Cyberpunks

Timothy Leary
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The opening moments of the movie *Wargames* provide a classic example of Cyberpunk warning. It is a foggy night. A jeep carries a captain and a lieutenant up a winding Colorado mountain road to secret nuclear-missile launching silos. The captain tells the lieutenant that he and his wife planted a cultivated grade of marijuana seeds in their garden, and, to ensure their growth, invoked the Tibetan Buddhist prayer for enlightenment : om mane padma hum.

The officers reach the entry checkpoint, identify themselves, and are issued pistols. A huge steel vault door opens, and they enter the control room from which the bombs are fired. While they check dials, the captain continues his story : the cannabis harvest was very successful... Suddenly, the lieutenant interrupts. On the control board a red light is ominously flashing.

"Tap it with your finger", says the captain. The light disappears. Get it ? The captain is alert and can de-bug errors in the system. But an alarm blares. The two officers quickly rip open the code book that instructs them what to do and gulp. They are commanded to launch nuclear missiles at the Soviet Union. No fucking way, the captain basically says. He orders the lieutenant to phone headquarters for human confirmation. The lieutenant protests that resisting the code order is an unauthorized action, but makes the call. There's no answer. The lieutenant primly reminds the captain the he MUST fire the nukes. The captain shakes his head. No way, Jack. He won't kill 50 million people without a human command. The lieutenant points his pistol at the captain. But the alarm turns out to be another false alert. However, the government responds to the captain's insubordination by introducing Whopper, a computer that "takes the man out of the loop".

The classic science fiction authors tended to be bluff, no-nonsense, engineer types who learned their craft in *Amazing Story* pulps or in the scientific journals and worked up to slick magazine narration. These guys were smart, scientific, knowledgeable, competent, and -- like their characters -- hopelessly square.

In the activist '70s, "new wave" science fiction emerged with the writings of Norman Spinrad, William Burroughs, Harlan Ellison, and Michael Moorcock, who expressed the irreverent cultural activism of the time. Brash dissent, anti-war protest, streetwise satire, a blending of sex, drugs, and rock 'n' roll with high-tech, the future portrayed not in terms of governments and controlled rocket hardware, but in terms of new cultural and pyschological frontiers.

The new generation of cyber-writers like William Gibson, Bruce Sterling, John Shirley, and Spinrad trace their heritage back to William Burroughs, whose laid-back, wry, decadent, worldly genius has for four decades influenced Beats, cynics, defiant new wavers, heavy metal screamers, and philosophic rollers. Burroughs, the Nostradamus/Prophet of the electronic future, presented his Soft Machine "cut-up" methods which taught us to digitize words; his *Cities of the Red Night* predicted the current AIDS plague; *Naked Lunch* produced the basic tenet of the information age : "...people are not bribed to shut up about what they know. They are bribed not to know it".

The new wavers outraged the flag wavers, the science fiction old guard, which favored a right-wing militaristic politic featuring empire-sized conflicts on the galactic scale, and assumed a conservative, country-club attitude

in cultural and pyschological matters. The heroes of Robert Heinlein, for example, are bluff, whiskey-drinking, macho American grads. But the characters of Cyberpunk science fiction are low down. The concept was formally introduced in William Gibson's 1984 punk novel, *Neuromancer*. Although this first novel swept the Triple Crown of science fiction - the Hugo, the Nebula, and the Philip K. Dick awards - it is not really science fiction. It could be called "science faction" in that it occurs not in another galaxy in the far future, but 20 years from now, in a Blade Runner world just a notch beyond our silicon present.

In Gibson's Cyberworld there is no-warp drive and "beam me up, Scotty". The high technology is the stuff that appears on today's screens or that processes data in today's laboratories : super-computer boards. Recombinant DNA chips. AI systems and enormous data banks controlled by multinational combines based in Japan and Zurich.

