Cyberpunk as Subculture

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1. Introduction

In this paper, I wish to introduce and analyse cyberpunk. Cyberpunk is an interesting phenomenon that took shape first in the Western countries in the early 1980s and later spread all around the world. At the beginning, there was a literary subgenre of science fiction later called cyberpunk. Works falling under this label became widely discussed within academic circles, not because of their quality but because of the questions they raised; not only in the area of computer studies, but also in the area of social theories and postmodern philosophy. Along with these academic discussions, cyberpunk literature gave birth to a particular subculture - cyberpunk.

In this paper, I have chosen to deal with cyberpunk as subculture. Authors of theoretical texts concerning this phenomenon do not refer to cyberpunk uniformly. Some refer to cyberpunk as subculture, others as movement or fan culture. The purpose of my paper is to prove the proposition that cyberpunk can be considered a subculture in the true sense of the word. I approached this question by applying the traditional analytical tools in the study of subcultures.

The concept of subculture and the analytical tools themselves are described in chapter 2. The chapters following, examining subcultural features of cyberpunk, are organized according to these analytical tools. The last chapter is devoted to the style and imagery of cyberpunk.

2. Concept of Subculture and Analytical Tools for the Study of Subcultures

Since this paper is focused on cyberpunk as subculture, it is important to clarify the concept of subculture itself. According to David Bell, the term subculture has faded a little and has been replaced by terms like "counterculture" or "youth culture". In order to prevent confusion, I will systematically use the term "subculture".

The term "subculture" appeared in the post-war era, when certain anomalies in the behaviour of certain groups of mostly young people started to appear in society. Sarah Thornton in *The Subcultures Reader* defines subculture as "groups of people that have something in common with each other (i.e. they share a problem, an interest, a practice) which distinguishes them in a significant way from the members of other social groups" (Gelder 1). Because this definition can be applied on almost all of society, Thornton explains, that contrary to groups in society which are characterised by formal membership (written constitutions, uniforms, etc.), the subcultures are informal and organic.

Subcultures are characterised by their rebelliousness and lack of willingness to conform to the mainstream

society and parent culture. Paradoxically, claims Bell, this rebelliousness becomes alluring for the mainstream culture, which starts to take over certain features of the subculture. In this case, subculture becomes part of mainstream culture. Bell illustrates this thesis on the "subculture par excellence" (Bell 164) - punk.

Some subcultures are mostly characterised for their visual externalisation in the form of style. Hedbige argues that *bricolage* - "the resignification of a patchwork of symbols, given new meanings in new contexts" (Hedbige 103) - shows how important it is for a subculture to adopt and transform that, which already exists.

I want to analyse cyberpunk according to the matrix of subculture, which is why I organised the structure of this paper according to the points of subcultural analysis proposed by Michael Brake in *Comparative Youth Culture : The Sociology of Youth Culture and Youth Subcultures in America, Britain and Canada* (1985: 19-20). These points are :

1. The nature of the subculture
    a. The historical development of a subculture and its relationship to the structural problems of the wider socio-economic structure needs to be analysed.
    b. The style and imagery of the subculture need hermeneutic perspective which considers the meaning these may have for potential recruits. The problems "solved" by the subculture are important at this point.
2. Societal reaction to the subculture. An analysis is needed of mass media mediation of the nature of the subculture. The immediate effects of this in terms of significant others is necessary, as well as wide societal reaction in terms of moral entrepreneurs and public and official guardians of moral order.
3. A natural history of the moral career of the subcultural member needs to be constructed, in particular paying attention to Glaser and Strauss's (1971) "status passage". That is, that any moral career needs to be considered in sequences or stages, which have contingencies and problems affecting the actor ([1]).
4. The social organization of the subculture. This involves two levels : the subculture's relation to the structure, and the effects this has on the social interaction within the subculture. The values, norms, symbols, imagery and behaviour of the subculture need to be considered in terms of their organization.
5. The persistence of discontinuance of the subculture. The subculture is unlikely to remain unaltered, and the altering boundaries of the subculture as well as its changing form need to be considered. One interesting element is the way in which subcultures may continue thematic focal concerns, yet reconstruct imagery so that the contemporary subculture addresses in new interpretations of perennial problems, but with a totally different style which reflects specific problems of a particular generation.

3. Historical Development

3. 1. Background Concepts of the Era and Cyberculture

The first point in Brake's proposed subculture analytical tool is an introduction to the history of subculture and its relationship to the wider socio-economic situation. For the purpose of better understanding the atmosphere that prevailed in the second half of the twentieth century, I present several philosophical and sociological concepts that took shape in Western countries and were an important factors in the process of creating of cyberculture, which gave birth to cyberpunk.

The birth of cyberpunk subculture was a result of the "general swing to right-wing elements within the West" (Lafayette) in the 1980s. It was the era of Margaret Thatcher (Britain), Ronald Reagan (USA) and Hawke (Australia). It was a time when even the majority of youth, the most radical part of the society, embraced the free-market and capitalist philosophies - yuppies.

The key term for the second half of the twentieth century is indisputably the term "postmodernism". Ambiguity is the core essence of postmodernism, and its definition is as vague as the definition of most terms somehow connected with postmodernism. Hence, the comical definition provided by Carlos Enrique Gonzales's six-year-old son will, serve as well as any to explain it : "Exactly what Postmodernism is ? Posmodernism Dad ? It's like Charlie Brown's statements : Posmodernism is... to attend a good party...not to ask permission...to see the future... to travel to the stars" [spelled as in the original].

The next term important for this era is "post-industrialism". This term was introduced by Daniel Bell in his sociological analysis *The Coming of Post-Industrial Society* (1973). Bell argues that post-industrialism will be information-led and service-oriented, and he locates the beginnings of the post-industrial society in the 1945-50.

Another concept arising in the 1960s was the Gaia hypothesis, a hypothesis that was taken over mainly not only by members of the "flower generation", but that also inspired some members of the cyberpunk community. This theory was created by the atmospheric scientist and chemist Sir James Lovelock, who, in 1979, published a book titled *Gaia: A new look at life on Earth* (1979). He hypothesized that all the living matter of the planet functioned like a single organism, and named this self-regulating living system after the Greek goddess Gaia. Douglass Rushkoff in his book *Cyberia* (1994) comments that the Gaia hypothesis is now a well-supported notion that the planet Earth is itself a giant, biological organism. The planet is thought to maintain conditions for sustaining life through a complex series of feedbacks and iterations.

