

Cyberpunk Literary Style

The Cyberpunk Project

What is Cyberpunk as Literary Style ?

The publication of William Gibson's *Neuromancer* in 1984 established a landscape in which a number of important theoretical postulations about the future of contemporary culture were free to operate. The "cyberpunk" movement was born -- an evolution of the science fiction (SF) genre that appropriates elements of contemporary society (and theoretical conjectures) and presents a narrative that both includes and extends the technological developments of today. However, in spite of its dominance within SF during the 1980s, the consensus among both SF writers and critics is that cyberpunk as a movement is essentially over. These cyberpunk writers and critics -- Fitting, Hollinger, McCaffery, Dery, etc -- argue that while "pure" cyberpunk is no longer being written, there has been a commodification of cyberpunk elements that persist in what Lewis Shiner, a celebrated cyberpunk writer in his own right, has termed "scifi-berpunk", a mass market version "commodified, summarized, codified, and reduced to formula". "Cyberpunk" has become a widely accepted term for describing a specific kind of cultural production found in music, film, and fiction in 1980's America. A fusion of techno and punk counterculture characterized by a self-conscious stylistic and ideological rebelliousness, it can perhaps best be defined as a reinterpretation of human (especially male) experience in a "media-dominated, information saturated, post-industrial age".

Where did Cyberpunk come from ?

Debate is no longer concerned with what cyberpunk is but rather on what its value has been, with opinions ranging from Istvan Csicsery-Ronay's criticism of cyberpunk as "the vanguard white male art of the age" (*Neuromanticism*) to Veronica Hollinger's sympathetic reading of cyberpunk as an exploration of posthumanist subjectivity (*Cybernetic Deconstructions*).

In both the "cyber" and the "punk" aspects of this subgenre, there are cultural changes that have contributed to this formulation. With the entrance of the US into the Space Age, many technological advances were given room to flourish. But in becoming a technocracy with the ability to build its own future, the desire for technological advancement was tempered by a fear of the unknown and a need to master the new technology. While much of the speculative fiction written during this era deals with keeping this new technology in check, the cybernetic/technological advances that arose from this period have become part of our everyday lives; cyberpunk writers are the first generation of writers to have grown up in a truly "science fictional" world where microwaves, radar detectors, cordless phones, and even personal computers are part of their everyday "reality matrix". For this reason, cyberpunk narratives differ from other science fiction in that technology no longer has a positive or negative connotation; the influx of technology crosses previously established boundaries as an inevitability rather than a probability (the fusion of human and machine is a part of daily life and no longer necessary to be feared or mastered).

Cultural change tied to the evolution of cyberpunk narratives also contributes to the "punk" aspect of this genre.

Inspired by punk culture's anti-utopian (no-future) look, cyberpunk writers saw themselves as, among other things, accurately "depicting a realistic near-future earth". But the origins of this movement reach back farther than the punk culture of the late 70s and early 80s to the countercultural, anti-authoritarian movements of the 1960s -- particularly in the arenas of drug culture and the evolution of computer hacking -- that led to areas of individual empowerment appropriated by cyberpunk writers. As I will elaborate below, these "revolutions" have been instrumental in envisioning the realm of "cyberspace" in cyberpunk narratives, where issues of the role of the body become exceedingly problematized.

Cyberpunk and Literary Cyberspace

William Gibson first introduced the concept of cyberspace in *Neuromancer* : "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". Gibson was naive about computers and their functioning when he wrote (on a manual typewriter) about this then nonexistent virtual reality in 1983, but in an interesting feedback loop his view has been adopted by the computer industry and a fluid, graphical architecture is being created right now that will one day represent Gibson's vision. Gibsonian cyberspace is reaching a wider audience today through the ever expanding use of the Internet, and specifically of the World Wide Web which, although allowing literal worldwide access to data, is actually a rather primitive representation of the landscape Gibson hypothesized, due mainly to the limitations of the computer/human interface. As cybernetic hardware becomes available, the world Gibson envisioned may become more feasible (see especially Rheingold's *Virtual Reality* and Benedikt's *Cyberspace: First Steps* for detailed descriptions of the future of electronic communication). The greatest potential of cyberspace lies in the fact that "electronic technology makes possible the thrill of escape from the confines of the body and from the boundaries that have separated organic from inorganic matter" (Springer, "Pleasure"). This is the power/potential offered the cybersubject via the virtual reality of cyberspace.

