

Cyberpunk - From Subculture to Mainstream

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A hip new lingo has infiltrated the mass media. "Cyberspace", "hypermedia" and "virtual reality" have become the techno buzz words of the '90s. After years of indifference and suspicion, the idea that technology can be fun, exciting, and sexy has surfaced again.

Two ideas in particular are now doing the rounds. One is that computers are not just for pencil-head types in lab coats and grey suited accountants. Technology can be a tool for the imagination, opening up new terrains of images, sounds, experiences and concepts. The second idea has less to do with computers than with communications. By linking up all of the computer power languishing on desks and in basements, whole new forms of interaction are possible Q a communications revolution to take beyond the television age.

The first of these two ideas orbits somewhere around the term virtual reality. The second is a vague nebula of possibilities sighted off the cyberspace cluster. Both have been around a long time, but have just recrystallised in the public's imagination. "Hypermedia" is the next phase in marketing this dream to the public. The movie Lawnmower Man has cashed in on the trend, pulping the whole lot together with some silly old Stephen King haunted house clichs. The really interesting stuff on both these current trends can be found a little off the main stream. Take a hyperspace bypass back through the cyberpunk subculture of the 80s, and you will find the creative source and force behind the present multimedia marketing push.

Cyberpunk is a cute name for a rather motley collection of people who thought and wrote and made art about technology over the last decade. Some of them were harmless. Some of them were mad, bad and dangerous to know. Like many other prophetic art avant gardes in the past, they saw the future both more clearly and more crazily than their contemporaries. Like the romantic poets and the decadent artists of the 19th century; like the surrealists and futurists and constructivists of the early 20th century, they wanted to change life. So they imagined how it could be different, not only from the present, but from how the future was officially imagined to be.

Cyberpunk gathered momentum in 1984 with the publication of the first of William Gibson's novels, called *Neuromancer*. Gibson has since published four novels and a collection of stories. There are half a dozen readers of cyberpunk fiction on the market, and now other writers like Bruce Sterling and Pat Cadigan have emerged. There is even a remarkable "overground" cyberpunk magazine called *Mondo 2000*, as well as a host of tiny desktop published fanzines. Cyberpunk has gone beyond a subculture and is now a full blown marketing category.

Gibson was an odd sort of person to launch an avant garde cultural movement. He wrote pretty pulpy science fiction novels. He was a small town, white suburban kind of guy. Yet he was able to crystalise something that was in the air. He bleak, "no future" landscape of punk rock and post-apocalyptic movies like *Bladerunner* and *Mad Max*, and imagined a way to escape from the street-level violence these films referred to. The way out was cyberspace.

In Gibson's world, cyberspace is a consensual hallucination created within the dense matrix of computer networks. Gibson imagines a world where people can directly jack their nervous systems into the net, vastly increasing the intimacy of the connection between mind and matrix. Cyberspace is the world created by the

intersection of every jacked-in consciousness, every database and installation, every form of interconnected information circuit, in short, human or in-human.

This mythology of cyberspace is interesting for two reasons. Firstly, it provides an alternative to the boredom of suburbia without having to deal with the danger of inner-city living. Every subculture needs a fantasy place to run away from suburban life to, be it the rural fantasy of the hippies or the urban fantasy of punk. Cyberspace is a fantasy destination for white, middle class suburbanites who realise that rural life is even more boring than the suburbs and the cities are becoming far too dangerous.

The other interesting thing about cyberspace is the way it recreates the idea of community. Every subculture needs an image of an outsider's community to cling to, to run to. For the cyberpunk, this community doesn't actually have a place. It's not a nightclub in New York. It is not a street in London. It can be accessed everywhere Q by modem. Of course, the bulletin boards and e-mail systems are a poor imitation of the fully wired-up world of cyberspace, but it's the nearest thing on earth. Cyberpunk subculture is the first subculture which doesn't have a particular place of congregation Q it's a suburban phenomenon made possible by the networks. There are now hundreds of bulletin boards around the world which have a cyberpunk style, where young cyberpunks discuss the latest hardware and software.

