Cyberpunk Not Defined as "Anything That Cyberpunks Write"

The Cyberpunk Project

In Bruce Sterling's article, "Cyberpunk in the Nineties", he explained how public opinion had defined himself, Rucker, Shiner, Shirley, and Gibson as the cyberpunk "gurus" in the 1980's. Because of being labeled cyberpunk "gurus", the public had come to understand the definition of cyberpunk as "anything that cyberpunks write". To break this definition of cyberpunk established by popular public opinion, I will pursue giving cyberpunk a more definite definition. After reading numerous cyberpunk fiction stories, I noticed reoccurring themes in these stories. I believe these themes can form a criteria under which a story can be defined as cyberpunk. These criteria are total enhancement and integration of everyday life by technology, some degree of pleasure (by the author) in explaining this technology, cyber-lingo, and some degree of global connectiveness.

The first criterion or theme, total enhancement and integration of everyday life by technology is probably the most obvious and vital in order for a story to be deemed cyberpunk. Why is it the most obvious and most vital ? It is the most obvious because cyberpunk writers use the "everyday", that is, objects, concepts, or places we causally shrug off as normal, and integrate/enhance the normal with technology. A good example can be found in John Shirley's *Freezone*. Upon entering the "Semiconductor" the scene is unusual but appears to be a everyday freak club. An occasional flare dots the audience. They have multi-colored hair that is styled straight up. In reaction to the flares and much more frequent than the flares are minimonos; they have ultra-straight hair falling down past their shoulders and uniform monochrome colored clothes. Anyway, the crowd is unusual, but you could find just as unusual a crowd at any local punk club. However, one aspect of the club that at first appears normal, but then transforms itself thanks to technology is the walls. They react to the "music with color streaking wavelengthing in oscilloscope patterns, shades of blue-white for high-end, red and purple for bass and percussion". What makes this example obvious is that today's walls are expected to be just walls with no redeeming qualities. In the Semiconductor, the walls are a piece of everyday life enhanced and integrated with technology; an everyday object given attention and made into a phenomenon by technology. So what makes this criteria or theme so vital ? The primary reason is mood. Cyberpunk fiction seeks to propel the reader into the near-future with the "everyday" made novel. If the everyday seems to normal, the reader feels left in today. If the everyday can't even be found and everything seems foreign because nothing relates to the reader, then the reader is reading another genre - probably mainstream science fiction. So the reader is isolated only by fantastic technology, but not familiarity. This fantastic technology combined with familiarity can be found in another example from William Gibson's *Neuromancer*. The scenario is your everyday bar. In it, Case, *Neuromancer*'s main character, is sipping a draft beer and conversating with Ratz - the bartender. Gibson; however, casually inserts a detail about Ratz that immediately identifies itself with the criterion. Ratz's arm is a prosthetic limb, one Gibson in the novel refers to as "antique". The bartender's arm being infused with technology to become a prosthetic limb testifies to the theme and also serves to create the mood so vital to cyberpunk. This mood of near-futureness is further established in Gibson referring to the limb as "antique". Although prosthetic limbs are a new technology, in the near future, prosthetic limbs constructed today would be labeled antique. The enhancement and integration of the "everyday" by technology is a trademark theme of cyberpunk that is exemplified commonly in cyberpunk fiction.

The second theme; however, is still a trademark to cyberpunk but not as obvious. This criterion or theme being some degree of pleasure (from the author) in explaining this technology. After a cyberpunk author has created a new technology in his story, he enjoys describing this technology in explicit detail. To resummarize and provide direct support to this criterion, I quote from Sterling in his reference to cyberpunk prose as "dizzying bursts of

novel information, sensory overload that submerges the reader". Another father of cyberpunk to support my claim to the evidence and necessity of this criterion in cyberpunk in William Gibson. Gibson begins by recalling that classic "Sci Fi authors tend to use generics" such as "then he got into his spacesuit". Gibson articulates that he choose superspecificity over generics. Larry McCaffrey, Gibson's interviewer, credits Gibson's superspecificity as being "sleazy, intensely vivid, full of coloristic details". Gibson expresses his desire for superspecificity and he indicates by using the spacesuit example that his superspecificity is directed at technology in his prose. To best exemplify this theme is to present a passage by Gibson :

> "The way I figured it later, they must have amputated part of his left thumb, somewhere behind the first joint, replacing it with a prosthetic tip, and cored the stump, fitting it with a spool and socket molded from one of the Ono-Sendai diamond analogs. Then they'd carefully wound the spool with three meters of monomolecular filament."

Gibson introduced a new piece of technology here and instead of labeling it a generic like a laser gun, Gibson explicitly explains how it was made and in the following passage what it can do :

> "And then the joke-shop thumbtip, heavy as lead, arcs out in a lightning yo-yo trick, and the invisible thread connecting it to the killer's hand passes laterally through Ralfi's skull, just above his eyebrows, whips up, and descends, slicing the pear shaped torso diagonally from the shoulder to rub cage. Cuts so fine that no blood flows until the synapses misfire and the first tremors surrender the body to gravity."