An important person in the area of communication theory and media ecology was Marshall McLuhan. McLuhan was a philosopher and scholar whose work was appreciated also within technophile circles gathered for example around Wired magazine : he was listed as "patron saint" on the masthead of this magazine. McLuhan published his probably best-known work *Understanding Media* (1964) where he foresaw the effects of electronic communications upon mankind and life in the twentieth century. The world became enchanted by his idea of the *global village* - a village interconnected by an electronic nervous system. McLuhan chose the insightful phrase *global village* to highlight his observation that an electronic nervous system (the media) was rapidly integrating the planet : "events in one part of the world could be experienced from other parts in real time, which is what human experience was like when we lived in small villages" (23). One could hardly speak of cyberculture at the time, but McLuhan's predictions in the area of mass media were absolutely correct : the creation of the Internet - the global interconnection of computers - joined people from all over the world into one village, sometimes called a tribe. In his next book, *The Medium is the Massage: an Inventory of Effects* (1967), McLuhan argues that media is an extension of the human body and that content is not important. What really matters is the medium itself. As media change, they utterly transform our environment and affect everything we do : they "massage" or reshape us. "The wheel is an extension of the foot" (31-2), "The book is an extension of the eye" (35-7), "Clothing an extension of the skin" (38-9) and finally "Electric circuitry an extension of the central nervous system" (40). This idea perfectly fits the concept of virtual reality (VR). When McLuhan introduced his thoughts, they were easily applied to the media of the time (radio, television, etc.); but, computer science was still at the very beginning of its development, and words like "cyberspace", "Internet" or "virtual reality" could not be found in dictionaries. McLuhan was not the only prophet in this era, for there were other philosophers, sociologists or cultural anthropologists who made the same or similar prophesies. For example, an eccentric psychologist, strong advocate of virtual reality, and explorer of the psychoactive effects of psychedelic drugs named Timothy Leary; and professor of philosophy of culture and media criticism at the European Graduate School named Jean Baudrillard who formulated the notion of "hyperreality". Baudrillard applied this concept to America and claimed that America has constructed itself as a world that is more "real" than real - authenticity has been replaced by copy and instead of having experiences; people observe spectacles, via real or metaphorical control screens. Instead of the real, they have simulation.

These concepts predicting the future development of technologies and society created a certain mood of anxiety

about the future, for the shadow of rigorous government rule and growing power of multinational corporations threaten individual freedoms. Uncertainty is the very essence of postmodernism, and post-industrialism only supports this growing anxiety. McLuhan's prophesies about computers being the extension of human beings and the virtual village as a prospect for connecting these computers has brought about new hope of an individual being able to fight the power. These anxieties and hopes are mirrored in the new subgenre of science fiction literature.

3.2 Cyberpunk Literature

The term "cyberpunk literature" refers to a subgenre of science fiction and dystopian fiction. The term itself is a portmanteau of cybernetics and punk. It amalgamates into one entity two seemingly disparate entities of computer science and punk subculture.

It is necessary to make clear how works of cyberpunk subgenre differ from the traditional science fiction. Science fiction is a genre that advances in science and is often situated in outer space locations. The main plot line frequently deals with a contact with more scientifically advanced civilizations and is located in the near future on Earth rather than into orbit. Science fiction creates situations different from those of both the present day and the known past. In cyberpunk, the technology is computer technology. The plot of cyberpunk is focused on the fight of individual against multinational corporations. Cyberpunk is one of a large number of science-fiction subgenres. To get the picture of diversity of these subgenres, consider just a few of them : Alternative history, Military science fiction, Space opera, Steampunk and Tokusatsu.

The term cyberpunk was used for the first time by Bruce Sterling in his short story called *Cyberpunk*, published in 1983 in *Amazing Stories* magazine. A year later Gardner Dozois, in an article for *The Washington Post*, used this term to label a particular group of science fiction writers. Among these writers were Bruce Sterling, Lexis Shiner, Rudy Rucker, Pat Cadigan and William Gibson (this list of authors, a list which is not stable, this list is derived from Navratilova). These authors, or at least Gibson, did not recognize themselves as cyberpunk writers : "People have made up a dozen or so words to try to define us. None has really satisfied me up 'til now'" (Riche : 2003).

The most distinctive feature of cyberpunk literature is its dystopian nature. Dystopia is the antithesis of utopia. Dystopian novels depict a world with a totalitarian or authoritarian form of government, with state propaganda and strict conformity among its citizens. Political rule in dystopian novels is in the hands of the upper class. Dystopian novels are for example *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (George Orwell) or *A Clockwork Orange* (Anthony Burgess).

Cyberpunk literature, among hopeless fight of the individual against the corporative power and corruption, discusses new concepts like the penetration of technology into a body (cyborgism), not only in the form of prosthetic limbs but also implanted circuitry and genetic alteration. More astounding is the idea of mind invasion in the form of neurochemistry or brain-computer interfaces. Both of these invasions could seriously change the nature of humanity and the self-identity of the individual.

The consensus is, that literary cyberpunk started with William Gibson's *Neuromancer* (1984), the first novel from the well-known *Sprawl Trilogy* that consists also from *Count Zero* (1986) and *Mona Lisa Overdrive* (1988). It is the first novel that is widely agreed to be a cyberpunk novel, and it possesses all of the characteristic features of cyberpunk literature. Since it is the prime example of a cyberpunk novel, other cyberpunk authors, with questionable success, have recycled the themes introduced by Gibson.

Even though *Neuromancer* was awarded three of the most prestigious awards for science fiction (The Hugo, The Nebula and Philip K. Dick Awards), it is not really science fiction. Timothy Leary gave it a more accurate name : "It could be called 'science faction' in that it occurs not in another galaxy in the far future, but twenty years from now" (Leary : Cyberpunk). In an interview with Timothy Leary, Gibson himself admitted that *Neuromancer* does not describe any imaginative future, but it is actually a story from the present. In several interviews, Gibson claimed, that this was how he had coped with his anxiety and fear of the world we live in.

