Mainstreaming Cyberpunk

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Pulled in every direction by journalists, SF manifesto-makers, postmodern theorists, netsurfers, and fans, "cyberpunk" has been stretched into strange new shapes. My use of the neologism, in a 1989 cover story for *Keyboard* magazine, as a label for electro-industrial rock with a grungy, sci-fi edge serves as a prism to refract some of cyberculture's recurrent themes : the convergence of human and machine; the supersession of sensory experience by digital simulation; the subcultural "misuse" of high technology in the service of perverse sensibilities or subversive ideologies; and a profound ambivalence, handed down from the sixties, toward computers as engines of liberation and tools of social control, reweavers of the social fabric shredded by industrial modernism and instruments of an even greater atomization.

To Lewis Shiner, one of the genre's founding fathers, the use of the term to describe "guys in black leather who use synthesizers and digital sampling" betokens the co-optation of what began as the literary equivalent of a terrorist faction. It is emblematic, he contends, of the mainstreaming of cyberpunk, a trend he laments in his 1991 *New York Times* editorial, "*Confessions of an Ex-Cyberpunk*" :

> Cyberpunk started out as a fashionable subset of science fiction, showing high technology subverted by opportunists on the margins of society, for profit or just for fun... But by 1987, it had become a cliche... Ironically, as the term was losing its meaning for us, it was escaping, virus-like, into the mainstream, where it continues to thrive.

Instead of speaking truth to power, he argues, mass market cyberpunk "offers power fantasies, the same dead-end thrills we get from video games and blockbuster movies"; it mythologizes "our obsession with material goods" and reaffirms our faith in "technical, engineered solutions" to economic ills and moral malaise.

Shiner's worst suspicions about black leather synth-rockers who call themselves cyberpunks were confirmed in 1993, when Billy Idol - a onetime punk rocker whose market-savvy makeovers have helped him outlast the class of '77 - released *Cyberpunk*, a bald-faced appropriation of every cyberpunk cliche that wasn't nailed down.