

Cyberpunk is a Label Like Any Other

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As both a reader and a writer, I've been trying to figure out what this "cyberpunk" thing really is. Is it a genre ? Is it a passing fad ? Is it a one-man literary wrecking squad ?

And, underneath all that, I've been wondering : should it matter ?

I'm not quite sure. Whatever William Gibson's Hugo, Nebula, and Campbell award-winning *Neuromancer* started, it's become quite a special thing.

Gibson's cyberpunk trilogy (which, by the way, he seems to be finished with -- his next book is going to be about an alternate past where the Babbage Engine really works) consists of *Neuromancer*, *Count Zero* and *Mona Lisa Overdrive*. It shows all of the signs of being its own literary form. In fact, one might even think that it's a pretty darn strict form, too.

For instance, each book works in a cycle of characters. This is most clear in *Count Zero* and *Mona Lisa Overdrive* -- there are various sets of characters which alternate each chapter, eventually coming together (or not coming together) at the end of the novel. The novels are set in a high-tech future dominated by cyberspace, a consensual hallucination, a virtual reality constructed out of all the computer systems in the world interacting with one another. But the world is controlled by international conglomerates, and voodoo-like intelligences run rampant through cyberspace (now, Gibson wasn't necessarily the first person to use these different elements, but he was the first to incorporate them all in this specific form).

The question is, if this is what "cyberpunk" is all about, wouldn't any other "cyberpunk" novel be simply called a rip-off of William Gibson ? Did Gibson start a genre, or are all the "cyberpunk" books and stories which followed *Neuromancer* simply rip-offs ?

The temptation to write about virtual realities, artificial intelligences, chip constructs, and other "cyberpunk" fixtures is great - it's logical that it would be that way. Some of the best Science Fiction comes from writers telling stories about the human condition from a different, fantastic vantage point. It's a wonderful way of "coating" the story -- viewing it from a different angle, so a reader lets down their defenses and doesn't view the novel with the same skeptical view which they take while watching the network news. And cyberpunk is ripe with allegorical potential.

Say I use a virtual computer network in a novel I'm writing. Am I suddenly just "ripping off" William Gibson ? What if I try to change it a little, don't use the name "cyberspace", make it a bit more interactive in some ways, less in others... what then ? And what if I talk about artificial intelligences ? Or ROM-copies of dead people's memory patterns ?

This is the big question : is the founder of a genre creating new conventions, or is he just moving within his own work ? Is it fair to say "I'm writing a cyberpunk novel", or should we be saying "I'm writing a novel in the style of William Gibson" ? And should Gibson be flattered by the following which has sprung up around him, or should he feel that his work is being copied ?

Sticky questions, all. And I bring this up because, as you've probably guessed by now, I've been trying to write a story which uses many of Gibson's conventions. My story has three characters which appear in a cycle, it has a virtual reality, it might have artificial intelligences and/or ROM-constructs. Does this mean I'm writing a cyberpunk story ? Will people see anything with these conventions and simply scream "Cyberpunk !? I've seen it all before !" or, worse yet, "Another Gibson rip-off" ?

I hope not. I'd hope Science Fiction readers would be more open than that. But that doesn't seem to be the general pattern. Pigeonholing is the general pattern.

Because, you see, "mainstream" readers do that with Science Fiction in general. If I mention a book to a friend of mine, and let it slip that it's set in the future, or has aliens or robots or dinosaurs or anything like that in it, I'm as good as dead. Science fiction itself scares people off. People are scared of genres. So are people doubly scared of the sub-genre of "cyberpunk" ? Quite probably.

And it's all too bad -- because some damn good literature has been put out in the genre. Harlan Ellison fights the label "Science Fiction" for a good reason -- people won't take him seriously, people won't read him, if he's a genre writer. As it is, he goes in the literature section of the bookstore (some of the time, anyway) -- as he rightly deserves.

But Gibson belongs there, too. And so do a score of other Science Fiction novels -- not the 50's pulp-style which features aliens named Gloort, or robots named Zog, but sensitive, thought-provoking novels by Heinlein, Asimov, Sturgeon, Dick, Clarke, Le Guin, Tolkien, C.S. Lewis.

And pigeonholing doesn't just cover individual works -- it can cover whole careers. The best example of this is Dan Simmons' novel *Phases of Gravity*. It has nothing "Science Fictional" in it at all. But Simmons has written Science Fiction in the past, and the book was published by Bantam as a Spectra Special Edition.

I found it in the Science Fiction section. It was a beautiful novel, which I might not have ever read if it was in the mainstream novels. But that was where it belonged.

Categorizing books and authors in general is bad enough -- but allowing yourself to be scared off from individual books by those generalizations is terrible. We shouldn't run from all westerns, or mysteries, or Science Fiction... or cyberpunk.

I guess I'm safe in writing my story, because I can say "well, it's cyberpunk, you know ?".

But, somehow, that scares me. I'd rather just say, "this is a story I wrote about love, pain, and death. About human nature. It's an attempt at writing meaningful literature. It may be inept, it may just plain stink, but please read it and tell me what you think honestly".

Yet I know that, if the person I'm giving it to is a mainstream reader, he or she will read the first paragraph and mumble "Uh-oh-- sci-fi" to themselves. And if they're Science Fiction readers, chances are they'll say "Uh-oh-- cyberpunk" or, worse yet, "Oh, no, another Gibson rip-off".

You see, it shouldn't matter whether "cyberpunk" is a genre, a following, or whatever. It shouldn't matter whether Simmons' *Phases of Gravity* is Science Fiction or not.

But it does, somehow -- and that's not fair. It prejudices readers, and it shouldn't.