Navratilova argues that the world of *Neuromancer* is the world of high technologies that is governed by gigantic corporations. The characters are human beings penetrated by technological devices (cyborgs). They have no choice but to work for these corporations in order to preserve their lifes. The "work" means stealing information, the most precious commodity, in cyberspace (or matrix, if you want). Gibson created archetypal characters that appear in his later novels, and this pattern appears in most cyberpunk novels in certain variations. These characters are "console cowboy" Case and neurochirurgically improved killer - Molly. Case's field is cyberspace : "information matrix, accessed via (elec)trodes 'jacked into' the brain" (Jones). Some parts of the novel take place in cyberspace, a place where Case meets data constructs (data simulations of the characters of deceased people) and artificial intelligences (AI). Molly is described by Leary as a "beautiful heroine in mirrorshades [that] is a hired gun with optical implants" (Leary 2003). Molly's domain is the cruel and dangerous fight in the jungle of streets. Cyberpunk novels usually take place in large urban areas. Most of Gibson's novels are set in The Sprawl, which is also called BAMA (Boston-Atlanta Metropolitan Area). It is the metropolis without any identifiable borders and any history. The society is no longer regulated by a state; this role is taken by huge corporations - zaibatsu.

It seems that there is no life outside of the metropolis and also nature is just simulated : artificial animals or smells. This denaturalised society does not offer any sanctuary for the people so they seek refuge in socially accepted drugs. These drugs are of high tech quality-smart drugs. This is how Case felt after a night on betaphenethylamine :

> The high wore away, the chromed skeleton corroding hourly, flesh growing solid, the drug-flesh replaced with the meat of his life. He couldn't think. He liked that very much, to be conscious and unable to think. He seemed to become each thing he saw : a park bench, a cloud of white moths around an antique streetlight, a robot gardener striped diagonally with black and yellow...
> -- Gibson (149)

Cyberpunk literature influenced the part of youth culture that started to identify with the "heroes" of this subgenre and shared a similar fascination with computer technology. They shared the same anxiety about the idea of international corporations ruling the world. The idea of retreating into the virtual world where there are no borders and limitations and the possibility of threatening these corporations via cyberspace fascinated them. These youngsters started to call themselves cyberpunks.

3.3. History of Cyberpunk Subculture

The history of the development of computers and all the processes in the society, it means also the emergence of cyberpunk subculture, are associated with the term cyberculture.

It is important to explain what cyberculture actually is. Jakub Macek in his diploma thesis claims that "
cyberculture

can be clearly identified one of the frequently and flexibly used terms lacking an explicit meaning" (Macek 1). He proposes that this term "can be used as a label for historical and temporary hackers' subcultures and for the movement connected to the literary genre of cyberpunk" (Macek 1). In his analysis, Macek offers an account of the distinction between *early* and *current cyberculture*. He claims that whilst the *early cyberculture* is a finished chapter in the history, the *current cyberculture* is still lively and in the process of transformation. Though there is no clear-cut point between these, Macek set the division in the late 80s. Macek grounds this division on the fact that these two concepts hold different relationships to the mainstream culture. *Early cyberculture* is rooted in the hacker subcultures and can be characterized as a contra culture or subversive culture while *current cyberculture* became an important part of mainstream culture. Macek focuses mainly on the *early cyberculture* : he provides detailed periodization of this culture and divides it into four. He located the birth of the cyberpunk literary genre in the third period where are also the roots of the cyberpunk subculture.

The first computers were constructed "by the pioneering computer *aficionados* at MIT's laboratories in the 1950s and 1960s" (Levy 1984). Macek claims that this community of programmers at MIT (Massachusetts Institute of Technology) was called *Tech Railroad Model Club*. There were also similar groups at Cornell and Harvard University. Thomas says that these "old school" hackers relied extensively on their institutions for support and access to machines. These computer professionals adopted the word "hack" as a synonym for computer work and particularly for computer work executed with a certain level of craftsmanship. This community can be considered as the root of a continuous academic hacker subculture.

Macek sets the second period of cyberculture into the 1970s and the beginning of the 1980s when the first personal computers (PC) were born. At this time there emerged *early adopters* (term from Roger's model for the adoption and diffusion of innovations) of the technology who made it more visible in society. Most of these hackers would "go on to form Silicon Valley start-up companies, lead the open-source software movement, and create small (or sometimes very large) fortunes for themselves" (Thomas xi). According to Thomas they entered the popular imagination as "computer geniuses" or "nerds".

> ...in the seventies, assorted techno-hippies emerged as the computerized faction of the counterculture of the day... What characterized the second wave hackers was that they desperately wanted computers and computer systems designed to be useful and accessible to citizens.
> -- Hannemyr (2)

The third period is the most crucial in this development because it is characterized by "the most significant transformations at the level of groups, discourse, practices and narratives" (Macek 10). Computers became widespread across North America and Western Europe and became used as "an office tool and a resource of home-entertainment" (Macek 10) and public computer networks developed further. The term "hacker", in the present day meaning, refers to the programmers who became the leading lights in the advent of computer games architecture and virtual communities. This era is also marked by the birth of cyberpunk fiction and Macek also claims that at this time merged influences from the dying hippie with those of subsequent punk counterculture. All these factors participated in the creation of cyberpunk.

Macek claims that the fourth period is marked by the gradual blending of early cyberculture with mainstream culture and can be located in the late 1980s. It is marked by unification of hardware, growth of large corporations, reduction in prices making this technology even more accessible and the language of this new media becoming part of common speech.

Hackers began more criminalized. According to Gisle Hannemyr, in the second half of the eighties computer underground (CU) emerged and changed the meaning of the terms "hacker" and "hacking". "To the computer underground, 'to hack' meant to break into or sabotage a computer system, and a 'hacker' was the perpetrator of

such activities" (Hannemyr 2).

Paul A. Taylor characterizes this fourth generation of hackers and calls them the microserfs. "This generation represents the co-optation of the hacker skills by commercial computing" (Taylor 23). Whilst there were still elements of this commercial acumen in hacking's second and third generations, they kept the positive connotations of the hacker sobriquet because their activity still retained the pioneering qualities and associated romanticism of ground-breaking technological endeavour. Microserfs, in contrast, are portrayed as having had their ingenuity subordinated to the requirements of advanced capitalism in the form of the Microsoft Corporation.

