The Future in Cyberpunk

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The defining characteristics of the cyberpunk genre have been debated since the beginnings of the literary movement. Some authors, classified as cyberpunk, question the very existence of this label, while others are in constant disagreement about the traits that make up the literature. Authors such as Bruce Sterling believe that cyberpunk is the integration of technology and literature in a world where the gap between science fiction and reality is rapidly closing; however, others such as Lewis Shiner have formed the opinion that this literature is merely a product of pop culture, hence it should not have any true literary importance. Furthermore, cyberpunk is said to be the voice of the underground in modern society, and the vision of a new technological world. These theories represent the different views of the major authors in this genre, thus it becomes difficult to define a literary style from such opposing views. A more constructive method is to analyze the major characteristics and styles used in the stories considered as cyberpunk. The negative portrayal of the integration of technology and society is a fundamental tenet of the literature, because it presents a pessimistic vision of scientific advancement. The genre's dark tones, seen in the styles of it's major authors, emphasize the bleak images throughout the futuristic fiction. The constant conflict between the individual and a technologically advanced society is a major theme of the genre, for it stresses man's insignificance. These characteristics are interwoven into the fabric of cyberpunk and form a bleak image of science fiction and the future.

The issue of technology and its integration into society is a major pillar of most science fiction; however, it is not an essential feature of cyberpunk. The concepts of cyberpunk literature are futuristic, but technology is not prevalent in the literature. In *Rock On* synthesizers, special effects, lasers, and other virtual objects bring forth images of the future and technology. But the major theme revolves around the fact that the main character is trapped in the constructs of this world. Another example is seen in *The Girl Who Was Plugged In*, because the author took much care in trying to explain the possible scientific advances, yet again the major theme in the story is the character's struggle to find her individuality amongst the technology. Much of science fiction is about how the individual uses the technology to overcome the problems that confront him, conversely in the realm of cyberpunk the character's individuality is in conflict with the impersonalness of technology.

The word technology brings forth images of exactness and precision, but when dealing with the possible technological advances of the future cyberpunk writers become ambiguous. *The Gernsback Continuum* creates images of the future and the conformity that is caused by new scientific advances :

> One of them contained sketches of an idealized city that drew on *Metropolis* and *Things to Come*, but squared everything, soaring up through an architect's perfect clouds to zeppelin docks and mad neon spires. (*Mirrorshades* 8)

Gibson is very vague when describing the specific architecture and nuances of technology used in the designs of these futuristic objects. The lack of definite details in describing futuristic scenarios is due to the fact that cyberpunk literature resists the concepts of technology. *The Girl Who Was Plugged In* is a very good example of this point. Burke uses the technology to make herself into a physically more attractive person; however, she is ultimately doomed because the technology strips her of her individuality. Another example is seen in *Snake-Eyes*

where Jordan is in a constant psychological battle with the implants that are supposed to make him a better warrior. The loss of individuality due to technological advances becomes a major theme in the literature of cyberpunk, and this theme presents a dismal view of the individual in society. Thus cyberpunk's use of technological themes develop the darker themes of technology and science.

Cheerless moods and dreary images permeate the writing styles of the cyberpunk genre. These images are common themes in the literature of the underground. Since the voice of the modern underground is said to be cyberpunk, then these dark themes should be prevalent in the literature of the movement. Sterling writes in his preface that the images of the night, the mirrorshades, and other dark tones are a major subject in the realm of this fiction. These somber tones help set up the basic theme of a bleak future. In *Freezone* Shirley describes a decrepit city ranked with social ills and dire living conditions, and these images present a setting which brings forth an overall dismalness to the story. This emphasizes the philosophy that the individual in a technologically superior society struggles to survive. Characters such as Rickenharp and Gina are trying to preserve their individuality, but they are ultimately doomed in a society where technology and science exist in an inordinate degree. These themes and visions create a depressing portrait of the individual in the future.

Arguably one of the most important characteristic of this genre of literature is the role of the individual in society. Sterling describes the cyberpunk society filled with megacorporations and vast technologies that stifle the individual. A common setting in a cyberpunk story is the individual who is unwilling to fully conform to a society where technology is so prevalent that it controls the characters. Gina in *Rock On* wants to break away from Man of War, but the technology commanding her dooms her to failure. One only needs to read *Freezone* and *The Girl Who Was Plugged In* to see that the individual's major character flaw is that he is unable and unwilling to conform to the society where technology dominates. This theme is the essence of cyberpunk and is the one of the major reasons that cyberpunk differs from science fiction. This genre of literature is supposed to be based upon the integration of science and literature in a world where technology and science fiction are closing in on each other. However, the real picture that the cyberpunk themes evoke is the image of a technological integrated society in which the individual is forever doomed.

The basic precepts of the cyberpunk genre consists of technology as hindrance to man, stories that are saturated in dark and dreary themes, and a character that will either fail or conform to a structured society. Unlike the optimistic attitude that classical science fiction has towards technology, cyberpunk literature treats this issue as a major problem to the individual in society. Technology physically enhances a character, through implants and prosthetics; however, it is inhibiting to the development of the individual. The common themes of dismalness and dreariness help emphasize the doomed attempt of the individual to succeed in a futuristic society. Both these notions bring forth the question of the individual in society. The cyberpunks have a pessimistic view of the human condition emersed in technology. The futuristic world stresses conformity and power, thus this inhibits the human being to grow as an individual. The nonconformist attitude is the major flaw of most of the characters in the cyberpunk genre. These notions define the basic structure of the cyberpunk literature; moreover, the genre presents a bleak image of the integration of culture and society.