunately, simulation technology has also more constructive uses. Complex surgeries and other "one shot" tasks can also be tested or trained. Different models of synthetic substances, drugs (in positive or negative meaning) can be created without the fear of time consuming and fruitless work.

## **The Culture**

If cyberpunk is more than a few books and films of similar views, then there has to be some evidence how it represents itself in our society. Where can it be seen and who actually are "cyberpunks" ? In most cases some

certain groups are mentioned whenever this issue is discussed. Because of the hype factor, once again, several different groups are identified as cyberpunks in lack of a more adequate term. This has caused cyberpunks to be seen sometimes in negative light. These groups are usually made of urban, young people who have some computer skills. Some such groups are : hackers, crackers, phreaks, cypherpunks and ravers.

Hackers are people who are interested the computer world in terms of how does things work and how one can override problems of that area. They are known to penetrate corporate or state databanks in order to see if they can do it. The movement started in the early years of computer culture in the 1950's by computer enthusiastic M.I.T. students. Some of their inventions are still in use today, like the concept of word processing.

Crackers are a subgroup of hackers. The fundamental difference between hackers and crackers is that when caught, crackers need a lawyer. When the virgin world of computer networks opened to them, some hackers couldn't resist the opportunity to take advantage of the unprepared businessworld. Their actions led to the first computer crimes, although proper legislation didn't yet exist. These are people who are often connected to virus programmers, although viruses seldom can produce anything else than damage without any financial gain. Crackers in a way are the equivalent or cyberpunk's console cowboys and netrunners.

Phreaks are similar to crackers but they are using the telephone network for example to make free phone calls by confusing the operator computer that it cannot know who to send the proper bill or sends it to a wrong person. All three teams are using the growing communication and computer systems to their own individual goals.

Cypherpunks are interested in creating a "regions of privacy", where no one (companies) couldn't enter without permission. Their tools are cryptography and cryptosystems. The main "achievement" of cypherpunks is their interest in "PGP", short for Pretty Good Privacy. This public-key cryptosystems allows the receiver of a message to know "for sure" who the sender was. This could be important, when the use of e-money increases and people start using netservices, which require giving away one's bank account numbers or some other personal data.

The last group, ravers, are people who compose and consume synthesized music and computer (cyberdelic) art, have "raves", massive dance happenings and in general enjoy the modern ways of life. This includes sometimes using drugs and thus ravers have a bad image of being drug addicts who spread the increasing drug problem through raves.

But people, actual cyberculture requires also some appropriate structures and frames to function. Can cyberpunk be found in architecture, education, ways to communicate or in general in everyday life ? What cyberpunk items can you find, when you go shopping, for instance ? We are living a new era, one of fast communications and digitalized machinery. Is that enough ? When we talk about the world, we, being very western, often think "the world" is the industrialized part of the world. The third world countries or just the agricultural regions of one's country are easily forgotten. Global networks aren't connecting the whole of nations, just the urban areas or university cities. However in this "world" one can see some progress. It may be at primitive stage but there is a certain glow of chrome. Internet provides information of areas othervise (in literal sense) rare. Effortless communication to far countries or cities via e-mail is more common than writing an actual letter. We have "thinking cars" which tell us if our seat belt isn't connected. We are being monitored with surveillance cameras and infrared sensors. We use remote controls, digital watches, laser discs, plastic cards to store information. And we would be in serious trouble without electricity.

## "The Road Ahead"

When will the cyberage begin ? What are signs we can find ? It is essential to remember at this point that cyberpunk is a product of the 80's, a decade of materialistic values and economic wealth. As history has pointed out many times, people tend to change their ideologies on an almost regular basis. Periods of rationality are often followed by views more spiritual and vice versa. The popularity of different religions, values and attitudes towards life change constantly. Presumed that the cyberage isn't yet here in the "right meaning", I would predict that there will be a spiritual era before the cold, superficial cyberage. It may be even the age we are living right now, considering the rise of religions. People are put out of work and they are having economical difficulties and so they seek comfort in the supernatural. At the same time those who don't find peace there, lose their faith in the world and its establishments and values, much like in the cyberpunk world. Cyberpunk is not perhaps a critical prophecy of the future, because it is after all mostly used in fiction literature. It is pessimistic and romantic in a sense, but it relays also on current political and cultural issues. It may actually be quite valid a possibility, if everything just goes totally wrong. Wars, overpopulation, diseases, drug problems, violence, multinational companies, increasing consuming etc. can all get worse than what they are today. For example, the issue of big companies versus governments. We, the industrialized countries are being "human" and help those countries in need in cases of war, famine, plagues and poverty. At the same time we ignore possible human rights violations or the effect we have on certain countries' economics, if that suits our own purposes. The South America for instance, will never get back on its feet if all of its natural resources and profits are taken abroad by foreign companies. Governments are unwilling to do anything because it in a way relies on this phenomenon. We defend countries which can provide something to our society, like oil or political assistance and if there isn't anything like it, "too bad". This progress is taken further in cyberpunk, where the colours of the company are more important than those of countries. Identity is defined by where you work. This idea comes probably from the far east, where working morals are quite high. Asia in general is seen as most developed part of the world in cyberpunk. The rise of Asian economy has already begun and its influence on world's future is certainly significant.

In a more local level, signs are less radical. The constant increase in violence has touched now even smaller cities. In a modern megalopolis the troubles are almost unimaginable. We in Finland cannot perhaps understand the crime levels in places like New York or Los Angeles. School children carrying guns and being heroin addicts by the age of 15 ? Open riots and gang wars with submachineguns ? It seems like a normal day in cyberpunk world, but maybe we could still hope for the best. On the more positive side fast communications and globalization has raised people's understanding of other people and maybe also some kind of level of education. The technical part of future cyberpunk is developing into more secure and miraculous. Organ replacements, surgery techniques, security in cars and aeroplanes, freedom of speech or way of life are positive signs. Have these views then shaped the world we know towards more "cyber" fashion or vice versa ? This is hard to know. Is it real cyber or is it just closest thing we got ? Future visions are by nature unreachable. I suppose the influence has inspired people in some specific areas for example designers of virtual realities. Cyberpunk authors have then observed the progress and when necessary, used the results or taken the ideas further in their own work without the burden of worrying about whether it would work in "real life". This cycle is beneficial to both the scientists and us fiction consumers.

## Sources of Future

The defining of cyberpunk in a scientific way is somewhat difficult. Its main sources and documents are fictional of "post-literal". Apart from the cornerstones *Blade Runner* and *Neuromancer* there are many

important works that are included into the cyberpunk genre, depended on whether one uses broad or narrow definition. My main source is very unacademic Cyberpunk 2020 roleplaying game. I value it because of it's my first contact with the subject and because it is made to be as realistic as possible despite the fictional elements. The books and films are always hanging on the balance. Author or director can use whichever parts of cyberpunk he or she wishes and therefore there are many controversial items and only few "pure" cyberpunk works. This is more common in film industry than in literacy.