After the Deluge : Cyberpunk in the '80s and '90s

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In the mid-'80s cyberpunk emerged as a new way of doing science fiction in both literature and film. The primary book was William Gibson's *Neuromancer* ; the most important film, *Blade Runner*. Both featured a hard-boiled style, were intensely sensuous in their rendering of detail, and engaged technology in a manner unusual in science fiction : neither technophiliac (like so much of "Golden Age" SF) nor technophobic (like the SF "New Wave"), cyberpunk did not so much embrace technology as go along for the ride.

However, this was just the beginning : during the '80s cyberpunk "spawned", and in a very contemporary mode. It was cloned; it underwent mutations; it was the subject of various experiments in recombining its semiotic DNA. If you were hip in the '80s, you at least heard about cyberpunk, and if in addition you were even marginally literate, you knew about Gibson.

To understand how this odd process came about, we have to look more closely at cyberpunk's beginnings -- more particularly, at the technological and cultural context. At the same time, I want to acknowledge what seems to me an essential principle : when we define or describe a literary or artistic style, we are suddenly in contested territory, where no one owns the truth. This principle applies with special force to the style (if it is a style) or movement (if it is a movement) called cyberpunk, which has been the occasion for an extraordinary number of debates, polemics, and fights for critical and literary terrain. So let me remind you that I am speaking from my own premises, interests, even prejudices.

By 1984, the year of *Neuromancer*'s publication, personal computers were starting to appear on desks all over the country; computerized videogames had become commonplace; networks of larger computers, mainframes and minis, were becoming more extensive and accessible to people in universities and corporations; computer graphics and sound were getting interesting; huge stores of information had gone online; and some hackers were changing from nerds to sinister system crackers. And of course the rate of technological change continued to be rapid -- which in the world of computers has meant better and cheaper equipment available all the time. So computers became at once invisible, as they disappeared into carburetors, toasters, televisions, and wrist watches; and ubiqitous, as they became an essential part first of business and the professions, then of personal life.

Meanwhile the global media circus, well underway for decades, continued apace, quite often feeding off the products of the computer revolution, or at least celebrating them. The boundaries between entertainment and politics, or between the simulated and the real, first became more permeable and then -- at least according to some theorists of these events -- collapsed entirely. Whether we were ready or not, the postmodern age was upon us.

In the literary ghetto known as science fiction, things were not exactly moribund, but SF certainly was ready for some new and interesting trend. Like all forms of popular culture, SF thrives on labels, trends, and combinations of them -- labeled trends and trendy labels. Marketers need all these like a vampire needs blood.

This was the context in which *Neuromancer* emerged. Anyone who was watching the field carefully had already noticed stories such as *Johnny Mnemonic* and *Burning Chrome*, and some of us thought that Gibson was writing

the most exciting new work in the field, but no one - least of all Gibson himself - was ready for what happened next. *Neuromancer* won the Hugo, the Nebula, the Philip K. Dick Award, Australia's Ditmar; it contributed a central concept to the emerging computer culture ("cyberspace"); it defined an emerging literary style, cyberpunk; and it made that new literary style famous, and (remarkably, given that we're talking about science fiction here) even hip.

Also, as I've said, there was the film *Blade Runner*, Ridley Scott's unlikely adaptation of Philip K. Dick's *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep ?* The film didn't have the success *Neuromancer* did; in fact, I heard its producer remark wryly when the film was given the Hugo that perhaps someone would now go to see it. Despite this, along with *Neuromancer*, *Blade Runner* together set the boundary conditions for emerging cyberpunk : a hard-boiled combination of high tech and low life. As the famous Gibson phrase puts it, "the street has its own uses for technology". So compelling were these two narratives that many people then and now refuse to regard as cyberpunk anything stylistically and thematically different from them.

Meanwhile, down in Texas a writer named Bruce Sterling had been publishing a fanzine (a rigorously postmodern medium) called *Cheap Truth*; all articles were written under pseudonyms, and taken together, they amounted to a series of guerrilla raids on SF. Accuracy of aim and incisiveness varied, of course; these raids were polemical, occasional, essentially temperamental. Altogether, *Cheap Truth* stirred up some action, riled some people, made others aware of each other.

Gibson and Sterling were already friends, and other writers were becoming acquainted with one or both : Lew Shiner, Sterling's right-hand on *Cheap Truth* under the name Sue Denim, Rudy Rucker, John Shirley, Pat Cadigan, Richard Kadrey, others, me included. Some became friends, and at the very least, everyone became aware of everyone else.

Early on in this process, Gardner Dozois committed the fateful act of referring to this group of very loosely - affiliated folk as "cyberpunks". At the appearance of the word, the media circus and its acolytes, the marketers, went into gear. Cyberpunk became talismanic : within the SF ghetto, some applauded, some booed, some cashed in, some even denied that the word referred to anything; and some applauded or booed or denied that cyberpunk existed *and* cashed in at the same time -- the quintessentially postmodern response, one might say.