In a sense, subcultures are always a product of the media technology of the age. The classic subcultures of the 60s and 70s, from the mods to the punks, were a combination of the electric world of rock and roll with a style and a place and an ethos and a certain amount of drug abuse. The mods grew out of 50s austerity in Britain. They were the first generation of young people to enter mass white collar employment and acquire a disposable income at a young age. So they spent it Q on clothes and music and motor scooters and weekend trips to the seaside. They were a mobile community, growing up on television and rock and roll. The first great pop music TV show, Ready, Steady Go!, spread mod style from one end of Britain to the other instantly, a fashion transformation that without television would take months or years.

The punk movements of the late 70s were where the youth subcultures launched by the mods finally crash-landed. Punk was a subculture based on the boredom of unemployment, not the tedium of white collar work. It lacked the excitement and innocence of the mods Q who were absolute beginners in the art of living in a consumerist, media saturated world. Punk was a subculture created by young people in the late 70s who grew up on the media and its promises of the good life, and were bored with all that. It had let them down : "career opportunities, the ones that never knock" as a song from the time put it. The punks took the media technology of the time, the music, the fashion, the radio and video, and trashed it.

Cyberpunk grew out of this negative subcultural style, but turned it back towards a positive celebration. Where the mods had been fascinated by consumerism and the mass media, cyberpunk is fascinated by the media technologies which were hitting the mass market in the 80s. Desktop publishing, computer music and now desktop video are technologies taken up with enthusiasm by cyberpunk in the place of rock and roll. Computer networking is its alternative to the mods' pop TV or the punks' pirate radio.

Just as subcultures from mod to punk were the testing ground for new styles of music and fashion, the cyberpunk crowd are the testing ground for new fashions in desk-top technology. The rapid evolution from video-games to virtual reality has been helped along by the hard core of enthusiasts eager to try out each generation of simulated experience. The multimedia convergence of the publishing industry, the computer industry, the broadcasting industry and the recording industry has a spot right at its centre called cyberpunk, where these new product experiments find a critical but playful market.

Where punk was a product of unemployment and the english art school, cyberpunk is a product of the huge array of technical and scientific universities created in the US to service the military industrial complex. Your typical cyberpunk is white, suburban, middle class, and technically skilled. They are a new generation of white

collar worker, resisting the yoke of work and suburban life for a while. They don't drop out, they jack in. They are a fabulous example of how each generation, growing up with a given level of media technology, has to discover the limits and potentials of that technology by experimenting with everyday life itself.

Subcultures are an art form. They can have their delinquent edge, its true. Mods took too many amphetamines. Punks were a little prone to rioting. Cyberpunks sometimes have a romantic fascination with hacking into other peoples' computers. All this is a testing of limits, a pushing to the limit of the social norm. The enduring product of any subculture is a rapid innovation in popular style. Subcultures pioneer styles of life for the mainstream. In the case of cyberpunk, the networked world of cyberspace, the interactive world of multimedia and the new sensoria of virtual reality will all owe a little to their willingness to be the test pigs for these emergent technologies.

There is also a tension in cyberpunk between the military industrial monster that produces technology and the sensibility of the technically skilled individual trained for the high tech machine. Like all subcultures, cyberpunk expresses a conflict. On the one side is the libertarian idea that technology can be a way of wresting a little domain of freedom for people from the necessity to work and live under the constraints of today. On the other is the fact that the technologies of virtual reality, multimedia, cyberspace would never have existed in the first place had the Pentagon not funded them as tools of war. The pilots who bombed Baghdad flew in virtual reality.

Even the peaceful applications of these technologies can be subordinated to commercial imperatives abhorrent to the free thinking cyberpunk. There is a contradiction between the spirit of free enquiry and experiment and the need to keep corporate secrets and make a buck. Cyberpunk is a reflection of this contradiction. On the one hand it is a drop out culture dedicated to pursuing the dream of freedom through appropriate technology. On the other it is a ready market for new gadgets and a training ground for hip new entrepreneurs with hi-tech toys to market. Cyberpunk may be over a subculture. It was reabsorbed into the mainstream like every other subculture before it. Yet it signals a fundamental change in the way subcultures can form and oppose themselves to the mainstream. In effect, cyberpunk was the realisation that the new generation of media tools are also excellent resources for changing life, if only on the margins, and if only for a short while. Like all of the other avant gardes and subcultures before it, it has added something special to the repertoire of postmodern life.