Cyber + Punk = Cyberpunk

The Cyberpunk Project

The Coining

The word "cyberpunk" first appeared as the title of a short story *Cyberpunk* by Bruce Bethke, published in "*Amazing*" science fiction stories magazine volume 57, number 4, in November 1983. The word was coined in the early spring of 1980, and applied to the "bizarre, hard-edged, high-tech" SF emerging in the eighties. The story itself is about a bunch of teenage hackers/crackers.

Bethke himself tells, that the coining of the word "cyberpunk" was a conscious and deliberate act of creation on his part. The story was titled "Cyberpunk" from the very first draft. In calling it that, Bethke was actively trying to invent a new term that grokked the juxtaposition of punk attitudes and high technology. His reasons for doing so were purely selfish and market-driven : he wanted to give his story a snappy, one-word title that people would remember. And he really did succeed.

So, William Gibson didn't invent the word "cyberpunk". But he invented the cyberspace and the cyberpunk science fiction.

Originally the term "cyberpunk" was meant to be a only character type name, meaning "a young, technologically facile, ethically vacuous, computer-assisted vandal or criminal". Nowadays the term means much more, it's the name for whole subculture and movement.

Bethke wanted to include these notions in the term :

1. That children have some undefined wiring which enables them to learn languages far easier than adults do, and this ability is not limited to "organic" languages.
2. That teenagers can be dangerous because they live in a sort of ethically neutral state. They haven't got the hang of empathy yet, nor have they really grasped the linkage between their causative actions and the resulting effects.
3. That, just as command of a language is power, technological skill is enfranchisement, and in 1980 we were 20 to 30 years away from an explosion of technology that would radically change the distribution of power in society.
4. That parents and other adult authority figures were going to be terribly ill-equipped to deal with the first generation of teenagers who grew up "speaking computer".
5. THEREFORE, if you thought punks on motorcycles were a problem, just wait until you meet the--- the--- Y'know, there isn't a good word to describe them ?

The Fusion

The term, in and of itself, is a fusion of two other and very different words, 'cyber' and 'punk', and this fusion is the key to understanding cyberpunk.

'Cyber'

comes from "cybernetics", which is a science studying control and communication in the animal and the machine, as defined by Norbert Wiener, coiner of the term. The term originates in the Greek language word "kubernetes" which means "pilot" or "steersman". Originally, cybernetic system, or any system, was a feedback loop that gives a controller information on the results of its actions. As computers were adapted for use in many control systems throughout the 1960's and 70's, the term which helped create the computer became associated with it. Wiener would have become dyspeptic at some of the uses of his word in the last forty years, but surely not with "cyberpunk" and "cyberspace". It isn't cyber-anything without interaction, information, and communication. Nowadays, and in "cyberpunk", the prefix "cyber" means a synonym for that kind of cybernetic machine, something machinic, or something which exists or is produced via a cybernetic machine. Cybernetics also refers to machines that imitate human behaviour.

'Punk'

was a an anarchistic, dense, and fast youth movement which terrorized the world in the 1970's and early 1980's. The mess was caused by the loud hard-core rock music that groups such as the Sex Pistols made popular. The word means originally "rotten" or "junk". A "punk" is a troublemaker, an "antisocial rebel or hoodlum". In terms of literature and social movements, "punk" refers to a "counterculture" and a sort of "street-level anarchy", and tends to focus more on attitude and outlook than on music and criminal activity. In "cyberpunk", "punk" means the anarchistic and anti-authoritarian part of it.

So, words "cyber" and "punk" emphasize the two basic aspects of cyberpunk : technology and individualism. Meaning of the word "cyberpunk" could be something like "anarchy via machines" or "machine/computer rebel movement".

The technology of cyberpunk is ultratechnology, which mixes genetic material from animal to animal, from animal to man, or from man to animal. This technology raises human embryos for organ transplants, creates machines that think like humans and humans that think like machines. This is a technology designed to keep people within the "system" that dominates the lives of most "ordinary" people. This is the science of controlling human functions and of electronic, mechanical and biological control systems designed to replace them.

This technology is visceral. It extends itself into people via brain implants, prosthetic limbs, cloned organs. It is not outside us but under our skin, inside our minds. Technology pervades the human self ; the goal is the merging of man and machine.

Cyberpunk is a combination of high tech and low life. In this world of the future cities have become "sprawls" where only the strong survive. There is bleakness and dread and "extacy". In this world, as in any world, there are those who live on its margins : criminals, outcasts... and those who live in the world of the "sinless", who are not necesserily registered in the world database. Cyberpunk focuses on these people, these "lovers of freedom" who often use the ultratechnology designed to control them to fight back. The story lines usually bend toward the world of the illegal and there is often a sense of moral ambiguity; simply fighting the "system" does not make these characters "heroes" or "good" in the traditional sense.

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And you can bet any body part you'd care to name that, had I had even the slightest least inkling of a clue that I would still be answering questions about this word nearly 18 years later, I would have bloody well trademarked the damned thing!

Nonetheless, I didn't, and that's the first point I want to stress. The term cyberpunk is in the public domain, and NO ONE has the right to trademark Cyberpunk™ the comic book, or Cyberpunk™ the card game, or

Cyberpunk™ the crappy derivative franchised YA novel series.

-- Bruce Bethke

References

[The Cybernetic Delirium of Norbert Wiener](#)