Notes Toward a Postcyberpunk Manifesto

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Bud, from Neal Stephenson's *The Diamond Age*, is a classic cyberpunk protagonist. An aggressive, black-leather clad criminal loner with cybernetic body augmentations (including a neurolinked skull gun), Bud makes his living first as a drug runner's decoy, then by terrorizing tourists for money.

All of which goes a long way toward explaining why his ass gets wasted on page 37 of a 455 page novel.

Welcome to the postcyberpunk era.

Arguably, science fiction entered the postcyberpunk era in 1988 with the publication of Bruce Sterling's *Islands in the Net*. Just as Sterling's *The Artificial Kid* encapsulated many of cyber-punk's themes before the movement had a name, *Islands in the Net* prefigured a growing body of work that can (at least until someone comes up with a better name) be labeled postcyberpunk. But to understand postcyberpunk, it's important to distinguish what cyberpunk was (and wasn't) about.

Classic cyberpunk characters were marginalized, alienated loners who lived on the edge of society in generally dystopic futures where daily life was impacted by rapid technological change, an ubiquitous datasphere of computerized information, and invasive modification of the human body. William Gibson's *Neuromancer* is, of course, the archetypal cyberpunk work, and this (along with early Gibson short fiction like *Johnny Mnemonic* and *Burning Chrome*, *The Artificial Kid*, and the odd John Shirley work) is whence the "high tech/low life" cliché about cyberpunk and its imitators came.

The black-leather-and-chrome surface gloss was in large measure what attracted media attention, but isn't what made cyberpunk the most important science fiction literary movement since the New Wave. Cyberpunk's lasting impact came not from the milieu's details, but the method of their deployment, the immersive worldbuilding technique that gave it such a revelatory quality (what John Clute, speaking of Pat Cadigan, called "the burning presence of the future"). Cyberpunk realized that the old SF stricture of "alter only one thing and see what happens" was hopelessly outdated, a doctrine rendered irrelevant by the furious pace of late 20th century technological change. The future isn't "just one damn thing after another", it's every damn thing all at the same time. Cyberpunk not only realized this truth, but embraced it. To paraphrase Chairman Bruce, cyberpunk carried technological extrapolation into the fabric of everyday life.

The best of cyberpunk conveyed huge cognitive loads about the future by depicting (in best "show, don't tell" fashion) the interaction of its characters with the quotidian minutia of their environment. In the way they interacted with their clothes, their furniture, their decks and spex, cyberpunk characters told you more about the society they lived in than "classic" SF stories did through their interaction with robots and rocketships.

Postcyberpunk uses the same immersive world-building technique, but features different characters, settings, and, most importantly, makes fundamentally different assumptions about the future. Far from being alienated loners, postcyberpunk characters are frequently integral members of society (i.e., they have jobs). They live in futures that are not necessarily dystopic (indeed, they are often suffused with an optimism that ranges from cautious to exuberant), but their everyday lives are still impacted by rapid technological change and an

omnipresent computerized infrastructure.

Neal Stephenson's *The Diamond Age* is perhaps the most popular postcyberpunk novel, though also worthy of consideration are Bruce Sterling's *Islands in the Net* and *Holy Fire*, Ian McDonald's *Necroville* (aka *Terminal Cafe*), Ken MacLeod's *The Star Fraction* and *The Stone Canal*, Greg Bear's *Queen of Angels*, *Slant*, and (parts of) *Moving Mars*, Raphael Carter's *The Fortunate Fall*, some of Greg Egan's work (Egan novels like *Permutation City* and *Diaspora* are so wildly extrapolative that it's hard to fit them into *any* category), and the first hundred pages or so of Walter Jon Williams' *Aristoi* (among others).

Like their cyberpunk forebears, postcyberpunk works immerse the reader in richly detailed and skillfully nuanced futures, but ones whose characters and settings frequently hail from, for lack of a better term, the middle class (and we do need a better term; here in the United States, economic mobility has rendered the concept of "class" nearly obsolete). Postcyberpunk characters frequently have families, and sometimes even children (children, rather than plucky, hyperintelligent, and misunderstood teenage protagonists, being creatures all too lacking in most science fiction). They're anchored in their society rather than adrift in it. They have careers, friends, obligations, responsibilities, and all the trappings of an "ordinary" life. Or, to put it another way, their social landscape is often as detailed and nuanced as the technological one.

Cyberpunk characters frequently seek to topple or exploit corrupt social orders. Postcyberpunk characters tend to seek ways to live in, or even strengthen, an existing social order, or help construct a better one. In cyberpunk, technology facilitates alienation from society. In postcyberpunk, technology *is* society. Technology is what the characters breathe, eat, and live in (in the case of Walter Jon Williams' *Aristoi* or Greg Egan's *Diaspora*, live in the literal sense of the word, with their selves (in part or in toto) immersed in the datasphere). Postcyberpunk characters dwell in what Sterling has dubbed "permanent technological revolution" even as we do today.

