Down Among the Cyberpunks

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> Now he slept in the cheapest coffins, the ones nearest the port, beneath the quartz-halogen floods that lit the docks all night like vast stages, where you couldn't see the lights of Tokyo for the glare of the television sky, not even the towering hologram logo of the Fuji Electric Company, and Tokyo Bay was a black expanse where gulls wheeled above drifting shoals of white styrofoam. Behind the port lay the city, factory domes dominated by the vast cubes of corporate arcologies. [...] By day, the bars down Ninsei were shuttered and featureless, the neon dead, the hologram inert, waiting, under the poisoned silver sky.
> -- William Gibson, *Neuromancer*, 1984

It now seems clear that neither the Technophiles nor the Reversionaries will win out in their cultural debate. A third force that has no idealistic dimension at all, no vision either dark or bright, has won the day. The corporados, for whom the computer is simply a commodity to be sold for profit, have picked up all the marbles. And what sort of world are they building for us ? It is the cyberpunk landscape that William Gibson surveys in his novels, the vista that produced the sad punk rock culture of the eighties.

I know there are cyberpunks who bristle when they are associated with Punk Rock. "Cyberpunks aren't about PUNK MUSIC", insists one highly upper case contributor to *alt.cyberpunk.movement*. "Cyberpunks are about FREEDOM OF INFORMATION because INFORMATION IS POWER and by god - POWER TO THE PEOPLE". But in fact there is a significant overlap of sensibility between the groups.

The shared word "punk" serves in both movements to express an identity born of victimization. Both Punk Rock and cyberpunk express a spirit of resistance; both are made up of those who see themselves as marginal insurgents in a culture gone wrong. Cyberpunk takes its cue from science fiction literature rather than Rock music, but the literature is every bit as dismal and despairing as the music. Like the hyperamplified howls of anger and anguish that blare from the stage at a Death Metal concert, it reminds us that, besides the yea-saying techies at *Wired* who see an endless frontier of technological wonders and amazements ahead, there are the grunts, the malcontents, the delinquents of the high tech workforce, the hacker proletariat working out of coffin-sized cubicles with their phone calls and e-mail monitored to insure quality service. Their view of the future runs to alarm if not desperation. Leave them out, and the picture is incomplete.

William Gibson's jack-hammer abrasiveness suits the harsh realities of that world, a vista of gargantuan corporations and monolithic institutions where embattled anti-heroes can survive only as outlaws plotting clever ways to sabotage a system they cannot own or control. Gibson's cyber cowboys are marginalized bottom-dogs so sunk in narcotic fantasies and hallucinatory worlds that they have no Reality Principle to cling to. They inhabit a fictive zone where nothing is certain and everything can be manipulated. Anybody you meet might be a hologram. Not even their minds are their own. What the powers of modern technology have finally brought them is ecological doom in an empire of unlivable cities dominated by the high rise towers and emblazoned logos of the reigning corporate elite.

Gibson's cities are the private property of ruthless American-Japanese-German-French multinational companies. "Sprawls", as he calls the urban eyesores of the future (BAMA sprawls from Boston to Atlanta), are as squalid as any factory town of the nineteenth century - yet they brim with advanced technology. Nobody draws a breath or dreams a dream without the use of "derms", or "entertainment modules ", or "simstim" implants. In the sprawls, an underclass of demoralized billions struggles to survive in conditions of hopeless moral degradation. For them, the media have become, at best, forms of sad mind-blowing escape or, at worst, techniques of psychological control. People have themselves been re-engineered from their DNA up; they have been transformed into cyborgs equipped with internal processors and microbiotic spare parts. It is a world where nothing is real, nothing is human, nothing is gentle, beautiful, or noble. The only love Gibson's cowboys find might be a few drug-laced hours with a company whore in an over-night sleeping coffin.

