Politics of Cyberpunk

The Cyberpunk Project

What is cyberpunk ? The way the label has been used in the media seems to show that it really refers to three different things. The term was first coined by science fiction writers to describe a type of sci-fi written by people such as William Gibson (Neuromancer) and Bruce Sterling (Islands in the Net). Cyberpunk sci-fi was marked by several distinct features : 1) a very postmodern style of writing, involving sudden shifts in narration, identity, and perspective on the part of the characters. 2) The central role of computers, virtual reality, and the interface between man and machine. Gibson coined the term "Matrix" to refer to the virtual cyberspace where people and AIs (artificial intelligences) interacted - a "consensual hallucination", as he put it. 3) A rather striking return to the machismo, sudden violence, and "heavy metal" features of the early pulps. Today, there is a whole cyberpunk "canon", although as a literary movement, it seems to have lost steam and many writers in the "movement" have gone on to other things. Gibson still seems to be consulted as the "theorist" of the cyberpunk genre, and what he says about the near future is pretty striking.

In Gibson's dystopian future, somewhat reminiscent of movies like *Blade Runner*, modificiation of body and brain is commonplace. People use biotechnology (genetic engineering), cybernetic prosthetics, and various biochemicals to alter their appearance, intelligence, and physical abilities. The most important human modification is to become a "jacker" - to have a neural jack implanted that allows human consciousness to "jump" directly into cyberspace and interact with machines without the use of a terminal or keyboard or any other device besides a "deck", which seems to be carried portably. Politically, the nation-state has disappeared, only to be replaced by the hyperurban "Sprawl" - linked to other areas by the Matrix. Multinational corporations control almost everything from public services to local governance, managed by families which cheat death through cryonic freezing and genetic manipulation. These corporations guard their data very jealously, but are always hiring "netrunners" or "cowboys" to break into the security of their competitors. This is the all-critical new form of corporate warfare. For its protagonists, it can be deadly, because in Gibson's Matrix, protective programs - "ice" - can "flatline" or kill the brainwave activity of careless snoopers.

Gibson does not conceal the fact that he considers his dystopia to be right around the corner, far closer than any *1984* or *Brazil*. He says very shortly people will be identified more often with consumer products than any other form of ethnic or cultural identification (if you've seen the recent wave of Hyundai commercials, where someone gets up before the crowd to announce that they drive a Hyundai, only to receive supportive applause, you know that future is now). Further, the multinational corporations will have full access to all the "relevant" consumer data on any person that they need - "relevant" meaning anything they want to know. Today, of course, this issue of privacy is already a hot theme. They will in fact be in a position to sell this data to governments which are having a harder and harder time controlling their populations. Corporations will "modify" their employees in various ways so as to improve their efficiency. In Gibson's future, they will be providing the drugs (to improve work output) rather than testing for them.

The media has been using the word "cyberpunk" to refer to another group - the so-called "hackers" or "computer outlaws" or "phone phreaks". "Hackers" of the 1960s, as Steven Levy claims, aimed to promote decentralization, open access to computers, and easily modifiable technology and computer code, fighting the corporate mentality that pervaded the early computer field. Even today anybody who fiddles around with any technology in order to improve it is said to have done a good "hack". But, Levy also says, the "hackers" of the 1960s have nothing to do with today's "crackers", which he sees only as malicious marauders. "Crackers", of

course, use stolen passwords and access codes to break into "unauthorized" computer systems, while "phreaks" use "blue boxes" and other methods to make phone calls without paying for them, and "pirates" "crack" the protection on commercial software in order to sell it at a lower price themselves. The term "cyberpunk" seems to be applied to a certain breed of "cracker", however - the kind who steals from other peoples' ATM accounts and credit cards; who spreads viruses, worms, Trojan horses, and logic bombs and other destructive computer programs; who attempts to modify the credit rating or other records of their enemies in order to cause them difficulty; and who breaks into systems in order to do malicious things, like taking control of the phone lines.

Of course, many of this breed of "cyberpunk" are not very admirable. While some claim some sort of political inspiration for their handiwork - what's wrong with ripping off Ma Bell or Bill Gates, for example ? - basically most are just kids looking for ways to get things without paying for them. And the others are folks that seem to enjoy infecting locally operated bulletin board systems with viruses and invading the privacy of any personal system, not just "hacking" corporate voicemail systems and computer networks. Some cyberpunks have tried to come up with a code of ethics : it's OK to crack software and distribute it free but it's wrong to resell it; it's OK to break into corporate systems, but if you break into a personal system, it's wrong to read private mail or erase data; it's OK to listen in on cellphones and phreak on the phone system, but wrong to get other people's phone card and credit card numbers. But, as a group, this type of "cyberpunk" does not have much political consciousness. It has all sorts of political-type rationalizations for its activities, but basically it does what it does for the sheer sense of power and fun (and free goodies) that it brings them.

