Cyberculture Defined

The Cyberpunk Project

What is Cyberculture ?

To one degree or another, many critics closely tie the evolution of postmodern culture to technological developments. As Larry McCaffery notes, "the underlying factor for most of those critics seeking to account for the central features of postmodern culture is the evolution of a new network of economic and political systems, a global movement away from local, national sources of economic and political control toward multinational ones". This expansion has been made possible specifically by the exponential growth of technology, and has profoundly altered not only the daily textures of the arenas we populate but the way we think about the world and ourselves in it (McCaffery, *The Desert of the Real*).

Cyberculture is, simply, the conjunction of several political, historical, and social structures that share the present locus in time occupied by dominant Western capitalist culture. It is marked by the condition that technology penetrates, to some degree, every aspect of our existence. While its origins may be traced back to the 1960s (Brand), much of the theoretical discussion surrounding technological advancements has grown exponentially since the early 1980s. In this period the evolution of cyberculture has coincided with various issues related to conceptions of postmodern theory and the interpenetration of technology into the body.

Cyberculture and Cyborgs

The cyborg has come to to be the mascot of cyberculture. This entity represents the crossing of all boundaries -- biology, technology, identity, etc. -- in a new structure of technological fusion. Pacemakers, synthetic knee and hip joints, anabolic steroids, and countless other technological advancements have enhanced (for those who can afford them) the quality of daily life and increased life expectancy dramatically. As Donna Haraway asserts in her discussion of feminism, science, and technology, Simians, Cyborgs and Women, "we are all cyborgs" and the cyborg holds the promise of freedom from established categories of difference by removing the physical/social distinctions based upon class, race, sexuality, and most importantly for Haraway, gender. Thus her lament "I would rather be a cyborg than a goddess" attests to the liberatory potential offered by the infusion of technology into cybercultural social structure.

Yet, as Jane Desmond has pointed out, "many of our current analytic categories of difference (such as race, ethnicity, and cultural identity) are too often transparently 'read off' the body in ways that ultimately essentialize rather than problematize these very differences". Haraway's vision of the cyborg as harbinger of a postgender world has not necessarily come to fruition in this era of technological fusion. Cyberculture has not fulfilled the promise of boundary transcendence but rather reclaims technology as a positive image of capitalism. In fact, it is arguable that cybernetic fusion serves to "express nostalgia for a time of masculine superiority". In many instances cybernetic fusion posits a realm where previously contested paradigms have become reinstitutionalized.

Cyberculture Now

So where do we fit in ? The fact that this page has been accessed and is being read -- and offers the opportunity for reply -- links us in a technological feedback loop. We are all Web bodies, as Hacking the Future describes :

> That's the body electronic equipped for fast travel across the World Wide Web : neuro skin, URL exo-skeleton with HTML navigational beacons coded into its processing center. The WWW self has never known any future but intensive immersion in the force-field of data. A species type born in the age of hyper-text philosophy and neuro-theory, the electronic body speaks only multi-media navigational languages : Mosaic, El Net, Netscape. Perfect navigational tools for an electronic body that has already into a data probe with a global positioning system fused into its brain tissue.

Indeed, we are all cyborgs playing in a vast new landscape, but the future is what we help define.