Apart from these fourth generation hackers there appeared in the *current cyberculture* "new school hackers" who differed from the "old school hackers". As I have already mentioned, Macek associated *current cyberculture* with mainstream culture and these "new hackers", who sometimes call themselves cyberpunks, were its typical product. *Current cyberculture* is not only associated with mainstream culture, it actually became mainstream - part of public culture. It was everywhere, on "silver screen, on pages of popularising magazines and bestsellers, in ads on electronics and FBI offices" (Macek 7). This is how cyberpunk came into being. Though cyberpunk was born on the platform of hacker culture or rather on the fascination with hacker ethos it was based on literature, movies and games with cyberpunk imagery.

One of the most important features of cyberpunk is the dislike of frontiers. It is a nationwide phenomenon and thus it is very difficult to determine any local influences that affected the birth of this subculture. In general the philosophy of cyberpunk was mostly influenced by the hacker ideology but also partly by the hippy and gothic post-punk ethos.

England and mostly the USA are the countries, where cyberpunk subculture sprung very quickly because of the fast spread of computer technology and maybe because cyberpunk authors were mainly from Anglophone countries. Later cyberpunk spread all around the world. For example, there is a very strong cyberpunk base in Russia, the Ukraine and Japan.

In America the movement was strongly influenced by fading hippie subculture. Cyberpunk took over mainly the positive attitude towards drugs and rebelliousness. Leary comments on the rebelliousness and argues that the philosophy of both subcultures was : "Think for yourself, and question the authority" (Leary 1997 : 64).

Goths (Gothics), the more "intellectual and arts-oriented wing of the punk subculture" (Lafayette), influenced the development of the cyberpunk subcultures in Britain and spread around the world. It was a reaction to the colourfulness of the hippie era that came from America. Gothics adopted an imagery of black and white as antithesis to the pastel colours of the majority of the youth of the 80s. Members of this subculture adopted the traditional liberal values of the gothic literary movement (Poe, Shelley, etc). Gothics wear crucifix in order to ridicule the fundamental role of Christianity in England and to manifest their identification with the occult. Lafayette claims that since 1985 there occurred changes in this subculture. Gothics diversified into "romantic goths" and "techno goths". The second group integrated the use of computers, electronic music and more streamlined fashion. And from here is just a short step to cyberpunk.

Because of the number of themes that are to be covered in the second part of the first point of the analysis structure, and for the purpose of preservation of the textual integrity, I am going to deal with style and ideology of cyberpunk in chapter 7.

Instead I want to draw attention to two unique sources of information about cyberpunk. The first is an online source : *The Cyberpunk Project* (TCP). It is a source of academic essays about cyberpunk as a literary genre but it mostly focuses on the cyberpunk subculture. The contributors are major theoretical leaders of cyberpunk like John Misrach, R.U. Sirius and John Lebkowsky (none of them using their proper names) as well as common

members of cyberpunk subculture sharing their insightful articles. This project started in 1996 and was initiated by two (probably Russian) enthusiasts Cyborg T and Mad Maniac, aka madbyte (both of them cover their identity by nicknames). According to synopsis of Mad Maniac's autobiography, he can be considered to be a member of the cyberpunk community.

The second source is *Cyber Anthropology* a website governed by Dr. Steve Mizrach, adjunct lecturer at the Department of Sociology/Anthropology of Florida International University called Cyber Anthropology. This web site is dedicated to research on cyberculture and the creation of new cultures and cultural experience in cyberspace.

From the large number of factors that stimulated the birth of cyberpunk and from the complicated evolution of cyberpunk we can conclude that cyberpunk does possess the features of subculture.

4. Societal Reaction to Cyberpunk

The reaction of society has been mostly negative. On the other hand, as I have already described in chapter 2, the subculture becoming commercialised is alluring to the masses. This negative standpoint is seen not only on the part of mass media, but also from the area of the closest family of cyberpunks.

As the members of cyberpunk subculture are mostly young boys (there are only a few or rather no girls hacking) in their teenage, cyberpunk or the idea of hacking is the form of the protest against the paternal authority. David Bell (143) observes :

> For youth it is about transition from a world of paternal authority, where the parents dictate how things are done, to a world of responsibility, where youth make decisions for themselves. The transition is marked by rebellion, defiance, and a seemingly single-minded focus on defiance.

The youth of 1980s and 1990s grew up more technologically literate than their parents since they grew up with computers in their bedrooms. Computing itself is a way of rebellion for this youth; it represents a different way of doing things. Their parents, coming out of the hippie generation, are used to the traditional forms of protest like smoking, alcohol, light drugs, or delinquency. But protest by computing-children's eyes constantly stuck to the monitor while playing games and chatting online with their virtual friends on the other side of the planet and listening to weird electronic music ? This created a new the form of generation gap.

In the mass media, cyberpunk is identified with hacker culture. Hackers, in the present day sense of the word, are widely thought to be a menace to society. Cybercrime is the new form of crime. It is marked by fear of the secret enemy who can break all codes, ruin bank accounts and steal information of any character from a company's secret files. So the media coverage often tends to exaggerate the actual menace threatening society. This does not necessarily mean that cyberpunks do not commit crime. They have ceased to respect "old school" hacker ethics. "Old school" hackers were challenged by breaking the code, entering the system without leaving their "fingerprints" and quitting unnoticed. They challenged their skills rather than damage. Cyberpunks do not respect this convention, and often damage information or break down a system just out of whim, and thus are dangerous.

Along with the negative reaction in the media, there came also certain attraction towards cyberpunk. Mark Dery

(6-7) in his essay describes the situation :

> A WELL (2) employee told me, shortly after the appearance of *Time magazine*'s 8 Feb 1993 cover story on cyberpunk, that the bulletin board's population - already 3,000 strong - had swollen by several thousands more. "People call and ask, 'Is this the cyberspace ?'" he said.

The "old hacker" subculture regards this movement with mixed feelings. Since self-proclaimed cyberpunks are often "trendoids" with affection for black leather and chrome who speak enthusiastically about technology instead of learning about it or becoming involved in it. The definition of cyberpunk in the Jargon File 4.2.0 says that the attitudes are important, but most important are skills : "Attitude is no substitute for competence". However, cyberpunks are at least "excited about the right things" (Jargon File 4.2.0.) and typically respect the people who actually work with it.

This subculture is known for a more than positive attitude towards drug-taking. Cyberpunks are known for their experiments with synthetic drugs, which do not gain much approval by society.