A young man logs in to *alt.cyberspace.rebels* to utter a word of anguish. His entry may fall short of literary elegance, but he is giving a voice to the cyberpunk vision of things to come :

> LOOK at us and look out there we are living in the world dominated by corporate marketing machine. These guys eat up just every opponent out there Nothing is existed beyond corporate world. These guys are GOD. These guys have the real consciousness. These guys eat you and me. These guys slowly take over our existence and body and mind. We have no power to fight against these fascist gigantic monster ever created by human race.

There is a literary genealogy behind cyberpunk fiction. It traces back to early anti-Utopias like E. M. Forster's *The Machine Stops* (1905), the novel and film version of *Metropolis* (1920s), and Huxley's *Brave New World* (1933). All these works saw the bright promise of science and industry being swallowed up by fanatical social engineering and profiteering interests. At that early stage, the future depicted in these works was, on the surface at least, clean and elegant. Cyberpunk redesigned anti-Utopia by adding just the right touch of corporate philistinism and ecological disintegration. The films *Alien* (1979) and *Outland* (1981) helped embed images of futurist noir in the public perception. They show industrial life under the control of interstellar corporations reverting to the grubby drudgery of early Manchester. The cavernous and clanking space stations have lost their luster; they are lightless, dank, and dripping. Everything is built cheap and chronically malfunctions; underpaid technicians sweat, scowl, and grumble; cutthroats skulk along the garbage-strewn air-shafts and docking bays. The style for *Alien* has been called "the used future" - the future as it will look if it is owned by the same forces that own the world today.

It is a new and jarring insight - a hell of a different kind. In earlier anti-utopias - Zamyatin's *We*, Orwell's *1984* - it was universally assumed that only the central state could ever be powerful enough to rule the world. The dehumanized future would be the product of collective planning. But there is another possibility. What if corporate elites, with their insatiable appetite for profit, shape our high tech destiny ? Then we will have regimentation, but without the least concern among these selfish, competitive giants for cleaning up the mess or preserving order. Under the hegemony of triumphant market forces, pleasure gardens for the rich may survive under heavy guard, but the rest of the world will become a garbage dump. Marge Piercy has also anticipated such a world in her novel *Woman at the Edge of Time*, where all the women are corporate whores and all the men are paramilitary cyborgs.

It was, above all, the 1982 movie *Blade Runner* (directed by Ridley Scott, based on the Philip K. Dick novel "Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?") that most effectively exposed the decadent underbelly of corporate high tech. Both the film and the novel have since acquired a mythic stature on the Internet; there are several highly active *Blade Runner* websites. *Blade Runner* envisions a future where quasi-human replicants - patented products of the Tyrrell Corporation, one of the industrial giants that rule the future - have more humanity to

them than "real" human beings. The tale, played out in the thronging, smog-shrouded streets of a decaying megacity, is a study in the ultimate criminality of corporate power. The fact that younger people are learning these facts of life from science fiction rather than sociology should not undercut the validity of the lesson.

A snatch of lyrics from a Death Metal group whose performances usually end with punch outs and riots in the mosh pit.

> Power, rage unbound because been pounded by the streets.
> Cyanide blood burns down the skyline.
> Hatred is purity.
> The bullet connects at last.
> Let freedom ring with a shot-gun blast.

Words written by twenty-somethings for an audience of teen-somethings. Not teens who have suffered through a holocaust or the horrors of ethnic cleansing or thermonuclear war, but kids from suburban homes probably living off the fat of NASDAQ. The performance, with its super-amplification and programmed light show, is supremely high tech. But the audience is wearing tee-shirts with slogans like "Get Up and Kill" or "Hail, Satan".

It isn't easy to take young people seriously when they immerse themselves in a nihilism they have not earned and cannot fully understand. Yet, as presumptuous as the cyberpunk vision may be, it is, I think, an expression of the life impulse, still there, still struggling to make its way forward. If that impulse is left uneducated and given no creative means of expression, it will finish where it began - as a howl of indiscriminate rage that drifts toward the madness or suicide with which the young too much confabulate. Either that, or it will become mere show business - a marketable act, tolerable because it has no target and no strategy.