Case, the antihero, is a streetwise speed freak, a cowboy hacker illegally rustling high-tech code. Molly, the sleek, beautiful heroine in mirrorshades, is a hired gun with optical implants. The plot involves Ollie North-type uniformed cyber-hoods, software sensors, cyber-rastas squatted in abandoned sky labs, all just average citizens of the information society. Digitized data is the air, water, gold, and bread of the information culture.

The classic science fiction characters of Asimov, Arthur C. Clarke, Jr., Frank Herbert, and George Lucas acted and thought in terms of the empire, of the Industrial Age, or looked like Spielberg mutants from fantasy futures. *Neuromancer* fuses high-tech with low-life, high-tech with high art : neuro-transmitters, electrons, protons, soundwaves, video screens used without official approval by libertarian individuals who live on a kind of frontier outside of law and order.

The term "Cybernetics" was coined by Norbert Weiner in 1948, from the Greek word kubernettes, which means "pilot" or "steersman", but Weiner redefined it as "theoretical study of control process in electronics, mechanical, and biological systems". The derivative word, Cybernate, came to mean "to control automatically by computer, or to be so controlled". Weiner and the engineers corrupted the meaning of Cyber. The word "to steer" became "to control". And now, an even more sinister interpretation perceives Cybernetics as "the study of human mechanisms and their replacement by mechanical or electronic systems".

But Americans from Tom Sawyer to Tom Swift have always grabbed the "steersman's wheel". Henry Ford's "automobile" was the essence of Cyberpunk, breaking down the mass-transportation control of the railroad to the rebellious "joyride". Mark Twain converted Guttenberg's gadget into a personal appliance called a typewriter.

But Cyberpunk is pop tech. Complex electronic equipment in the hands of people. Pop engineering. If there is any aim to the Cyberpunk movement, it is to empower individuals to package, process, and communicate their thoughts on screen. It's uniquely homegrown, a Yankee Doodle phenomenon. And it's national anthem is rock 'n' roll. In *Little Hopes*, by Norman Spinrad, Coppersmith, the leader of a Cyberpunk organization known as the Reality Liberation Front, is describing his new pirate brain-jack MTV program to his lieutenant, Paco, a street kid. It features an artificial-personality rock star named Red Jack :

> "Hi, I am Red Jack", Coppersmith said. "I'm not here as the rock star you all know. I'm the leader of the Reality Liberation Front, who's bringing you this cut-rate bed-bug (pirate) program.... And now I'm making you a member of the Reality Liberation Front, so go out and copy this disk, and start your own chapter".
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> "Where's the fuckin' dinero in that ?" Paco demanded. "You wanna encourage every hacker with his own computer to pirate our disk, Red Jack and all ?" Coppersmith grinned from ear to ear. "Think

of it ! Hundreds of little Reality Liberation Front chapters coast to coast, bust one and two more spring up, and the only connection the cops can make between any of them is our national leader, Red Jack, a leader who's impossible to bust because there are thousands of him floating around, and he doesn't even exist. Mr. Random Factor personified. Red ripe anarchy for all the world to see, and not jack shit the fat men can do".

The future began with the development of the technology that allowed the creation of the computer. Because of their bulk and the cost of development, early computers were solely in the hands of technicians enslaved to the corporations and government labs where they were being designed.

But with the development of the microchip, says Cyberpunk novelist, Bruce Sterling, "technical culture has gotten out of hand. The advances of the sciences are so deeply radical, so disturbing, upsetting, and revolutionary, that they can no longer be contained. They are surging into culture at large : they are everywhere. The traditional power structure, the traditional institutions, have lost control of the pace of change. "And suddenly a new alliance is becoming evident; an integration of technology and the '80s counterculture. An unholy alliance of the technical world with the underground world of pop culture and street level anarchy.