Like other subcultures, also cyberpunk was exploited by commerce. There appeared a large number of video games with their themes taken from cyberpunk like *Neuromancer: the Interplay* (1988), *Street Hacker* (2003) or *Enter the Matrix* (2003).

Regarding the fact that there has almost always been a negative reception of subcultures by society and, on the other hand, certain "coolness" ascribed to them we can assume that cyberpunk meets the requirements of subculture.

5. Social organization of Cyberpunk

Every traditional subculture is to some extend organized. Subculture is sometimes compared to a tribe because of its hierarchy and its organization in some particular area connected with instincts of protection of territory.

To be honest, it is not possible to say with certainty, who is a cyberpunk and who is not, thus it is an even more difficult task to define the structure of cyberpunk society. Saffo in his essay claims that there were not more than a hundred "hard-core cyberpunks at any time before the term hit the mainstream press" (Saffo). The basic feature of this subculture is the interconnection of all members by computer technology. The main feature is the adoration of computer. The time when "computer nerds" were placed at the margin of society is over. This is the time when computers and sufficient knowledge in computing is considered to be fashionable. Even though cyberpunk is known for its dislike of hierarchy, this does not apply to the hierarchy of cyberpunk itself.

The hierarchy of this subculture is rather strict. According to the Herec's analysis it is a very difficult and long-term process to get at the top of the iceberg, which is covered with secrecy. At the bottom of the social structure of cyberpunk are aspirants. They are young boys having a leather coat and mirrorshades and heavy shoes in their possession. They know who Gibson is and think that his works are fine. The next stage is the stage of newcomer. The newcomer can handle the search engine and has read *Neuromancer*. A surfer can write a grammatically correct sentence and drills manuals in a marihuana haze. The core books in his library are the first issues of *Neuromancer*, *Mirrorshades* (cyberpunk anthology edited by Bruce Sterling) and *Schismatrix* (a novel by Bruce Sterling 1984). A practitioner possesses demonic net nick connected with death, blood or

heraldry and personally knows somebody who has written some article for *Computer Underground Digest* (digest/journal of debates, news and research in the area of computer culture). It does not necessary mean that the author knows him. "Elite", as the newcomer would spell, is a lower level of the elect. In the computer jargon, which is meant to isolate the community from the wider public, it stands for "3L1T3" (3). Finally the top of the mountain are members of "eleet", "31337" or "'1337". These members are recognized as appreciated teachers of the members of the lower levels of the structure. The members of "eleet" would rather be less appreciated and adored and prefer to remain in anonymity. Herec claims that there is a belief that there are secret masters of the net above the members of "eleet" but their knowledge goes beyond human understanding.

Various sources do not agree on the structure of cyberpunk society. The authors of Cyberpunk Project claim that there are two types of cyberpunks : those who "identify themselves with cyberpunk literature/sci-fi and call themselves cyberpunks" and those who "are associated with cyberpunks and called cyberpunks". They list basic classifications of cyberpunks : hackers, crackers ("dark-side hackers", they break security on computer systems), phreaks (telecom crackers), cypherpunks (masters of cryptography), netrunners (people who live in the net and master it : surfing, chatting), otakus (computer nerds, mainly in Japan, fixed on anime/manga and computer games), ravers (synthesized music fans), transhumans/extropians (they attempt to increase human potential and life expectancy by technology) and zippies (cyber-hippies).

Before Internet became a widely used tool of communication, these groups of young people were concentrated around magazines focused on computer technologies. Bell describes cyberpunk subcultures as "subcultures that borrow the aesthetics and philosophy of the cyberpunk genre to create group identities - such as the readers and writers collectively clustered around the cybermagazine *Mondo 2000* (Bell 176)".

There are no organized meetings or places where the members of this subculture meet. The most important medium of contact for these members is Internet. There exists a myth that this technology was introduced for the intervention of the American government on the basis of further technologization of war : "the need for machines for computation in the fields of ballistics, ordnance, information management, battle control, training, military intelligence and command systems led to cornerstone innovation in post-war digital computing". (Bell 9). This myth is still the subject of considerable ambivalence.

Internet fits within the concept of cyberspace but must not be confused with it. The term cyberspace is now vaguely applied in philosophy and computing. In computing it refers to, expressed in a simplified way, the identities and objects existing within the computing network. So all the happenings, meetings etc. that take place on the Internet are not taking place in the "real world" but in the cyberspace.

The term cyberspace is very problematic and David Bell describes it as notoriously difficult to define precisely and succinctly. Bell thinks that cyberspace is always cyberculture and "in that we cannot separate cyberspace from its cultural contexts" (Bell 8).

This term itself was coined by William Gibson and was used in his first novel *Neuromancer* published in 1984. This novel became the cyberpunk bible (I am going to elaborate on Gibson and his connection to cyberpunk later). Gibson described cyberspace as :

> A consensual hallucination experienced daily by billions of legitimate operators, in every nation, by children being taught mathematical concepts... A graphic representation of data abstracted from the banks of every computer in the human system. Unthinkable complexity. Lines of light ranged in the nonspace of the mind, clusters and constellations of data. Like city lights, receding.
> -- Gibson (67)

But this is an explanation provided by an author who had no experience with technology, in many interviews, Gibson claimed to be technologically illiterate and said that he wrote his novel on a manual typewriter. In spite of this handicap Gibson's vision of cyberspace has inspired the architects of Internet and virtual reality simulations. David Bell claims that Jordan in his work *Cyberpower : the culture and politics of cyberspace and the Internet* labelled this fictional cyberspace as "Gibsonian cyberspace". Jordan characterized it as "the purely symbolic version of cyberspace found in fiction and film" (qtd. in Bell 21). Then Jordan defined another type of cyberspace : "Barlowian cyberspace", that is named after cyberspace guru John Perry Barlow. This form of cyberspace "represents the mediation of image and reality : 'joining together the visions of cyberpunk to the reality of networks creates a concept of cyberspace as a place that currently exists'" (qtd. in Bell 21). David Bell, who is Reader in Cultural Studies at Staffordshire University and a co-editor of *The Cybercultures Reader*, himself admits in *Introduction in Cybercultures*, that this term is very slippery and hard to define. He divides its substance into three dimensions : material, symbolical experimental. Machines, wires, electricity, programs, screens, connections and also modes of information and communication : email, websites, chat rooms, MUD's (Multi-Users Dungeon or Domain). These represent the material dimension. The symbolic dimension is according to Bell formed by images and ideas : cyberspace exists on film, in fiction, in our imaginations as much as on our desktops or in the space between our screens. And the most important bit is how we experience cyberspace "in all its spectacular and mundane manifestations by mediating the material and the symbolic" (2).