These two passages clearly represent Gibson's pleasure in explaining his toy in explicit detail.

When authors exhibit pleasure in explaining their technology, they also create new words to match this new technology. These new words are criterion three and I call them cyber-lingo. Cyber-lingo is important to cyberpunk because cyberpunk presents near-future settings and as time progresses, new vocabulary enters the mainstream, especially scientific and computer vocabulary, and cyberpunk must reflect this. Gibson refers to this lingo as "poetry" in his interview with McCaffrey, but he also mentions the importance of cyber-lingo in cyberpunk when saying : "I'm looking for images that supply a certain atmosphere". This atmosphere, among other things, is the near-future. In *Freezone* for example, "impulse-translation" and "Earmite" are new vocabulary that help propel the reader into the near-future. *Neuromancer* contains the universal term of "cyberspace" and *Snake Eyes* introduces such cyber-lingo as "Red Burn" and "Orbital Energy Grid". A reader is almost guaranteed that if a story is cyberpunk is will have cyber-lingo. True cyberpunk stories will introduce new technology that the author will almost inevitably explicitly explain in the process, introducing new vocabulary or re-using common cyber-lingo terms.

Another theme, like cyber-lingo, that can be found in cyberpunk fiction is some degree of global connectiveness. This global connectiveness can be a global corporation or a technology or event that has affected the whole world. This global connectiveness doesn't have to a specific technology, corporation, or event. An author may present a society containing citizens of multiple nations. This society is globally connected because it is influenced by nationalities from all over the globe. A good example can be found in *Freezone* by John Shirley. Freezone is a playground for rich tourists and Shirley names off a multitude of nationalities : "Japanese, Canadian, Brazilian, South Korean, Chinese, Arabs, Israelis, and a smattering of Americans". This story testifies to global connectiveness through a society, but other stories testify to the criterion by directly referring to a global corporation. Such a reference can be found in Tiptree's *The Girl Who Was Plugged In*. Tiptree presents the Global Transmissions Corporation that possesses a "worldwide carrier

field bouncing down from satellites, controlling communication and transport systems all over the globe". Some stories only make subtle references to global connectiveness such as in *Rock On* by Pat Cadigan : "...and the machines picking it up, sound and vision, so all the tube babies around the world could play it on their screens whenever they wanted". The way global connectiveness works here is through a machine allowing "all the tube babies" to be connected not explicitly with each other, but with the fact that they all share one common image on their machines. The most important support to this criterion is Sterling's in his preface to *Mirrorshades*. In it he says : "...the satellite media net, the multinational corporation - fascinate the cyberpunks and figure constantly into their work".

Some people may disagree that global connectiveness is not a valid criterion for the definition of cyberpunk. Some may also disagree with the cyberpunk-lingo and total enhancement and integration of everyday life by technology criteria. To understand why these three criteria are valid, one must first understand the purpose of cyberpunk. There are probably many opinions to the purpose of cyberpunk, but I think all debators can agree on the following one : to create a near-future scenario through extrapolation. Extrapolation is taking information from known perimeters. Cyberpunk takes society as it is now and makes a projection, in the form of fiction, of a possible future. Cyberpunk fiction understands that everyday life is being increasingly affected by technology. Through extrapolation, cyberpunk authors use this understanding to project societies totally enhanced and integrated with technology. The same understanding applies to global connectiveness. Cyberpunk authors observe that as the twentieth century has progressed the world has become connected in increasing ways. Examples such as the internet and the United Nations testify to this. Cyberpunk authors then project a near-future even more severely globally connected as this trend dictates today. Finally, as new technology evolves, new scientific terminology accompanies it to define this technology. Again, cyberpunk authors observe this and apply this fact to their writing, anticipating new scientific terminology or cyber-lingo to exist in their near-future settings. My last criterion to be debated with is some degree of pleasure (from the authors) in explaining their technology. Some may argue that not all cyberpunk authors exhibit pleasure in explaining their technology. They may argue that cyberpunk authors excruciate at having to explain their new technology. Some authors probably do and end up using generics, but as Gibson pointed out, generics is a tool of mainstream Sci Fi. Also, as Sterling indicated in his article "Cyberpunk in the Nineties", those authors who have not had a true vigor for cyberpunk and used themes and technologies from established cyberpunk authors, have failed to fulfill classification under cyberpunk. I also believe that if the purpose of cyberpunk is fulfilled when writing, then the author will inevitably enjoy explaining his/her new technology. Because the author is extrapolating, he is not having to explain a concept or technology to the reader from an uncertain beginning. But because he is taking from known information and projecting its evolution in the future, he is not intimidated, therefore he is able to enjoy himself in explaining this concept or technology. Furthermore, because the author is reflecting off of a society so obsessed with detail, he is obligated to present his story is such a detailed fashion. Basically, I think, that if cyberpunk fiction fulfills its purpose then the four criteria will fall naturally into place and therefore these four criteria build the backbone of the definition of cyberpunk.