The Cyberpunks Reinvent Science Fiction

Daniel Riche

For the past ten years, science fiction has meandered along, often repetitive, boring and banal. SF's staunchest defenders turned their backs on the genre, and the classics remained gathering dust on library shelves. But seemingly, out of nowhere, a new wave of authors has cropped up throughout the US. Young, knowledgeable, funny and mean, they've reinvented the product. The name they've chosen for themselves flaps in the air like a banner. Cyber for "cybernetics", a word that doesn't mean very much, but brings to mind the most advanced technologies and the green light of the computer screen; and punks because their style echoes that kind of rock music. Cyberpunks.

The term was coined by Gardner Dozois, an American writer, in an attempt to describe the work of William Gibson, whose novel, Neuromancer, was a great hit, winning three respected awards : the Hugo, the Nebula and the Philip K. Dick Award. The term was so successful that both William Gibson and many other authors, whose works were published in the last few years, claimed it for themselves.

There is also a second Cyberpunk wave consisting of such writers as Jack Dann, John Shirley and Kim Stanley Robinson, amongst others.

With its technologic and provocative connotations cyberpunk faithfully expresses the new authors' ambitions. Their texts are fast, incisive, ironic and disconcerting, and relate time, reality, and changes that are being wrought in the present by new technologies and computer science. Gone are the Galactic Empires, and consequently, the aggressive alien and the confused ET's. They are replaced by a universe of synthesis, both precise and sardonic, full of telematic pirates, peripheral cyborgs and worlds that oscillate between laughter and frenzy, luck and amnesia, action and entropy. What better way is there to present these giants of this new and insolent fiction than letting them talk about their worlds.

Greg Bear (*Blood Music* and *Eon*) : "I think that the term cyberpunk is an abomination and I don't recognize myself in that movement. The cyberpunks are revolutionary only in name, all they really care about is selling as many of their books as the can... People like Gibson, Rucker and Sterling have a sensitivity which is much more European than mine. I feel much more American than they are, in the sense that I think I'm more egalitarian and more open in my options and choices... Our perception of science and technology has changed a lot since a few years back. Science has become a major cultural success, a form of art, in its own way... If I had been prevented from becoming a science-fiction writer, I would have shot my brains out... For the first time in history, with the advent of Reagan's SDI, science fiction has really had an impact on world politics, because SDI has influenced politics, even though it doesn't yet exist... I'm not ashamed of Reagan, but he worries me... As a Democrat, I'm ill at ease when I see that the Republicans have all the good ideas".

William Gibson (*Neuromancer* and *Count Zero*) : "I never studied science, but I use science and technology to conjure up new images, to create the surroundings and the atmosphere for my novels. I could say that I use scientific language in a poetic fashion. I'm a supplier of popular icons... I have a feeling that we're living in an era of rapid changes and we don't realize what's happening. My work, consequently, consists of taking real, everyday life and transforming it into a fantasy, to make it more acceptable. In the sense, I deal more with social criticism than with future perspective... My triple prize winning has made my existence a lot easier, but I have the impression that being widely accepted sort of neutralizes us one-time "angry young men". I don't think,

however, that success has corrupted me... I don't really belong to a group or a school of thought - I am part of the generation of people who have no special ties, but happened to land on the publishing world all at the same time. People have made up a dozen or so words to try to define us. None has really satisfied me until now".

Hell, that was just one and one-quarter pages of text, and you are CRAZY if you think I'm gonna type the remaining one and three-quarters. Besides, that was all William Gibson had to say anyway, and I'm tire and sore.

About *Max Headroom* : they used the word "ice" in a similar manner to the way Mr. Gibson used it in *Count Zero*. There ARE other similarities though, but that was the only one I feel really suck out and bordered on plagiarism. Don't get me wrong, I like Max, but I thought "Jeez. Now if they make a movie of it the people who see it will think HE stole it from Max Headroom".

Even though I'm tired and sore, I'll add a few more things about Cyberpunk. There was an article in the April '87 issue of *Computer Language* that was titled "Timothy Leary and the Cyberpunks". It is basically an interview with Leary. The main focus of it is on some software that Leary has written that is called "Mind Mirror", which, come to think of it, would be interesting to run online here for the users to use... Hmm... Anyway, Leary is also developing some software program called "Mind Movies". "In my software movies, you decide on who the hero will be and what attributes he or she will have. The script keeps coming up and you have choices. At the end, the movie is your unique version of the book. I want to give people the tools to create things themselves".

The first Mind Movie will be based on, you guessed it, *Neuromancer*. Novelist William Burroughs is working with Leary on the script for the first Mind Movie, which is based on William Gibson's book *Neuromancer*, about a Cyberpunk computer kid. Keith Haring, a graffiti artist, is doing much of the graphics, Helmut Newton the still photography, and New Wave rock group Devo the soundtrack. The last two sentences are direct quotes from the article but I forgot the quote marks. The rest will have quote marks in the proper places.