And let me add one more opinion from the other side of the academic fence. It is a voice from the street mediated by Douglass Rushkoff who teaches at ITC and Esalen Institute, Omega, and as a guest lecturer at universities around the world. Rushkoff wrote a book called *Cyberia* (1994). The book is written in the form of personal notes from his authentic experience of the cyberpunk underground. The members of this cyberpunk subculture gave cyberspace a more metaphoric name Cyberia which connotes the beauty but at the same time the vastness and emptiness of Siberia (part of Russia). These people claim that they can experience the same boundless, hypertext universe without the use of the computer at all. For them cyberspace can be accessed through drugs, dance, spiritual techniques, chaos math, and pagan rituals. They move into a state of consciousness where, as if logged onto a computer, the limitations of time, distance, and the body are perceived as meaningless. Rushkoff claims that they believe that they move through these regions as they might move through computer programs or video games : unlimited by the rules of a linear, physical reality. Rushkoff describes cyberspace from their point of view as follows :

> We need a new word to express this boundless territory. The kids in this book call it Cyberia.
> Cyberia is the place a businessperson goes when involved in a phone conversation, the place a shamanic warrior goes when travelling out of body, the place an "acid house" dancer goes when experiencing the bliss of a techno-acid trance. Cyberia is the place alluded to by the mystical teachings of every religion, the theoretical tangents of every science, and the wildest speculations of every imagination.
> -- Rushkoff, 1994

Apart from the cyberpunks' virtual meetings in cyberspace there still exists inevitable social contact among the members in real life. This contact is not only for social engagement, but also for the information exchange.

The stratified structure of cyberpunk society indicates, that it can be considered a subculture. The only deviance of cyberpunk from the traditional concept subculture is in the place of organization of subculture. The traditional subculture is organized in the real location whereas cyberpunk interactions take place in the cyberspace.

6. The Persistence of the Discontinuance of Cyberpunk

Subcultures are in general characterised by their more or less fast fading out or merging with society.

Paul Saffo in his essay issued in 1993 compares cyberpunk to "the sun-grazing comet" (Saffo) because, as he explains, it is fading out of the horizon as soon as it appeared there and its consistence is "hardly more substantial than a comet's fuzzy tail" (Saffo). Saffo observes that this - he calls it movement, is comparable to the beat generation. In the beat movement, as well as in cyberpunk, there was a rather small group of real aficionados before the term hit the mainstream press and also both of these subcultures were based on the literary tradition.

Saffo in his essay anticipated the further development of this subculture and presumed that because of the similarity of these two entities the history of cyberpunk is going to develop in the same direction as the beatnik movement. As the beatnik generation was some kind of "harbingers of a mass movement waiting in the wings" (Saffo) - hippie cyberpunk is supposed to be a predecessor of some digital counterculture that is going to be closer to humanity :

> I will bet that the digital counterculture will reject this bleak vision of a future in which technology enlarges the human spirit as a new tool for consciousness in much the same way that the hippies appropriated the psychoactive chemical spinoffs of the military- industrial complex. This new movement will be cyberpunk imbued with human warmth, substituting a deep sense of interdependence in place of lone-wolf isolationism. Cyberpunks envision humans as electronic cyber-rats lurking in the interstices of the information mega-machine; the gospel of the post-cyberpunk movement will be one of machines in the service of enlarging our humanity.
> -- Saffo

As for the cyberpunk literary genre, postcyberpunk describes a genre of science fiction, which is believed to have emanated from cyberpunk. Postcyberpunk as well as cyberpunk concentrate on technological progress in near-future societies and examine the social effects of telecommunication, genetic engineering and nanotechnology. Unlike in cyberpunk characters, postcyberpunk ones act in the interest of improving social conditions. Even though their world is also saturated with technology their future is not necessarily dystopian and, in addition, but is sometimes even optimistic.

There appeared voices saying, that cyberpunk as well as punk is dead. This is not, in the true sense of the word, so. As has happened in the case of other subcultures, perhaps some features of cyberpunk are not so intensively visible in the social fabric, but they are positively there. Maybe Saffo's predictions about digital counterculture are quite exaggerated but there is certainly something on it.

7. Cyberpunk Style and Imagery

Cyberpunk style is not pronounced very clearly. Most of the features now attributed to cyberpunk are the result of commercialisation processes that occur in the case of most subcultures. Besides the popular externalizations in the form of movies, computer games, fashion, magazines and music, cyberpunk is about ethics and a way of

life. Cyberpunk is also a computer underground that threatens the security of national governments and ruins corporations. Cyberpunk is techno music, drug-taking and street culture.

First I want to introduce the reader into the cyberpunk ethics. It is based on the traditional hacker's ethics. This was concerned in the promotion of computer technology, freedom of information and mistrust of authority. "Old school" hackers judged each other by their "hacking", not on the basis of age, race, gender or position. The ethics of "new school hackers" - cyberpunks - is theoretically the same, but cyberpunks do not stick to it much probably because they are influenced by many different socio-economical factors. The "new school hackers" and whole society have almost limitless access to computers and hence the promotion of technology became futile. They are mostly white teenage boys from suburban areas and there is hardly any girl "hacking" so the recognition of non-white and non-male members is questionable.