Penetrating Cyberspace

Gibson's Cyberspace

For the cyberpunk, subjectivity can be created and recreated in the virtual arena of cyberspace through the use of body representatives that can theoretically pursue multiple subject positions not determined by consciousness, unconsciousness or identification with a particular race, class, gender, or sexuality.

Penetrating cyberspace is theorized in *The Pleasure of the Interface*, where Claudia Springer asserts that :

Transgressed boundaries, in fact, define the cyborg, making it the consummate postmodern concept. When humans interface with computer technology in popular culture texts, the process consists of more than just adding external robotic prosthesis to their bodies. It involves transforming the self into something entirely new, combining technology with human identity. Although human subjectivity is not lost in the process, it is significantly altered.

In Gibson's fiction the body is not limited to a physical construction, and cybernetic fusion is not a possibility

but an inevitability in which cyborgization of the human form is the next evolutionary step. This technological evolution is tied directly into Gibsonian cyberspace -- a representation of the most advanced form of communications technology to date. In Gibson's work, cyberspace is part of a social matrix, a "consensual hallucination", inhabited by artificial intelligences and fluid representations of "real" constructions that may assume any shape their designer chooses.

While theorists such as Bukatman and Arthur and Marilouise Kroker argue that identity construction is moving away from the body, the physical body forms the basis for identity construction in the cyberspace of the virtual realities of many cyberpunk narratives, and as Steven Shaviro asserts : "... everything is implanted directly in the flesh. There is no getting away from the monstrosity of the body, nor from the violence with which it is transformed. For there is no essential nature, no spontaneous being, of the body; social forces permeate it right from the beginning". The body figures prominently in the architecture of Gibson's cyberspace where "console cowboys" are represented by "puppets" that extend the agency of the hacker against "physical" manifestations in the liquid architecture of cyberspace, such as the ICE (Intrusion Countermeasures Electronics) that threaten the puppet and can cause actual damage to the host in the "real" world if not negotiated properly. For the console cowboy who knows the limitlessness of cyberspace the body is merely "meat".

Pat Cadigan and New Representation

The major works and shorter fiction of Pat Cadigan, one of a few women writers of cyberpunk fiction, explore cyberspace as a private space where physicality is less a determining factor than in Gibsonian cyberspace, and identity and subjectivity constructions take place independently of the body. In *Synners*, the continual recurrence of the phrase "change for the machines" morphs from a literal question at a vending machine to a philosophical comment on the nature of the technologized human. In this novel, Cadigan deals with cyberspace in very Gibsonian terms and the human body - via the implantation of "sockets" in the skull-becomes a synthesizer (synner) capable of mixing various sensory input into a new marketable format. However in *Mindplayers* and *Fools*, cyberspace is moved to a much more private zone-the individual. Through a direct stimulation of the portions of the brain responsible for memory, Cadigan's characters input new/fabricated memories via their optic nerves. In these works Cadigan posits technology as allowing such things as "persona overlays" where memories can be recorded and exchanged among individuals (where method actors can really get into their parts and detectives can easily go into deep cover). In Cadigan's work the question of identity formation in cyberspace becomes paramount; her "memory junkies" can no longer sort out the sources of their memories. Visits to "mindplayers", psychotherapists aptly named "reality affixers", "pathosfinders", "dreamfeeders", "belljarrers" or "thrillseekers" are trained to help overcome (or sometimes implement) psychoses via a technologically mediated direct mind-to-mind contact, a concept which presents a new view of cyberspace with much more liberatory potential than Gibson's. Where Gibsonian cyberspace shows the penetration of technology by body representations tied to preconceived notions of the body "armored" by that technology, in Cadigan's cyberspace the body penetrates technology in the form of pure consciousness and representation is easily and often reduced to a simple symbolic form. In this realm of pure subjectivity, the physical body has a minimal influence on identity formation as the body remains static while identity itself becomes transferable.

The Future of Cyberpunk ?

This quick overview offers two views of the promise of cyberpunk in literary cyberspace. However, the technofuture is being created right now, and the new role of the human will be created with it. While the data of our information society may not necessarily be becoming human as cyberpunk narratives suggest, technology

has opened up new realms for the exploration of identities of representation. On the Web anyone can project any image they choose, any gender, race, or sexuality, as an entrance into the "bodiless exhalation of cyberspace" that is occurring. Cyberpunk offers a wonderful gateway into representational possibilities, but the representations these narratives set forth have moved from the romanticization of high tech to an age of technological normalization.