

Ruminations and convolutions on the substance of Cyberpunk

Dr. Odd
January 1988

Since its inception, since it has been christened, Cyberpunk has been regarded as a commercial label, a convenient tag to describe a certain way of writing and a certain set of literary flash card images. The general reaction in the science fiction professional community (i.e. the writers, editors, marketing flacks, etc...) is that it is no more than just another fad, purely a marketing gimmick with nothing new to offer. None of the insiders see any substance in it, and this attitude oozes out all over the place at the science fiction convention seminars on the subject, and even in the online scroll.

In recent times this attitude has changed somewhat with the critical popularity of the late lamented *Max Headroom*, the success of *Robocop*, and the decent sale of Cyberpunk books. In fact Cyberpunk has generated enough interest to make even the ever-\$-conscious Hollywood take note, with a number of movie deals in the works (*Neuromancer* of course, *Black Glass* with a script by John Shirley, and *Microchip* another script currently being worked on by the ever voluble and voluminous Shirley). Interest in the subject, in the style, is stirring in the loins of the money man. Almost as if there was something to it, some form amidst the speckled reflections bouncing from all those gloaming surfaces, some substance behind the atmospheric haze...

Of course, in the opinion of many pundits Cyberpunk has no substance. Nothing there but a set of surfaces and textures, evokative digitally processed image and moody landscapes generated by a mind zoned out on high tech static, about as deep as your average MTV video. They see a lack of explicit moral values (automatic fall point in this dawning age of moral constipation) or even any particular points which Cyberpunk may be making. In their view it's just a hardware catalogue of near future.

But how can Cyberpunk be empty of meaning and achieve the underground popularity that it already has ? (Of course, depth is hardly a prerequisite for popularity with teeming multitudes. Witness the geologically recent success of phenomenom know as Network Television). However, the fact is that Cyberpunk has struck a responsive chord in a rather interesting segment of society - the rebels, the fringies, and the outsiders who lurk on the leading edge of our culture. All people with a slightly folded frame of mind, such as Dr. Odd, and perhaps even you. What do they, what do we, see in it ? Is Cyberpunk just mindless high gloss, high velocity entertainment or is there something more to it ?

It would be foolish to deny that the packaging alone is a big part of the attraction. The high gloss world of Cyberpunk is exciting enough to make at least some of our neurons cream with pleasure. Couple this with that tense sensation of danger inevitably lurking on every corner of the street-smart Cyberpunk world and you have enough to attract a lot of intellectual thrill seekers. Without a doubt Cyberpunk packaging seems to satisfy that craving for sensory overload tacitly encouraged in so many aspects of our beloved western culture.

But undeniably, there is more to Cyberpunk than just the wrapper. One hint of this is that the concepts, the look, and the feel of Cyberpunk independently popped up in so many places. *Max Headroom* was conceived, according to Michael Cassutt, one of the people behind it, in parallel with the work of Riddley Scott (his commercials and, of course, *Blade Runner*). Gibson says that he saw *Blade Runner* about a third of way through writing *Neuromancer* and was amazed by how much it looked like "the inside of my head". The movie *Videodrome* came out before both of those works and touched on many similar themes.

[lost fragment of text] up in parallel all over the place because it is a reflection of what is going on our culture. Examples ? You can see the seedy face of technology in things like the sophisticated hydroponic pot farms in the hills, protected by the latest in electronic surveillance equipment. The all pervasive media is so pervasive that, well, it's everywhere, literally pointing a camera into peoples shorts. The steep slope of change can be seen in things like RAM capacity doubling every 3 years or in the new strains of biogenetically designed bacteria popping up every other day in a new garden plot. And animating it all is the escalating struggle for control between the globe-spanning corporations with their legions of business suited mercenaries, the government unable to make laws fast enough to keep up with the times, and the ever more powerful individual, who more and more inflicts himself on society via the juice of personal technology. Cyberpunk as a world view could not have possibly been in the 60's simply because the elements were not all there as yet. No microchips in every appliance, no recombinant DNA, no artificial hearts or cochlear implants, no AI to speak of, no video pirates or hackers or phone phreaks or designer drugs. As much as the spaceships of mainstream science fiction were an outgrowth of American preoccupation with space flight in the 60's so Cyberpunk is a reflection of our generation's preoccupation with the culture of information and with the very pop of culture.

One can argue that the substance of Cyberpunk lies precisely in the fact that it reflects the values of our society, and more than that, in its rather cynical and irreverent attitude towards what we are becoming (not to mention its considerable entertainment value, something worth remembering lest we get too serious about it). It is a glimpse of where we are heading taken to its inevitable sharp edge extreme, by turns mocking what we are becoming and seducing us with the plastic chrome and chintzy glitter of a world stuck on sensory afterburner. Sort of pornography of rampant commercialism mixed with a injection of artificial adrenalin and liberally spiked with an extra high dose of neurotransmitters. You can either take Cyberpunk as a warning of Things To Come or as a pointer to where we are heading complete with the formula for how to survive there - cynical self interest, intellectual rebellion, fierce democratization of technology and the ability to outrun the pace of change. Adopt or burn out. Afterburner or Lobotomy City. Your choice.

[lost fragment of text] it does the issues of the moment, has [lost fragment of text] the seeds of its own destruction. It is self limiting because it so closely reflects the culture of our own time, due to this contemporary nature of Cyberpunk. I do not believe that it will be with us 20 years from now in the way that we see it here today. It is in the nature of society to mutate, and popular literature and pop culture (a large part of what Cyberpunk is) reflects the issues of the moment and mutates faster than most other aspects of society. Unless we choose to do something about it Cyberpunk will inevitably become outdated. In fact, I suspect that our culture will change faster and in weirder directions than even Cyberpunk can envision.

The question then becomes, should we do something about it ? Should we firm up the philosophical girders of Cyberpunk or should we just surf the cultural feed and hope we don't wipe out on the reef of high tech scrap ? More importantly, is it worth bothering to take Cyberpunk seriously ?

This, of course, is a question each of us must turn recursively on him and herself, and the ultimate answer depends on whether Cyberpunk has something to offer to our miserable existence, something of use in the everyday struggle against the tedium and blandness of Deep Reality. Indeed, there is nothing wrong with enjoying the surface textures of Cyberpunk, in using it as an escape valve for flushing out the old reality queue. But I would argue that Cyberpunk, as Cyberpunk International and its members may wish to define it, has something useful to give us in coping with the high speed, high bandwidth, high spin world of today and tomorrow. And it's up to each of us individually to dig in and suck up what we want out of it. (Think of this process as "personal culture", an analog of "personal technology". You get to choose the rules you play by).

Anyway, if I got you to think about it, I have done my job and can get my dose of REM with well deserved tranquility. So hold the line avoid the static, and have a high bandwidth New Year.

Endit.