According to Steve Mizrach (qtd. in Thomas 31) the split between the hackers of the 1960s and cyberpunks is cultural and generational rather than technological :

> The main reason for the difference between the 60s and 90s hackers is that the GenXers (4) are a "post-punk" generation, hence the term, "cyberpunk"... Their world is a little more multicultural and complicated, and less black-and-white. And it is one in which, while computers can be used to create beauty, they are also being used to destroy freedom and autonomy.
> -- Thomas (31)

Cyberpunk ideology was articulated in the cyberpunk manifesto. It was penned by Christian As. Kirtchev in 1997 and its subhead statement presents the mood the manifest is written in : "We are the ELECTRONIC MINDS, a group of free-minded rebels. Cyberpunks. We live in Cyberspace, we are everywhere, we know no boundaries. This is our manifest". And this is how Kirtchev characterized the nature of cyberpunk in the manifesto : "The Cyberpunk is no literature genre anymore, not even an ordinary subculture. The Cyberpunk is a stand-alone new culture, offspring of the new age. A culture that unites our common interests and views. We are a unit. We are Cyberpunks" (Kirtchev). The manifesto itself pronounces the progressive anxiety caused by the raising power of multinational corporations and their more and more powerful means of control, not only of real life, but also life in cyberspace. Hacker ethics - in order to weaken the power of corporations - demands wide use of computer technology, which enables borderless communication and free access to information. Cyberpunk propagates independency form the products of mainstream culture, which means a boycott of its products and an attempt to produce these products within their own faculties.

Andy Hawks in his essay *Future Culture Manifesto* claims that this subculture is directed towards individualism and specialization : "You can't wait for someone to produce something to appease you, appease yourself instead. Create your own art, your own clothes, your own music, your own reality, your own manifesto, whatever... Action is a "vital" element in all of this" (Hawks).

Cyberpunk, in its production, uses a kind of "techno-bricolage" (Bell 164), which means "reinvestment of technology with subversive meaning and intent, wrestling it out of the hands of those in power and reclaiming it for their own ends" (Bell 166). This kind of "techno-bricolage" is also applied to language.

The "official" language of cyberspace is apparently English. Herec claims that cyberpunks in addition use codes (computer language) for the purpose of making communication easier and faster. Thomas claims that young people are very capable of learning languages and that computer language is one of them. Thomas describes a case of Warren Schwader who spent over eight hundred hours working on a program : "His native tongue was no longer English, but the hexadecimal hieroglyphics of LDX #$0, LDA STRING, X JSR, $FDF0, BYT $0, BNE LOOP" (Thomas 40). Herec also points out the role of computer jargon. Its role is to make communication

more difficult in order to isolate the community from the common users of computers. There exists a unique source of jargon used in online communities called *Jargon File 4.2.0*. Macek claims that it was created in 1975 and is administrated by Arjan de Mes, University of Amsterdam. To give an impression how weird the jargon can be, I list one entry from the *Jargon File 4.2.0* : "zen - to figure out something by meditation or by a sudden flash of enlightenment. Originally applied to bugs, but occasionally applied to problems of life in general. 'How'd you figure out the buffer allocation problem ?' 'Oh, I zenned it'" (*Jargon File 4.2.0*).

The cyberpunk, in contrast to other subcultures, is not characterised by distinct externalization features. Because of this fact, there is no precise specification what cyberpunk fashion looks like. The imagery of cyberpunk is mostly derived from the novels and movies, to which cyberpunk features are attributed. These are for example the already mentioned novel *Neuromancer* (Gibson 1984), the well known trilogy *The Matrix Series* (Wachowski brothers 1999) or *Blade Runner* (Ridley Scott 1982). It is mostly futuristic style. Cyberpunks often wear leather or latex materials in black or metal like colours. Mirrorshades, like those that Molly in *Neuromancer* or the main characters Trinity and Neo from *The Matrix* wore, became the symbol of cyberpunk. That is why the anthology of cyberpunk edited by Bruce Sterling was named after this symbol : *Mirrorshades*. Cyberpunks tend to reuse the punk style : tattoos, piercing and extravagant hairstyle. This is how a selfproclaimed cyberpunk describes the essence of cyberpunk : "To be able to strut into the local nightclub with a leather jacket, glowing tattoo, fangs the size of a bullet and nice new shiny cyberarm shows that you ain't one of those thugs on the street looking for their next hit but you truly know the essence of being a cyberpunk" (CyberFashion).

Cyberpunk subculture as well as the culture described by Gibson is often associated with drug-taking culture. The time of marihuana, the drug celebrated by hippies, is over. This is the generation of synthetic drugs. Herec states that cyberpunks intend to intensify their neurophysical and mental functions by psychoactive drugs (smart drugs). A large variety of drugs are taken for their speedy effects - amphetamine (speed), Ephedrine, Cat (khat or qat), drugs taken mostly at the rave parties. Next are drugs taken for their calming effect and relaxation - DMX (Dextromethorphan Hydrobromide), GHB (liquid E) or Temazepan. And finally, there are drugs which produce altered states of consciousness - Ketamine, LSD or Magic Mushrooms. Cyberculture is mostly associated with ecstasy. It is sometimes referred to as an E-generation. Cyberpunks set out to the adventurous trips into the different reality and thus free themselves from fetters of social conventions. This reality is often described in the same way as data space (matrix). Rushkoff explains :

> This experience leads users to treat the accepted reality as an arbitrary one, and to envision the possibilities of a world unfettered by obsolete thought systems, institutions, and neuroses. Meanwhile, the cybernetic experience empowers people of all ages to explore a new, digital landscape. Using only a personal computer and a modem, anyone can now access the datasphere. New computer interface technologies such as virtual reality promise to make the datasphere a place where we can take not only our minds but our bodies along for the ride.
> -- Rushkoff, *Cyberia*

Rushkoff claims that computer programmers and psychedelic warriors believe that the development of the datasphere is the final stage in the development of "Gaia", the living being that is the Earth, "for which humans serve as the neurons" (Rushkoff). Rushkoff argues that there emerged a common belief that the evolution of humanity "has been a wilful progression toward the construction of the next dimensional home for consciousness" (Rushkoff). Cyberpunks experiencing this new reality by way of psychedelic drugs do so mainly at wild parties in clubs. Music that can be heard in these clubs is electronic-computer generated music : House. Its roots are in Chicago but when it was transferred to Britain it was recreated into a new form - Rave. Rushkoff claims that in Britain rave took the form of mass open-air parties.

One of the movies that is the most frequently associated with cyberpunk is *Blade Runner* (Ridley Scott, 1982). Though it was released prior to the *Neuromancer* (Gibson, 1984), it is thought to give cyberpunk its visual representation. It is set in the Los Angeles of 2019 and among human beings there appear androids - in the movie called replicants - that are almost absolutely identical to humans besides their emotions. The "latest" version of androids - created by a megacorporation - are implanted artificial memories, which makes these machines almost unrecognizable from humans. The movie opens a lot of debates about the blurring boundary between human and machine, which is one of the central themes of cyberpunk. Other movies that possess cyberpunk features are *Johny Mnemonic* (Robert Longo 1995), *Minority Report* (Steven Spielberg 2002) or *RoboCop* (Paul Verhoenen 1987).