"Dr. Leary is, and always has been, a psychologist. In the 1950's he was well known for devising psychometric techniques that gave the individual the ability to diagnose him or herself. That's why he was invited to teach a Harvard University. Leary was also very prominent in the development of innovative group therapy techniques before the 1960s cultural revolution. With his current foray into "software for the mind", however, many people have begun attaching the slogan "Turn on, tune in, and boot up" to him. But he doesn't really appreciate the tone of this twist on the famous 1960s phrase "Tune in, turn on, drop out". Psychology has to do with human thinking and cognition, and I see the computer as a device for processing thoughts and ideas", he maintains. "I'm convinced as a psychologist that one of the many reasons for the conflict, destruction, and disorder categorizing human behavior today is the technology we use to think, which is abysmally destructive and confusing", says Leary. Because letters "don't mean anything", he claims people make up nonsense syllables. And yet in a discipline such as chemistry we use letters like C, H, O and N to clearly indicate the elements carbon, hydrogen, oxygen, and nitrogen. "These letters mean something to everybody in the real world", he says. "Throughout the planet you may call water 'aqua', 'vassa,' or 'd'leau'. There are literally thousands of ways to describe water in an oral or verbal tradition, and yet nobody understands what anyone else is talking about. But if you just write the letters H2O, in every culture people will know what you are talking about".

And Leary believes computers may be the key to closing this "information gap". The word computer is defined by most dictionaries as a hand-operated electronic device for processing or communicating human thought. This definition can be extrapolated, Leary says, to include the three techniques humans have historically used or "computing" (processing their thoughts).

The first of these techniques is muscular (gestures and sounds). The second is written, involving either hand-operated (a papyrus and plume or pen) or mechanical methods (such as the reproduction of books, which uses letters). The third is electronic, involving computers, which Leary refers to as "thought appliances". "I love the word 'appliance'", he says with a smile. "Because Big Brother doesn't want appliances. He wants things like

systems and AI combines".

But Leary believes that computers exist as appliances that help the individual think for him or herself. His definition also implies use on a mass scale. "A few deces ago, only big companies or countries had the right to use computers", he says. Today, however, "The average American has perhaps 30 to 50 machines in his or her home, although there's still a big industry of airplanes and rockets and tanks. But there's no question that in the liberal, democratic, industrial countries, such as North America and Western Europe, every person in every home will depend more and more on individual appliances. The notion of machines being appliances for the pleasure, whim, and comfort of the individual is really very new and honestly quite American". Leary claims that in the Soviet Union the Xerox machine is one of the most feared entities because with it ideas can get out quite freely. Also feared are the underground publications called Samizdats, which advocate individual growth. "Of course, it's always true that a new technology is always controlled by the conquerers, military, and bureaucrats", Leary says. "They're the only ones who have the energy and power to build a tank, steam engine, or whatever. But then the next generation of people come along, and you can't stop human instinct to think for itself. You can hold it down, but in every situation it springs forth".

Contrary to popular perceptions, Leary claims he has never advocated drugs. "That's ridiculous. That's like advocating that no one has a right to tell anyone else what to do with their lives", he says. "I'e always been a moderate, and I've always been pro-choice. Drugs are chemicals that can change your thinking. There's no question about that".

In the 1960s, Leary claims that he used chemicals to activate different circuits in his brain and help change his consciousness. "Drugs are technologies", he says, and submits that individuals should have the right to change their consciousnesses any time they want to. "But Big Brother doesn't want that", he says. "Every bureaucracy is against the Cyberpunk use of drugs because drugs are a way to change your mind. Big Brother wants to control what you think. He finds the idea of individuals changing their consciousness alarming". Yet Leary contends that anything involving an individual freedom to think for him or herself will always have negative overtones. Even so, Leary admits that he's honored to be called a "dangerous kook".

"The very fact that my ideas have gained such widespread consciousness is recognition of my nonviolent and free expression of ideas. Why am I so dangerous ? Because of my ideas. And I welcome that. But he also concedes he has been hurt by rumors that he is "brain-damaged". "What's ruined my image is the allegation that my brain has been burned out, that I'm toasted, that I'm a babbling idiot", says Leary. "This is what any orthodoxy does with someone whose ideas they can't handle".

Leary has come to recognize these allegations as barriers to overcome. "Of course, they've complicated my life", he admits. "And yet it's my challenge to show that I'm not brain damaged. I've never been wounded by imprisonment or slander - that's just how humans play. If you set yourself as an individual who is playing the game of ideas and really competing for the consciousness of the country, they're going to throw everything against you".

