

The Confusion Over Cyberpunk

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What the media associates with cyberpunk does not agree with the commonly accepted interpretation of the movement. The cyberpunk writers' philosophies of a bleak future, caused by the marriage of technical and human abilities, have been lost due to the acceptance of the underground movement. Whenever anyone looks at the newborn information age, one can not help but attach a "cyber" label to it. When anyone mentions the Internet or the World Wide Web, the only word that comes to mind is "cyberspace". Even though our networks are not synonymous with the "cyberspace" created by William Gibson in *Neuromancer*, the term is now being used to describe any virtual computer environment. It seems that the current acceptance of computers has started a revolution in which man is becoming dependent upon machines. Where can you go without having access to a television or telephone ? The widespread use of microprocessors and the data stored on them have created a new medium for artists to demonstrate their abilities. One problem this computer revolution creates is that it is often confused with cyberpunk fiction. On February 8, 1993, *Time Magazine* published an article defining and clarifying questions of the cyberpunk movement. The conventionalization of cyberpunk has succeeded in removing the ideals and philosophies once associated with it. Rudy Rucker states that cyberpunk is "simply the fusion of humans and machines". However, cyberpunk is about much more than that : it is about the struggle between man and its creation, the probing of the human soul, and the rebellion against tradition.

Cyberpunk started as a group of writers eager to oppose conventional beliefs and writing styles. The movement began with the inception of *Cheap Truth*, a newsletter devoted to counterculture and free thought. Cyberpunk grew from an unknown group in the 1950's to the mainstream science fiction genre of the 1990's. One of the major tenets of the cyberpunk founders was that the work should be devoid of any standards or regulations. The writers simply wanted to write science fiction that was "good and alive and readable" (Sterling). Cyberpunk exists as a battle against the norm. The "punk" part of the label implies a rebellious individual whose principles are contrary to the majority of the population. The primary characteristic of cyberpunk is to be innovative and original, each work should not be placed in a SF category, but rather classified in a genre of its own.

Cyberpunk strives to show that there are "no sacred boundaries to protect us from ourselves" (Sterling). It tries to realistically postulate what the future will be like given the current growth of technology. Where the media is mistaken is that the literature not only tells of how man is intimately linked to computers, but also how man copes with the new situation. Many SF writers believe that man is limited to a certain amount of knowledge. Once man crosses that forbidden line, he risks disaster. For example, some people believe that nuclear technology represents a piece of "forbidden" knowledge. Now that the technology exists, mankind faces a possible tragedy caused his own invention. The way in which cyberpunk differs is that man has crossed this line, but has adapted to embrace its creation rather than fear it. Mankind deals with the consequences of its actions and struggles to survive against natural odds. Consider the creation of new drugs and antibiotics; every time scientists develop a way to kill a bacterium, it evolves into a more resistant and potent form. With each failed attempt at controlling nature, man climbs onto a higher cliff from which to fall. Hence, man is constantly fighting a battle with his "solution".

Another effect of technology on society is that due to its widespread comprehension, cyberpunk writers have succeeded in homogenizing the population into an uniform global community. Technical knowledge is no longer restricted the people educated in the specific field, thus there are no more advantages for people who

possess it. For example, in the current society, someone who understands spreadsheets can calculate large amounts of data in a fraction of the time it would take for an unknowledgeable person to do the same job. Therefore, the uneven distribution of knowledge allows some people have an advantage. In cyberpunk settings, everyone has the same foundation and footing. For example, in "The Girl Who Was Plugged In", P. Burke, who had very little interaction with society, was still able to operate the luxury items of the world such as solar cars and body-lifts. Consequently, the people in the future are free to explore human nature with technology acting as a mere tool.

