The Etymology of Cyberpunk

Bruce Bethke
2001

In the early spring of 1980 I wrote a little story about a bunch of teenage hackers. From the very first draft this story had a name, and lo, the name was --

CYBERPUNK

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 as you're probably aware, the c-word has gone on to have a fascinating career all its own. At this late date I am not trying to claim unwarranted credit or tarnish anyone else's glory (frankly, I'd much rather people were paying attention to what I'm writing *now*). But for those folks who are obsessed with history, here, in tightly encapsulated form, is the story behind the story.

The invention of the c-word was a conscious and deliberate act of creation on my part. I wrote the story in the early spring of 1980, and from the very first draft, it was titled "Cyberpunk". In calling it that, I was actively *trying* to invent a new term that grokked the juxtaposition of punk attitudes and high technology. My reasons for doing so were purely selfish and market-driven : I wanted to give my story a snappy, one-word title that editors would remember.

Offhand, I'd say I succeeded.

How did I actually create the word ? The way any new word comes into being, I guess : through synthesis. I took a handful of roots --cyber, techno, et al-- mixed them up with a bunch of terms for socially misdirected youth, and tried out the various combinations until one just plain sounded right.

IMPORTANT POINT ! I never claimed to have invented cyberpunk *fiction* ! That honor belongs primarily to William Gibson, whose 1984 novel, *Neuromancer*, was the real defining work of "The Movement" (at the time, Mike Swanwick argued that the movement writers should properly be termed *neuromantics*, since so much of what they were doing was clearly imitation *Neuromancer*).

Then again, Gibson shouldn't get sole credit either. Pat Cadigan ("Pretty Boy Crossover"), Rudy Rucker (*Software*), W.T. Quick (*Dreams of Flesh and Sand*), Greg Bear (*Blood Music*), Walter Jon Williams (*Hardwired*), Michael Swanwick (*Vacuum Flowers*)...the list of early '80s writers who made important contributions towards defining the trope defies my ability to remember their names. Nor was it an immaculate conception : John Brunner (*Shockwave Rider*), Anthony Burgess (*A Clockwork Orange*), and perhaps even Alfred Bester (*The Stars My Destination*) all were important antecedents of the thing that became known as cyberpunk fiction.

Me ? I've been told that my main contribution was inventing the stereotype of the punk hacker with a mohawk. That, and I *named* the beast, of course.