Towards a Definition of Cyberpunk

The Cyberpunk Project

It may seem somewhat ludicrous to worry about the meaning of the term "cyberpunk". Science fiction as a general category is still attempting to define itself 75 years after its birth as a commercial genre. Even within the subgenre of cyberpunk, a comparative toddler, there is a huge amount of difference between works. Even when only applied to canonical works (a somewhat paradoxical thought for a field as new and relatively unexplored as cyberpunk), a definition of cyberpunk must encompass such variations as the gloomy dystopia of William Gibson's *Neuromancer* trilogy, Neal Stephenson's *Snow Crash*'s giddy four-color comic book romp, and Bruce Sterling's engrossing and oraculal thriller, *Islands in the Net*. How can a definition withstand the cyberflotsam gathered by a wider net ? Can Sterling and Gibson's Victorian fantasy, *The Difference Engine* be fit in somehow ? What about Philip K. Dick's vertiginous fiction of paranoia (seemingly entirely removed from the subgenre, but including the book that was transformed into the seminal movie *Blade Runner*) ? What, for crying aloud, about Disney's *Tron* ? The mind boggles.

When a large body of work is examined, however, certain traits begin to stand out. The definition of cyberpunk used in this project (admittedly, one only a few degrees removed from "cyberpunk is what I say is cyberpunk") relies on three concepts. Our broad definition of cyberpunk is "science fiction literature that emphasizes, to a greater or lesser degree, the three attributes of post-humanism, post-industrialism and post-nationalism".

Post-humanism is probably the most obvious component of cyberpunk. The stereotypical cyberpunk novel is positively dripping with chromed artificial limbs, bizarre prostheses used to ill ends, crazed artificial intelligences run amok. The concept is more subtle than that, however. The underlying aesthetic is often one of *transcending the flesh*; all the rest is just surface glitter and means to that end. The methods of transcendence can be mundane; drugs are an amazingly prominent feature of many cyberpunk books. They can be exotic; *Neuromancer*'s Case jacks into the Matrix not just for work, but for liberation from the "meat" -- the ability to play unfettered in a purely mental arena, a "consensual hallucination".

Gaudier examples are available. Rudy Rucker's *Software* and Greg Egan's *Permutation City* are both focused on the possibility of modelling, simulating or uploading the human mind (this is a fairly common trope). Pat Cadigan's *Synners* features Artie Fish, a computer program that accidentally achieved sentience. *Count Zero* features entities of uncertain origin, taking the form of voodoo *loa* and dwelling in the Matrix. Are there ghosts in the machine, or are they just us ?

The critical grounding -- the yin and yang -- for this defining factor of cyberpunk can be found in Donna Haraway's gender-bending, liberating cyborg (originally from "cybernetic organism" -- the body extended, reshaped, rewritten) and Jean Baudrillard's simulacrum, the simulation of a non-existant real. When the human body becomes non-essential, will the species have gained or lost ? Will we face the manipulative horrors of a Wintermute or the genial goodwill of a mother-figure/feature, as in Vernor Vinge's early story, *True Names* ? Will it really matter ?

Post-industrialism could also be thought of (to steal a phrase from anarchist rhetoriticians Hakim Bey and Bob Black) too-late capitalism. It is perhaps most finely represented in Neal Stephenson's *Snow Crash*, in which America leads the world in only three industries : movies, computer code, and speedy pizza delivery. Service industries and software remain, but in a future transformed by telepresence, when the Net makes telecommuting

as common as the streetcar and the highway made commuting, who needs factories ? Nanomachines can build it cheaper and better. If you're positing a world without nanomachines, you can always have it built somewhere cheap and dirty, by disposible laborers held in serf-like bondage. Bangkok, perhaps, or Newark. Life is cheap; information is dear.