The recently recognized Cyberpunk culture has been publicized throughout the media. The movement, based on the fictional settings and technology of the writers bearing the same label, has been rapidly growing and gaining acceptance since the late 1980's. *Time Magazine* listed many different inventions and concepts in which it deemed cyberpunk. First of all, the author, Philip Elmer-Dewitt, agrees with the mainstream view of cyberpunk in which it "is a way of looking at the world that combines an infatuation with high-tech tools and a disdain for conventional ways of using them". Cyberpunks, based on the previous definition, do not seek out new inventions or even have any opinion about them; they are a necessity. Living in a cyberpunk society, without tech would be similar to not knowing the country's language. Furthermore, people of the cyberpunk world utilize their tech tools in a manner in which they were designed. What is the purpose of a computer ? It is a tool to help complete tasks faster and more efficiently. Therefore, it seems that what Elmer-Dewitt means by "conventional" is using the computer to aid in problem solving in the real world. For example, an unconventional use would probably be to infect another computer's with a harmful virus since it is of no benefit to anyone. In other words, cyberpunks would probably use computers for malice or other illegal purposes. Additionally, Elmer-Dewitt claims that cyberpunks are a combination of a knowledgeable computer user and a rebellious "teenager". Further he claims, "Obsessed with technology, especially technology that is just beyond their reach, the cyberpunks are future oriented to a fault". Again, he emphasizes on the fact that cyberpunks are looking forward into the future. In cyberpunk short stories such as Pat Cadigan's *Rock On*, the protagonist, Gina, is only concerned with how to avoid capture by Man-o-war and not how technology will change their lives in the future. It seems that in cyberpunk writing, the characters typically believe that there is little or no hope for the future, so people try to enjoy the present as much as possible. What's more, the technology in the stories seem to be constant in that very few innovations or improvements are being made. Finally, due to the additions of synthetic limbs and implants, the characters lose part of their humanity and self-control. Many stories such as *Snake Eyes* depict the struggle for control over the artificial implants. In this story, George Jordan constantly fights the instinctual "snake" implants which creates urges in him to feed on cat food and copulate. Most of the cyberpunk literature appears to illustrate the tech-aided struggle for control over the body, the society, and the mind.

The label cyberpunk not only applies to the writers that originally founded the movement, but also the people who are attempting to imitate the characters in the stories. The reason why the media seems to be incorrectly identifying cyberpunks is because the self-proclaimed cyberpunks have the loudest voice in the movement and are attempting to define it. Elmer-Dewitt seems to be getting much his information from the people who follow the movement rather than the people who started it. Even though he mentions authors such as Rudy Rucker, William Gibson, and Bruce Sterling, the lines he quotes mainly pertain to technology. Thus, in his attempt at characterizing cyberpunk, he fails to give the views of its founders. There is no concrete definition for a cyberpunk, yet they have been generalized as any computer user whose hobbies include computers. It is understandable how techies could be considered cyberpunks due to their extensive use and dependence on computers, but they still may not fulfill the requisite of having a rebellious nature or carpe diem attitude. If one looks at cyberpunk stories at face value, the main point that is evident is the influence of computers interwoven into society. Very few readers notice that the stories tell of basic human desires and needs. For example, the snake in *Snake-Eyes*, by Tom Maddox, describes human instincts unleashed. The "snake", artificial brain implants, seeks food for survival, a mate to reproduce with, and an aggressive self defense mechanism. Another possible reason why people misinterpret cyberpunk is that people like to have a definition for everything. It is

human nature to try to explain something in its simplest form. When one tries to define cyberpunk, a whole list of problems arise. For instance, due to the loosely organized movement, there are only a few writers who can describe its origin and growth. Furthermore, due to the diverse style of the cyberpunk writers, there is not one general format for the literature. There is no way of defining cyberpunk and any attempt at doing so would contradict its primary premise, to be open and variable. Moreover, the cyberpunk movement remained unnamed by its "founders" since there were not enough generalizations drawn to create a single genre. Therefore, due to the lack of organization and leadership in the cyberpunk movement, there is no singular all-encompassing definition to describe it.

The mainstream views of cyberpunk do bear some resemblance to the characters from the literary genre. One similarity is that the present day Cyberpunks seem to be hedonistic and self-centered. Rickenharp, from "Freezone" seemed to typify these characteristics with his egotistic "bad-ass" attitude and his craving for narcotics. In addition, cyberpunks usually listen to counter-cultural music such as the garage grunge bands of Seattle. Cyberpunk stories also include music as a means of social interaction. For example, in *Time Considered as a Helix of Semiprecious Stones*, the "singers" were the most honored and distinguished members of society. However, even though modern cyberpunks mimic the lives of characters in cyberpunk stories, they incorrectly applied the label to a movement that does not uphold the primary doctrine of originality established in the literary genre.

In the high-tech society of today, non-computer users are mistakenly labeling computer junkies as cyberpunks. Even though most of these users fit parts of the definition, very few actually meet the requirements. For example, just because people are familiar with the Internet or programming, they do not satisfy the basic stipulations of being a "punk" or rebel. On the other hand, just because people use designer drugs and listen to synthesized music, they may have no contact with the technological aspects of cyberpunk. Elmer-Dewitt claims that, "in the long run, we will all be cyberpunks". This statement alone opposes the fact that the cyberpunk movement is countercultural and always stands away from the mainstream. The newly formed definition is rapidly replacing the true cyberpunk movement. Eventually, all interactive technologies ranging from video games to digital satellite systems will be considered cyberpunk. The group of writers creating SF in the 1980's has created a new movement based on their works, bearing the same name.