Cyberpunk tended to be cold, detached and alienated. Postcyberpunk tends to be warm, involved, and connected (a nod here to Paul di Filippo's half-serious "Ribofunk" manifesto). Cyberpunk tended toward the grim, while postcyberpunk is frequently quite funny (parts of *The Diamond Age* shine most brightly in this respect, as do Ken MacLeod's works). It could even be argued that postcyberpunk represents a fusion of the cyberpunk/humanist schism of the 1980s, but : A) I'm happy leave that particular can of worms to braver (or more foolhardy) souls, and B) Though many a cyber-punk's work has become more humanized, the reverse doesn't seem to be true (John Kessel's recapitulation of Shiner & Sterling's *Mozart in Mirrorshades* in *Corrupting Dr. Nice* notwithstanding).

It may have been Isaac Asimov (though I first heard it via Howard Waldrop) who said there were three orders of science fiction, using the automobile as an example. Man invents the automobile and uses it to chase down the villain : adventure fiction. Man invents the automobile, and a few years later there are traffic jams : social problem fiction. In the third type, man invents the automobile, and another man invents moving pictures : fifty years later, people go to drive-in movies. It is this third order of fiction, social fabric fiction, that was at the heart of cyberpunk. Yet many a cyberpunk tale used classic plot devices (plucky young rebels topple decaying social order, etc) to explore such issues. The best postcyberpunk moves further into third-order science fiction, the plot arising organically from the world it's set in.

Gardner Dozois's influential 1970s essay *Living the Future : You Are What You Eat* made this very point, noting that future societies should be depicted as "a real, self-consistent, organic thing". The postcyberpunk viewpoint is not outside the fishbowl looking in, but inside the fishbowl looking around. As a result, postcyberpunk frequently skirts the edge of what can be described in late 20th century English, be it the representation of data in fourth-dimensional Pikeover space in *Slant* to the intelligence-enhancing *something* that Maya realizes she's too old to embrace in *Holy Fire*.

Finally, there is the inevitable issue of generational relevance. Yes, cyberpunk was about the early 1980s, while

postcyberpunk is about the 1990s, and cyberpunk was largely written by people in their 20s and 30s, postcyberpunk by people in their late 30s and early 40s. But another factor is at work. Many writers who grew up reading in the 1980s are just now starting to have their stories and novels published. To them cyberpunk was not a revolution or alien philosophy invading SF, but rather just another flavor of SF. Like the writers of the 1970s and 80s who assimilated the New Wave's classics and stylistic techniques without necessarily knowing or even caring about the manifestos and ideologies that birthed them, today's new writers might very well have read *Neuromancer* back to back with Asimov's *Foundation*, John Brunner's *Stand on Zanzibar*, and Larry Niven's *Ringworld* and seen not discontinuities but a continuum. They may see postcyberpunk not only as the natural language to describe the future, but the only adequate way to start extrapolating from the present.

Answers to the inevitable questions : *is postcyberpunk a movement ?* No. *Aren't there cyberpunk or postcyberpunk works that don't fit these definitions ?* Yes. Sterling's *Schismatrix* and his other Shaper/Mechanist stories tend to defy this schema (though it becomes more applicable if you consider "Moving in Clades", the last third of *Schismatrix*, as postcyberpunk), and Cadigan seems to have run the sequence in reverse. *Aren't there many newer writers (Jack Womack, Kathleen Ann Goonan, Linda Nagata, Nicola Griffith, etc) whose work might be labeled postcyberpunk but which you haven't gotten around to reading yet ?* It's true. Mea culpa. *Aren't there books that came out in the 1990s that look like postcyberpunk that don't fit your definitions ?* Alexander Jablokov's *Nimbus*, Paul J. McAuley's *Fairyland*, and, of course, Stephenson's *Snow Crash*, all defy this taxonomy, or else must be regarded as mutant hybrids or late arriving "classic" cyberpunk. *Aren't these definitions rather hard and fast ?* Not only that, they're ham-handed, Procrustean, and will probably look misguided in many particulars a decade or so hence. Yet postcyberpunk is a very real, and very vital, part of the modern science fiction landscape. *Necroville*, *Slant*, and *Holy Fire*, for all their differences, have far more in common with each other than they do with most works of modern science fiction as a whole, or even with other books in the 10% of SF that isn't crap.

Of all the mutant strains currently percolating through the science fiction body politic, postcyberpunk is the one best suited to explore themes related to world of accelerating technological innovation and ever-increasing complexity in ways relevant to our everyday lives without losing the "sense of wonder" that characterizes science fiction at its best. This is not to say that postcyberpunk is the only game in town; science fiction writers like Octavia Butler, Stephen Baxter, and Jack McDevitt (to name but three) are all doing good work outside its boundaries. But postcyberpunk is the most important game in town, and the one best suited for honing the genre's cutting edge.