The cyberpunk vision is so extreme that it is tempting to dismiss it and hope that it will simply be outgrown. But the first thing that one must say is how *true* that vision is. It has a great deal more history and culture behind it than our younger generation may realize. That in itself is a healing lesson, for it brings perspective. William Blake saw the smoking mills of his day as dark and satanic. Were he around today, he would very likely see high tech as *sleek* and satanic. He would surely recognize the same inhumanity and sacrilege at work in the most ingenious of Silicon Valley's achievements. He would also see the genius, for he celebrated the inventor's skill as much as the artist's. Only a conflicted loyalty stays in touch with the truth in both directions.

I suspect much of the angst and bitterness the young reflect in their on-line messages to one another stems from their sense of isolation, which also imbues their words with an annoyingly self-congratulatory sense of originality. Misguided science, the abuse of wealth and power, technology in the wrong hands ... these are issues that connect to the countercultural movement of the sixties and back at least as far as the Romantic artists. What the cyberpunks have done is to press those issues to new, histrionic extremes - as if to warn us that, like Hollywood's indestructible Alien, this thing is still *here*. William Blake called the thing "Urizen, a shadow of horror", Allen Ginsberg named it "Moloch" - a suitably ancient name that reminds us how old the horror is.

> What sphinx of cement and aluminum bashed open their skulls and ate up their brains and imagination ?
> Moloch ! ...
> Moloch whose mind is pure machinery ! Moloch whose blood is running money ! Moloch whose fingers are ten armies ! Moloch whose breast is a cannibal dynamo ! Moloch whose ear is a smoking tomb !

The current younger generation, by and large, knows little of the old counter culture that took Ginsberg to be one of its bards. But some of them are having bad dreams about Moloch. With a prophetical clarity beyond their years, they see the monster now as the alien, the cyborg, the android, caricatures of humanity that cannot love or understand us. They see it as the Tyrrell Corporation, as the X-Files' cigarette-smoking assassin, as Darth Vader in any number of his sword and sorcery/science fiction variations.

The first step in an effective post-industrial education is to make common cause with the dread and disgust of the young. But we must also recognize that their despair is a measure of their immaturity. The nihilistic hysteria that fills their music and literature simply tells us that they cannot make their way home alone. They need the competence of elders to find their way out of the bad dream we are in together. Left to their own devices, they come up with clichèd despair. Robert Bly, speaking with a poet's wisdom, believes there will be no growing up in what he calls "the sibling society" unless children find their way beyond the machines and the systems and back into the sustaining natural world to learn from the trees, the stars, the beasts.

Lewis Mumford, the teacher who taught me the most through my college years about the use and misuse of technology gave Moloch another name, perhaps the best choice of all. He called it "Anti-Life". Anti-Life was the psychic distortion that Mumford believed was at work behind megatechnics, seeking to replace all things organic with mechanical substitutes. The inventions of Anti-Life might be as modern as the next Intel chip, but Mumford believed they traced back to the divine kings of the River Valley civilizations with their compulsive appetite for imperious power over man and nature. His vision of our destiny under the dominance of Anti-Life was grave in the extreme, and more deeply-studied than any cyberpunk fantasy. But he knew that the true measure of wisdom is hope, and hope is what the competence of elders brings to the dilemmas of the young.

> On the terms imposed by technocratic society, [Mumford observed] there is no hope for mankind except by "going with" its plans for accelerated technological progress, even though man's vital organs will all be cannibalized in order to prolong the megamachine's meaningless existence. But for those of us who have thrown off the myth of the machine, the next move is ours : for the gates of the technocratic prison open automatically, despite their rusty ancient hinges, as soon as we choose to walk out.
> -- Lewis Mumford, *The Pentagon of Power*, 1970, p. 435.