Information is, in fact, the true medium of exchange in cyberpunk (as *Snow Crash* adeptly points out, even the franchized service industries really boil down to nothing more than information). Perhaps the fact that so many heroes in cyberpunk literature are criminals can be explained by authors largely committed to the old hacker ethic : information wants to be free. In a world where bits are the only real commodity -- those bits could represent a coded Swiss bank account, new military icebreakers, or the formula for a new synthetic drug giving a cheaper high (or, for that matter, Coca-Cola) -- only the informed survive. Drugs are perhaps the closest physical analogue to information; all you need is a formula and a hired chemical lab, and you've got a salable good. How will it be purchased, though ? In most cyberpunk literature, physical dollar bills are no longer even widely accepted currency. Many works posit other currencies (yen, euro) replacing the dollar in importance; many more suggest either that folding money will be replaced entirely by digital transactions or that private currencies will be issued. In Gibson and Swanwick's short story *Dogfight*, antique laminated dollars circulate as money, but only for their value as collectables.

Our guides to the post-industrial economy come from several quarters. Future guru Alvin Toffler and his Gingrinchian allies provide relatively positive visions of the future as slowly but inexorably shaped by the market. Black and Bey provide models of resistance (dropping out of the rat race or creating new, rhizomatic economies) that, often as not, look toward the past. Primarily, though, the guides are Marshall McLuhan, Guy Debord, Jean Baudrillard, and Pierre Lévy, each of whom has his own take on what the knowledge space (to use Lévy's term) will be like.

Finally, most cyberpunk literature is dystopian. Often, a war or catastrophe has occured in the backstory, prior to the beginning of the plot. If a war, it was most likely not a success; America in cyberpunk is often a beleaguered country. Whether through a disaster or simply the unending tide of technological change (the erosion of borders predicated by the development of the net, e.g.), the general assumption is that the nation as we know it is an endangered species. The positions of the Third World and the First World -- with the rise of post-industrialism -- are often reversed or muddled. *Islands in the Net*'s Jamaica is on the cutting (and somewhat shady) edge of technological development; George Alec Effinger's *A Fire in the Sun* shows a Muslim world in which America's remnants aren't even worth thinking about. The orbital society (technocratic, often corporate, usually technologically advanced far past the world down the gravity well) is a fairly common trope. Walter John Williams' *Hardwired* posits a war with orbital corporate nations, a war which the now-Balkanized America lost. There is a deep uneasiness with what the future will do to the current conception of the nation-state.

The most common prediction is the rise of the corporate state. The Corporation can harness the forces of the market, serving its employees/citizens in a way that the castrated nations of the cyberpunk world cannot. Similarly, in a world devoid of national protections, the Corporation can both serve as an enforcer of laws (as in the burbclaves of *Snow Crash*) and an exploiter of the power vacuum. Williams uses the term policorporate, a political-business entity that cocoons its workers in every aspect of their lives. This, too, is one of the reasons that so many heroes are criminals. When the state is the Corporation, mother and father and Big Brother rolled into one, what choice does the strong individual have to rebel ?

Once again, Baudrillard is a guide. The works of Bey and Toffler are somewhat helpful. The best theoretical guide, however, may be something like the front page of the *Wall Street Journal*; the privatization of jails, garbage disposal, public space, or even schools and police, is not the stuff of science fiction. Market theorists on the political right are already predicting much of what is seen in the world of cyberpunk. After reading a text on economics written by a member of the Cato Institute or the American Enterprise Institute, does the satirical

Greater Hong Kong in *Snow Crash*, with convenient franchized locations up and down your local highway (bring your passport lest you be shot for invading) really seem quite so humorous ? Cyberpunk gains much of its power from the fact that, more than any other subgenre of science fiction, it's creeping into our peripheral vision. 1984 has come and gone, but, soon enough, cyberpunk may be here.

The motifs of cyberpunk

Post-humanism :

- Artificial intelligence
- Cyber-religions
- Cyberspace
- Cybertech
- Drugs
- Silicon humans (constructs)
- Simstim

Post-industrialism :

- The Corporation
- Crime
- Cyberspace
- Currency
- Drugs
- Franchization

Post-nationalism :

- The Corporation
- Currency
- Orbital society
- Post-war / Balkanization
- The Third World