"What is more deplorable than the use of drugs for pleasure or with intellectual intent", says Leary, "is that many of the people who take and abuse drugs often see no other means of personal reward. If you're a deprived person, say from a ghetto, you're more likely to use drugs because it's the only way you can reward yourself", says Leary. "And that's unfortunate. The answer is to give people better ways to cope".

Leary admits that he has used (and still does use) any drug of choice. "But I do it prudently, moderately, and cautiously", he says. "I have a thousand other things I can do to amuse myself. I don't want to be strung out, spun out, freaked out, or blitzed out". Why ? Because the human mind is to valuable a thing to waste. "We have been endowed with a brain that contains a hundred billion neurons, and each neuron has the capacity of a microcomputer. So everyone's carrying them around, but we're not all using them. It's hungry; it's like a muscle.

It wants to be used !"

But if the human brain is just a bunch of micros networked together, will there come a time when we can duplicate or improve the mind's abilities ? "So-called artificial intelligence is an oxymoron", Leary says with conviction. "Intelligence is natural. Humans get together and build systems for processing data faster, for filing, for expert systems, and so on. But it all generates from the 'wet ware' - the brain".

Leary accepts what he calls the challenge of AI, but he feels that humans can always outwit the big AI combines. "Who controls clusters of electrons ?" he asks. "Are electrons demons moving through space ? Can you pull them down ? With electronic media, you just can't apply the laws of the industrial society anymore. If in 20 years I'm dead, under the old industrial way of thinking my inheritors might still control the copyright to books I'm writing now. You can't do that with information that's in the form of electronic clusters".

In Timothy Leary's opinion, computer programmers are the true "Cyberpunks" and the real heroes of today. "They have the intelligence, courage, and imagination to access high technology - particularly knowledge technology - for their pleasure, purpose, profit, or whim". To Leary, it's people like Captain Midnight and Captain Crunch - nicknames for two men who illegally broke into computer and television channels - that define the spirit of Cyberpunk, a notion he thinks was born within the hacker culture during the mid-1970s.

Leary also credits hackers with being the original frontier Libertarians. "I like the word 'punk' because it sets people apart and shows that what they're doing is unauthorized", he says. "It's no accident that Steve Jobs and Steve Wozniak were both long-haired, barefoot freaks. They were the original Cyberpunks. Their names will go down with great Libertarians in history".

The word Cyberpunk connects Herbert Weiner's notions of cybernetics and control systems with the idea of someone who uses technology for personal growth, freedom, and unauthorized communication, according to Leary. "I'm open to the idea that human beings come in different models and that certain individuals are able to handle more amounts of raw data more effectively than others", he says. "I think most programmers have nervous systems that are simply faster and can deal with more data. They also have to deal with an unforgiving mathematical system". Leary also views members of the programmer community as the thought processors of the future and disagrees with the stereotype of programmers as socially alienated, uncommunicative, and uncreative. Even so, "Programmers should be proud of these accusations and labels", he says. "It makes you different. Naturally people will be suspicious of difference, which means you've got to be twice as strong, twice as tough, and twice as skillful. That's the test of innovation".

He does admit, however, that programmers haven't developed the sophisticated, literary, cultural, aesthetic, or even erotic aspects of human thinking as much as they might. "They're so involved in such a challenging reality that they tend to neglect other aspects of their humanity", he says.

Leary has some strong concerns for the future of humanity and the Information Age. America has gone through a drop in intelligence, Leary says, with superstition, violence, racism, tribalism, and religious fanaticism on the rise. "The antidote to this is a shot of intelligence", Leary believes. "It's not going to be done by the teachers, the politicians, or even the writers. It's going to be done by computer programmers, software designers, and software artists. The human race is facing a tremendous crisis. And it's the job of those people involved with computers as thought appliances to raise the intelligence level of our culture by at least 10%. If we could just change things upward by 10%, that networking would be irresistible".

While this is a great responsibility and a wonderful challenge for those he refers to as the Cyberpunks, Leary feels it is also an attainable goal. "Cyberpunk is a very heroic term to me", he says. "And the tradition of the computer hacker as Cyberpunk goes back throughout human history. It's always been these individualistic things that kept us thinking".

Computer hackers, who by definition are individualists, are a rare breed. "They are the ones who go where no man [or woman] has gone before", says Leary. "They will go down in history the way all great explorers have gone down".

"Even in the worst scenario of a Big Brother situation, you're going to have hackers who are in there in the bowels. They understand it better than the dictators. And because of that, there will always be hackers, and programmers, and Cyberpunks".

Ok, now it's me again your friendly neighborhood cyberpunk. Just wanted you to know that *Mind Mirror* is made by Activision and is available for most computers. Haven't tried it, but it's what Dr. Leary calls a thought processor.