"The counterculture of the 1960s", says Sterling, "was rural, romanticized, anti-science, anti-tech. But there was always a lurking contradiction at its heart, symbolized by the electric guitar. Rock tech has grown ever more accomplished, expanding into high-tech recording, satellite video, and computer graphics. Slowly it is turning rebel pop culture inside out, until the artists of pop's cutting edge are now, quite often, cutting-edge technicians in the bargain. They are special-effects wizards, mixmasters, tape-effects techs, graphics hackers, emerging through new media to dazzle society with head-trip extravaganzas like FX cinema.
And now that technology has reached a fever pitch, its influence has slipped control and reached street level. The hacker and the rocker are this decade's pop-culture idols".

> Bobby was a cowboy, and ice was the nature of his game, ice and ICE, Intrusion Countermeasure Electronic. The matrix is an abstract representation of the relationship between data systems. Legitimate programmers jack onto their employers' sector of the matrix and find themselves surrounded by bright geometries representing the corporate data.
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> Towers and fields of it ranged in the colorless non-space of the simulation matrix, the electronic consensus hallucination that facilitates the handling and exchange of massive quantities of data. Legitimate programmers never see the walls of the ice they work behind, the walls of shadow that screen their operations from others, from industrial espionage artists and hustlers like Bobby Quine. Bobby was a cowboy, Bobby was a craftsman, a burglar, casing mankind's extended electronic nervous system, rustling data and credit in the crowded matrix, monochrome nonspace where the only stars are dense concentrations of information, and high above it all burn corporate galaxies and the cold spiral arms of military systems.
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> -- From *Burning Chrome*, by William Gibson

Tyrone Slothrop, chased by the intelligence agencies of all the post-World War II powers, pops up in Zurich. He contacts a black market entrepreneur name Semyavin.

> "First thing to understand is the way everything here is specialized. If it's watches you go to one

cafe. If it's women you go to another. Furs are divided into sable, ermine, mink, and others. Same with dope : stimulants, depressants, pyschotomimetics... What's it you're after ?"

"Uh, information."

"Oh, another one". Giving Slothrop a sour look. "Life was simple before the first war. You wouldn't remember. Drugs, sex, luxury items. Currency in those days was no more than a sideline, and the term, 'industrial espionage', was unknown..".

A tragic sigh. "Information. What's wrong with dope and women ? Is it any wonder the world's gone insane, with information being the only medium of exchange ?"

-- From *Gravity's Rainbow*, by Thomas Pynchon

The Bible of the 21st century has an Old Testament and a New. The Old, written in 1973 by Thomas Pynchon, is called *Gravity's Rainbow*. It takes place in 1945, when the fall of the German Empire leaves Europe a lawless zone in which the major powers struggle for control of the future. The spoils of this high-tech war are not land or raw materials but scientists and scientific information. Everyone knows that the next war will be won not by the bravest, not by the strongest, but by the smartest. The Bad Guys, the intelligence-espionage agencies of the superpowers, ruthlessly scour the continent for atomic secrets, rocket equipment, chemical patents, and, above all, pyschological methods for brainwashing, mind reading, pyschodiagnosis, and behavior modifications.

At the same time there emerges the Counterforce, a loosely related network of Good Guys, rowdy agents, independant thinkers, high-tech mystics who deal themselves into the action, each one in pursuit of their own private visions. In the book, a band of black African troops just demobilized from the army seek to control their own V-2 rocket. Roger Mexico, a statistical psychologist, harasses the Fat Men in the control towers to win back his girlfriend. Major Tchitcherine, a Soviet intelligence agent and hashish connoisseur, conducts a mystical search for his African brother. Tyrone Slothrop, unwilling subject of a bizarre CIA psychological experiment, flees across the zones, chased by Ollie Norths and protected by an underground network of Cyberpunks.

Best of all, *Gravity's Rainbow* is an authoritative text on how to understand and neutralize the cybervillians, the secret police of all nations. With brilliant parody and farcical satire, Pynchon exposes the weirdo psychology, the kinky sociology, the ruthless inhumanism of all the national espionage combines. The New Testament of the 21st century is found in Gibson's trilogy *Neuromancer*, *Count Zero*, and *Mona Lisa Overdrive*, Gibson providing a smooth follow-up on Pynchon, an encyclopedic epic for the cyber-screen culture of the immediate future, and an inspiring cyber-theology for the Information Age.

