The Movement in America

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Cyberpunk fiction first took shape in the early 1980s in the fiction of such figures as Bruce Sterling, William Gibson, Rudy Rucker, Pat Cadigan and James Patrick Kelly. However different in other respects, these writers were preoccupied by the changing place of media in American society, especially in the wake of the initial phases of the "digital revolution".

In his introduction to *Mirrorshades*, an anthology which helped to map the parameters of the cyberpunk movement, Bruce Sterling argues that cyberpunk reflects a new perspective on technology, not only among science fiction writers, but among consumers. For Sterling cyberpunk imagines an "overlapping of worlds that were formally separate : the realm of high tech and the modern pop underground".

Cyberpunk's protagonists are hackers, rockers, and other cultural rebels, clinging to a cult of individualism in a culture characterized by corporate control and mass conformity. These protagonists are adept at appropriating the materials of popular culture and making them speak to alternative needs and interests; they also know how to tap into the vast digital database to access information about corporations and their secret conspiracies, or to spread resistant messages despite powerful mechanisms of top-down control.

Critics like Larry McCaffery, Claudia Springer, and Scott Bukkatman have described cyberpunk as an expression of postmodernism, yet one can make an equally strong argument for seeing the movement as a counterpart in fiction of the Birmingham tradition of Anglo-American cultural studies, which recovers and analyzes styles of resistance and appropriation in working class and ethnic subcultures. That both versions of cyberpunk are plausible and illuminating suggests how closely these writers were engaging with traditions of thought in the humanities and social sciences.

Sterling saw the gap between hard science and cultural studies crumbling in an unexpected fashion...

> Technical culture has gotten out of hand. The advances of the sciences are so deeply radical, so disturbing, upsetting, and revolutionary that they can no longer be contained. They are surging into culture at large; they are invasive; they are everywhere. The traditional power structure, the traditional institutions have lost control of the pace of change... Times have changed since the comfortable era of Hugo Gernsback, when Science was safely enshrined -- and confined -- in an ivory tower. The careless technophilia of those days belongs to a vanished, sluggish era, when authority still had a comfortable margin of control. For the cyberpunks, by stark contrast, technology is visceral. It is not the bottled genie of remote Big Science boffins; it is pervasive, utterly intimate. Not outside us, but next to us. Under our skin; often, inside our minds. Technology itself has changed. Not for us the giant steam-snorting wonders of the past : the Hoover Dam, the Empire State Building, the nuclear power plant. Eighties tech sticks to the skin, responds to the touch : the personal computer, the Sony Walkman, the portable telephone, the soft contact lens.

This theme of personal technology, of the fusion of machine and body, runs through cyberpunk fiction, which is often framed from the bottom-up perspective of consumers as against the knowing, elite perspective of scientists, engineers, and inventors.

The Cyberpunks sought to do for science fiction what the punk movement had done for rock and roll -- return to the old standards, strip them down to their bare bones, and rebuild the genre from the ground up. Perceptive readers might have recognized something strange and new when William Gibson first published *The Gernsback Continuum*, a short story many see as a manifesto for the future cyberpunk movement.

As the title suggests, the story returns to some of the core icons of the Gernsback tradition of technological utopianism. A young reporter seeks to document the remains of a future which never came to pass, the future foretold at the New York Worlds Fair and in films like *Things To Come*. As he investigates further, he finds himself staring face to face with that future as a "semiotic ghost" and he is horrified by his vision of a man and a woman from that other future :

> They were blond. They were standing beside their car, an aluminum avocado with a central shark-fin rudder jutting up from its spine and smooth black tires like a child's toy. He had his arm around her waist and was gesturing toward the city. They were both in white : loose clothing, bare legs, spotless white sun shoes... They were heirs to the Dream. They were white, blond, and they probably had blue eyes... Here, we'd gone on and on, in a dream logic that knew nothing of pollution, the finite bounds of fossil fuel, of foreign wars it was possible to lose. They were smug, happy, and utterly content with themselves and their world... Behind me, the illuminated city : searchlights swept the sky for the sheer joy of it. I imagined them thronging the plaza of white marble, orderly and alert, their bright eyes shining with enthusiasm for their floodlit avenues and silver cars. It had all the sinister fruitiness of Hitler Youth propaganda.

The images of a technological utopia of white marble, glass, and steel, have devolved here into a dehumanizing utopia, a world closer to the regimentation of Nazi Germany than to the visions of corporate America. *The Gernsback Continuum* was a radical text, an assertion that science fiction had to challenge and perhaps surrender its utopian and optimistic impulses, that it must speak to an age full of ambivalent feelings towards technology, a world created by intimate machines and digital media, a disorderly world where various groups from complex cultural backgrounds must interact and struggle for control.

The cyberpunk writers set their stories in the near future, not the distant future of the Gernsback tradition. One can understand something of how science fiction has evolved by comparing the time-frames in older science fiction with those of contemporary writers. The genre first emerged in response to the dramatic changes occurring in the late 19th and early 20th century. Still, the earliest science fiction writers told stories set thousands and even millions of years in the future, in order to envision social and technological change. The time frame has dwindled, decade by decade; much contemporary science fiction is set only twenty or thirty years in the future. We now live in a state of constant change, and the anxiety/thrill of permanent transition shapes the science fiction we read and write.