Associated with these cyberpunks, of course, is "cyberpunk chic", the style involved in being one, which they go to great pains to display. Some elements of cyberculture chic are just basic recycled punk - mirrorshade sunglasses, worn at night; lots of leather; wild, unkempt hair; gender bending; rock concert T-shirts; and body piercing (more than just ears) and marking (tattoos, the more surrealistic, the better). That's the cyber dresscode. When it comes to music, the cyberpunks listen to some of the old punk, alternative, progressive, heavy metal, and New Wave; but they much prefer hiphop, acid house, industrial, and techno music. They have become rather infamous for their "raves" where loud digital music blasts incessantly, people dance till they drop, and large doses of "smart drinks" and Ecstasy (MDMA) are doled out. Billy Idol released a "Cyberpunk" album, but apparently it didn't win universal acceptance from his audience. As far as pop culture goes, if you've seen *Blade Runner*, *Fortress*, *Robocop*, *Terminator* or *Lawnmower Man*, you know the cutting edge of cyberchic. The brief TV sitcom series *Max Headroom* is another example. Anyway, that's cyberpunk-as-style. It's adopted by the first and second types of cyberpunk, and found less often among the third, who are more concerned for substance over style.

The third type of "cyberpunk" is a political movement that overlaps with the second group. Many of the third type of cyberpunk are hackers, crackers, and phreakers. Some do not engage in those activities but believe in spreading information about them because their manifesto is that "information wants to be free". This type of cyberpunk believes that people should be able to communicate with each other affordably rather than having to phreak the phone system in order to do it. They believe that access to the "Matrix" (e.g., the Internet) should be available to everybody rather than forcing people to "hack" in order to get on it. They believe that through the use of FOIA and other methods, governmental information should be freely available so that people don't have to "crack" military and government networks in order to find it out. Some, like the "cypherpunks", are trying to educate people about using public-key cryptography so that they can protect the privacy of their messages from corporate and governmental snooping. Yet others try and write free software and source code (like the Free Software Foundation) or low-cost recopiable "shareware" so people don't have to pay exorbitant amounts for programs or "crack" them so they can be distributed. They try and create "Freenets" so people can gain access to computer resources they would otherwise need an account for. Some of their activities are more controversial - like trying to break copyright law and "intellectual property rights" by freely distributing copyrighted material electronically over the nets.

The mainstream media doesn't talk much about this third type of cyberpunk because they don't try and break the law fragrantly in the way that other "hackers" do. You can read about this third "movement" by picking up magazines like *Mondo 2000*, *bOING bOING* and *Wired*. They are expressly political, and like any other political group, they have their manifestoes, which they try and distribute anywhere they can. Like the first generation of "hackers", they want to humanize technology, to educate people to make their own modifications of programs and computers so as to best personalize them to their needs. And they want to decentralize the control of information. By operating Bulletin Board Systems (BBS), they want information to be literally a local phone call away. They want to break the corporate control of media, and do this by operating their own methods of information distribution - the Deep Dish satellite TV network, "pirate" radio stations which break the FCC "lock" on radio transmission, "alternative" radio broadcast programs, public-access computer networks like the Well and Peacenet, and of course the "alternative press" of small-circulation 'zines.

This third group of cyberpunks want to prevent the dystopian vision of Gibson from coming true. The new information technologies (and also the coming advances in biotechnology, pharmeceuticals, transportation, and electronics - robotics, AI expert systems, etc) are only instruments, neither intrinsically good nor bad. They can disempower and numb the mind, as TV has done so tragically in our society, or they can enhance our lives in myriad ways, as VR (virtual reality) is already doing (even as staunch a conservative as John McLaughlin says they represent a new "Gutenberg" revolution - they will change society in ways greater than even the printing press). They can be used for a new generation of military applications (robotic warfare is under serious consideration by the Pentagon) or to revolutionize health, education, and politics (true participatory democracy). They can increase the interactions between people and access to information, or they can be used to depersonalize communication and to disinform by digitally modifying pictures and video so that, now more than ever, they will lie (or promote government "truths"). The key is : who will control these technologies ? Gibson's increasingly inhuman, AI-run multinational corporations ? Or you and I ? If the cyberpunks have their way, it will be the latter.