Marketing aside, however, cyberpunk had a genuine spokesman and proselytizer, Bruce Sterling, waiting in the wings. He picked up the label so casually attached by Dozois and used it as the focal point for his own concerns, which at times seem to include the outlandish project of remaking SF from within. In interviews, columns in various magazines and newspapers, and in introductions to Gibson's collection of short stories, *Burning Chrome* , and *Mirrorshades: The Cyberpunk Anthology*, Bruce staked out what he saw as cyberpunk and both implicitly and explicitly challenged others to contest it. If Gibson's success provided the motor, Sterling's polemical intensity provided the driving wheel.

Literary cyberpunk had become more than Gibson, and cyberpunk itself had become more than literature and film. In fact, the label has been applied variously, promiscuously, often cheaply or stupidly. Kids with modems and the urge to commit computer crime became known as "cyberpunks", in *People* magazine, for instance; however, so did urban hipsters who wore black, read *Mondo 2000*, listened to "industrial" pop, and generally subscribed to techno-fetishism. Cyberpunk generated articles and features in places as diverse as *The Wall Street Journal*, *Communications of the American Society for Computing Machinery*, *People*, *Mondo 2000*, and MTV. Also, though Gibson was and is often regarded with deep suspicion within the SF community, this ceased to matter : he had become more than just another SF writer; he was a cultural icon of sorts, invoked by figures as various as William Burroughs, Timothy Leary, Stewart Brand, David Bowie, and Blondie, among others. In short, much of the real action for cyberpunk was to be found outside the SF ghetto.

Meanwhile, cyberpunk fiction - if you will allow the existence of any such thing, and most people do - was

being produced and even became influential. Bruce Sterling published a couple of excellent novels, *Schismatrix* and *Islands in the Net*, that added new dimensions to cyberpunk; Pat Cadigan, John Shirley and Rudy Rucker did the same. Imitations appeared, some of them pretty good, most noxious - I won't cite the worst imitators' names because I don't want to publicize them.

Also, various postmodern academics took an interest in cyberpunk. Larry McCaffery, who teaches in Southern California, brought many of them together in a "casebook", of all things, *Storming the Reality Studio: A Casebook of Cyberpunk and Postmodern Science Fiction*. Many of the academics haven't read much science fiction; they're hard-nosed, hip, and often condescending; they like cyberpunk but are deeply suspicious of anyone's claims for it. But whatever their particular views, their very presence at the party implies a certain validation of cyberpunk as worthy of more serious attention than the usual SF, even of the more celebrated sort.

Thus, cyberpunk had *arrived*, however you construe the idea. However, in postmodern days, by the time the train pulls in, it's already left the station : the media juggernaut excels at traveling at least fifteen minutes into the future. And so, by the end of the '80s, people who never liked it much to begin with were announcing with audible relief the death of cyberpunk : it had taken its canonical fifteen minutes of fame and now should move over and let something else take the stage. "No orchard here", the TV reporter says, her words bouncing off a satellite. "Just all these *apple trees*". However, Cyberpunk had not died; rather, like Romanticism and Surrealism before it (or like Tyrone Slothrop in *Gravity's Rainbow*, one of the ur-texts of cyberpunk), it had become so culturally widespread and undergone so many changes that it could no longer be easily located and identified.

Let me cite one example and comment briefly upon it. Cyberspace is no longer merely an interesting item in an inventory of ideas in Gibson's fiction. In *Cyberspace: First Steps*, a collection of papers from The First Conference on Cyberspace, held at the University of Texas, Austin, in May, 1990, Michael Benedikt defines cyberspace as "a globally networked, computer-sustained, computer-accessed, and computer-generated, multidimensional, artificial, or 'virtual' reality". He admits "this fully developed kind of cyberspace does not exist outside of science fiction and the imagination of a few thousand people"; however he points out that "with the multiple efforts the computer industry is making toward developing and accessing three-dimensionalized data, effecting real-time animation, implementing ISDN and enhancing other electronic information networks, providing scientific visualizations of dynamic systems, developing multimedia software, devising virtual reality interface systems, and linking to digital interactive television... from all of these efforts one might cogently argue that cyberspace is 'now under construction'".

Indeed. Cyberpunk came into being just as information density and complexity went critical : the supersaturation of the planet with systems capable of manipulating, transmitting, and receiving ever vaster quantities of information has just begun, but (as Benedikt points out, though toward different ends), *it has begun* . Cyberpunk is the fictive voice of that process, and so long as the process remains problematic -- for instance, so long as it threatens to redefine us -- the voice will be heard.