Some "old school" hackers in interviews attributed the first impulse for hacking to the release of the film *WarGames* (Johm Badham 1983). This movie is a story about a teenager, who under the impression that he has "hacked" a videogame manufacturer's software, starts playing "Global Thermonuclear War". Instead of manufacturer's software he actually connects a computer system of the U.S. Air Force that is supposed to launch their missiles at the Soviet Union. The quality of cyberpunk movies is controversial but they are, undoubtedly, a rich source of questions raised in the postmodern era.

An interesting phenomenon that links both "old school hackers" and teenagers proclaiming themselves cyberpunks is their affection for computer games. Bell argues that games stood at the very beginning of the development of computer software : "games were a way to learn about programming and to expand the capabilities of machines through software innovation" (Bell : 45). Cyberpunks are passionate players of video, arcade, PC and Internet-based computer games. Bell claims that when computers were still a domain of a narrow elite, games were a part of every computer for testing if the machine was in good working condition. On the other hand there appeared coin operated arcade games for amusement of wider masses. Probably the best known is *Pong* - "modelled on table tennis, but inspired by the arcade success of pinball" (Bell 45), *Space Invaders* and *Pacman*. The next stage, according to Bell, in the development of games was their penetration into households where they created a greater opportunity for interactivity. Teenagers started to spend a larger part of their time in interaction with their computers than with their friends. Haddon describes these youth as "video games culture" (qtd. in Bell 46).

One peculiarity within the scope of gaming are RPGs (Role Playing Games) that are played in real life. Rushkoff in *Cyberia* describes his experience with this kind of game.

These games are unstructured and non-linear; they "work like an acting exercise, where the players improvise the story as they go along" (Rushkoff). The target of the game is to create with fellow players the most interesting story. Rushkoff claims that "players must keep their characters alive, and having fun often means getting into trouble and then trying to get out again". The most popular are RPGs on the base of the GURPS - The Generic Universal Role Playing System - created by Steve Jackson. GURPS are based on "modules", that is a set of rules for gaming in various worlds full of magic, high-tech and fights. These modules are so realistic, that one of them called *Cyberpunk*, in 1990 caused, that U.S. Secret Service to confiscate all computers form the *Steve Jackson Games* office on the suspicion that it could be used as a manual for cybercrime.

In this brief description of cyberpunk imagery and ideology, I have managed to scratch the surface of the cyberpunk subculture. From this short outline it emerges that cyberpunk imagery and style are not as rich as those of the traditional subcultures. Nonetheless, despite the lack of visual imagery, cyberpunk is characterised by its highly evolved ideology.

8. Conclusion

The purpose of this paper is to consolidate the terminology within the scope of social theory concerning the cyberpunk subculture. The question about the status of cyberpunk emerged from the unsystematic use of the terms subculture, movement or fan culture in the definitions of cyberpunk.

I have approached this problem via the analytical tool used to analyse the traditional subcultures proposed by Michael Brake. In his analysis *Comparative Youth Culture*, Brake successfully applied this tool on the punk, hippie and beatnik subcultures. In my paper I assume that cyberpunk is also a subculture and thus I have organized my analysis according to the single points of this analytical tool.

From the chapter dealing with the historical development of cyberpunk follows that cyberpunk is a result of the wider socio-economical situation in the western countries. The anxiety that originated in the immense speed of the development of computer sciences, social decay and philosophy resulted in the cyberpunk literature that inspired teenagers or "modern day hackers" to identify themselves with the heroes of cyberpunk novels. From this point of view, there is no doubt that cyberpunk is a subculture.

The next point of the analysis is the societal reaction to cyberpunk. As in the case of other subcultures, there is mostly negative response to cyberpunk. In the case of cyberpunk, there also appeared an interesting feature of a certain attraction to it as soon as it merged into the pop culture. This proves that cyberpunk is a subculture.

As for the social organization of cyberpunk, the question is not easy. For sure, the structure of cyberpunk is strict and it is very difficult to get to the higher position in the hierarchy. What differs cyberpunk from the traditional subculture is the place, where subculture is organized. In contrast to the traditional subculture, members of cyberpunk subculture mostly meet in the cyberspace, the virtual world.

The persistence of cyberpunk is unquestionable. If not the persistence of the subculture, at least its ideas of nonconformity and challenge within the area border crossing in computer-human relationship and boundaries of the real life and new reality of cyberspace will continue to develop in the social consciousness.

Since the purpose of this work is to find out whether cyberpunk subculture is a subculture in a true sense of the word, I did not manage to cover substantially the style, themes and possible readings of cyberpunk literature and its reflection in the subculture. The imagery of cyberpunk is certainly not as developed and strong as the imagery of other subcultures. On the other hand, the ideology is very rich and abundant.

Cyberpunk certainly meets the requirements of the traditional concept of subculture even though there are certain discrepancies in some features concerning the place of organization of subculture and the weaker externalisation of features of cyberpunk. I would like to propose the idea of Andy Bennett who developed the idea of Post-Subculture. Bennett elaborated his idea in *After Subculture: Critical Studies in Contemporary Youth Culture* and claims that the concept of subculture "has become increasingly redundant in relation to contemporary youth culture" (Bennett 11). Bennet claims that in the post-modern era the clear divisions between subcultures has blurred as "the relationship between style, musical taste and identity have became progressively weaker and articulated more fluidly" (Bennett 11).

From this analysis flows that cyberpunk is not a traditional type of subculture and it would be more appropriate to label this phenomenon by new, postmodern term - "post-subculture".

Note

1. In this paper, I will skip this point, due to its complexity and my need to limit my focus.

2. WELL : "Whole Earth 'Lectronic Link is a pioneering Bay Area based virtual community that grew out of the productive intersection in San Francisco of 1960's Whole Earth counterculture, computer hackers and hobbyists" (Bell 99).

3. In the computer jargon 3 stands for E, 1 for i, 7 or I for L, X for K, etc. (Herec 166).

4. Generation X is a term referring to the generation of children born in the Western World following the post-WWII baby boom generation.

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