The cyberpunks built upon the images of corporate-control over culture which surfaced in the works of the Futurians in the 1950s and added the bizarre twists associated with the New Wave writers of the 1960s. Not since the origins of the genre had science fiction exploded with so many fresh ideas, which rushed forth in a breathless prose, and burst upon the page in vivid sensory details. This was a future one could not only see but touch, smell, hear, and taste, not an empty future but one full of life and brimming with contradictions and conflicts.

Such qualities are vividly suggested in this passage from John Shirley's *Freezone* :

> Rickenharp felt a ripple of kinetic force under his feet, an arc of wallow moving in languid whiplash through the flexible street stuff, telling him that the breakers were up today, the baffles around the artificial island feeling the strain. The arcade ran three levels above the narrow street : each level had its own sidewalk balcony; people stood at the railing to look down at the segmented snake of street traffic. The stack of arcades funneled a rich wash of scents to Rickenharp : the french-fried toastiness of the fast food, the sweet harshness of smokes -- smashweed smoke, gynosmoke, tobacco smoke -- the cloy of perfumes; the mixed odors of fish-ka-bob stands, urine, rancid beer, popcorn, sea air; and the faint ozone smell of the small electric cars jockeying on the street... The sounds splashed over Rickenharp in a warm wave of cultural fecundity : pop tunes from thudders and beat boxes swelled in volume as they passed, the guys carrying the boxes insignificant in comparison to the noise they carried, the shanky tripping of protosalsa or the calculatedly redundant pulse of minimomo.

Shirley's short story unfolds with the same dense mise-en-scene as Ridley Scott's *Blade Runner*, a film cited by many cyberpunk writers as a major influence on their fiction. Like *Blade Runner*, the story depicts a world of warring corporations, of multi-cultural chaos and constant advertising messages.

Shirley and the other cyberpunks cared deeply about the popular culture that would emerge in such a world, especially the struggle of rock musicians to maintain "authenticity" in the face of corporate exploitation and manipulation. Unlike most 1950s writers, cyberpunk authors understood popular culture as something more than bread and circuses for the masses. They conceived popular culture as potentially positive and enabling : helping people to define their identities and offering the potential to foment resistance to dominant institutions. This altered conception of the popular in part reflected the counter-culture's involvement in rock.

Norman Spinrad's *Little Heroes*, for example, describes the creation of the world's first fully cybernetic rock star, one who would be totally under the control of the music industry. No sooner does Red Jack appear, however, than subcultures begin to form around his image and to appropriate it for use in the formation of radical political movements designed precisely to resist corporate power. The struggle for the meaning of Red Jack moves towards a street riot which burns the corporate headquarters of the media conglomerate to the ground; the corporation's camera crews film the carnage and use it as a backdrop for Red Jack's next music video. Spinrad's world is thus defined by constant struggle over the meanings and values of media content -- a struggle neither the corporation nor the street can fully control. Everything, in such a world, is open for appropriation; nothing can be fully contained.

Unlike earlier science fiction generations, these writers understand corporate exploitation and the circulation of cultural commodities on a global rather than a national scale. Writers like Bruce Sterling are especially

interested in the new global culture and in using science fiction to alert readers about the imperialist and anti-environmental practices of multinational corporations.

In *Mozart in Mirrorshades*, for example, corporate agents travel into past worlds where natural resources still exist in order to strip mine these more pristine worlds :

> Huge cracking towers and swollen, bulbous storage tanks dwarfed the ruins of the St. Rupert Cathedral. Thick white smoke billowed from the refinery's stacks... The sheer spectacle of it delighted him. You didn't sign for a time-travel project, he thought, unless you had a taste for incongruity. Like the phallic pumping station lurking in the central square of the convent, or the ruler-straight elevated pipelines ripping through Salzburg's maze of cobbled streets. A bit tough on the city, maybe, but that was hardly Rice's fault.

Along the way, these agents of profit corrupt indigenous peoples, buying them off with cheap consumer goods -- bikinis, cassette tapes of bad pop songs, mirrorshade sunglasses -- and destroy their cultural distinctiveness. In Sterling's story, the past, no less than the present and the future, becomes a staging ground for the breakdown of cultural difference, its distinctiveness obliterated by the designer labels of corporate capitalism.

The cyberpunks also depict a world where human identity itself is breaking down, either through subcultural self-stylings -- the "glo worms" in James Patrick Kelly's "Solstice" who inject luminous paint into their skin, the "gargoyles" in Neil Stephenson's *Snow Crash* who televise their lives into the net using head-mounted cameras-- or through military and corporate take-over of worker's bodies, as in the horrors experienced by the protagonist of Tom Maddox's *Snake-eyes*. These writers create a world where individuals can download their consciousness into computers and thus live forever as in Gibson's *Neuromancer*, where the mind can be re-entered and reprogrammed as in Pat Cadigan's *Mind Games*, or where we can live most of the time in imaginary identities, as in much of Stephenson's works.

The cyberpunks have been the most powerful single influence on science fiction over the past two decades, an influence that is explained by their perceptive analysis of the cultural and social changes generated or threatened by "media in transition". Many of the writers who are coming to MIT as part of the Science Fiction readings series are either participants in the cyberpunk movement or have reacted against it in some fashion.