A Cyber-Sociology

Much of the action of *Neuromancer* occurs in the BAMA Sprawl -- BAMA means Boston-Atlanta-Metropolitan-Axis -- decaying cities given over to gangs and segregated zones. America in the 21st century seems to have slumped into a second-class Blade Runner society. It seems to be a laissez faire urban jungle. Third World countries have sunk into third-class cultures controlled by the old primitive religions. Japan, of course, is the scene of the fast action, the innovative technology, the big money. Switzerland seems to be prosperous, too.

Folks live in a media world, inhabiting an info-environment where they spend much time watching super-realistic TV programs via brain implants.

The religions seem to be offshoots of the current electronic ministries of Oral Roberts and Pat Robertson. The Christian Youth Gangs seem to be pretty militant and aggressive. Since robots program all the muscular-

mechanical chores, there's lot of leisure time. Drugs. Whores. Service occupations. On the surface, the Gibson future may appear dreary, but the pleasant kicker is this : it's a peaceful, live-and-let-live sort of world. An idea environment for individuals, dissenters, independant sorts, anarchists, poets, artists, mavericks. Governments and top management have little power or importance.

Cyberpunks, courageous, imaginative, proficient individuals, have a freedom of undreamed of in repressive 20th century nations. It is post-political culture.

There's a federal bureaucracy, apparently, but it seems irrevelent. There is apparently no partison politics. Why would you vote for a politician to "represent" you when telecommunications give everyone a chance to vote ? For whatever good that does.

Nationalism had faded. Territorial war is an anachronism in an info-society in which the competitions and rivalries are played out by multinational combines. It seems like an inevitable Japanese solution. Why bomb other lands when your banks own them ?

Cyber-Theology

In the last scene of *Neuromancer*, Case, the punk hero, is in his hotel room. He's blue. His girl has left him. Suddenly, the Super Intelligence in the Matrix appears on his TV screen in the form of Finn.

So let's meet a new God.

To me, this laid-back conversation between a man and a disembodied Super Intelligence presents a profound and exceedingly impressive theological proposition -- a new philosophy for our new species.

> The Finn's face was on the room's enourmous gray wall screen. He could see the pores in the man's nose. The yellow teeth were the size of pillows.
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> "I'm the matrix, Case."
> Case laughed. "Where's that get you ?"
> "Nowhere. Everywhere. I'm the sum of the works, the whole show."
> "...So what's the score ? How are things different with you running the works now ? You God ?"
> "Things are different. Things are things."
> "But what do you do ? You just sit there ?" Case shrugged, put the vodka on the cabinet and lit a Yeheyuan.
> "I talk to my own kind."
> "But you're the whole thing. Talk to yourself ?"
> "There's others. I found one already. Series of transmissions recorded over a period of eight years, in the 1970s. 'Til me, natch, there was no one to know, nobody to answer."
> "From where ?"
> "Centauri system."
> "Oh", Case said. "Yeah ? No shit."
> "No shit."
> And then the screen went blank.

A vision of the future more vivid than a dream : people don't work, robots work. People sell, distribute, wheel and deal. Free agents perform. Entertainment combines keep everybody busy, either producing or watching exciting simulated realities. No big deal, really, just an intensification of today's vidiot TV culture. Scientists and engineers are big. Since they are free agents they sign up with commercial teams or, in some cases, are enslaved via neurological implants. Knowledge technicians and high-tech wizards are hot. So are cosmetic medicos, rejuvanation clinicians, DNA experts.

The multinational corporations control the big stuff, like the research, design, manufacture of technology. But there's an enormous free market of entrepreneurs, imagineers, entertainers, athletes, hustlers, middlemen, service suppliers, creators, mercenaries, pirates, professionals, and independants who live by their technological wits. Cyberpunks.