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Cyberpunk and Neuromanticism

As a label, "cyberpunk" is perfection. It suggests the apotheosis of postmodernism. On the one hand, pure negation: of manners, history, philosophy, politics, body, will, affect, anything mediated by cultural memory; on the other, pure attitude: all is power, and "subculture," and the grace of Hip negotiating the splatter of consciousness as it slams against the hard-tech future, the techno-future of artificial immanence, where all that was once nature is simulated and elaborated by technical means, a future world-construct that is as remote from the "lessons of history" as the present mix-up is from the pitiful science fiction fantasies of the past that tried to imagine us. The oxymoronic conceit in "cyberpunk" is so slick and global it fuses the high and the low, the complex and the simple, the governor and the savage, the techno-sublime and rock and roll slime. The only thing left out is a place to stand. So one must move, always move.

Those are evocations; it's harder to say what the label actually refers to. The best-known cyberpunk manifesto, Bruce Sterling's introduction to the *Mirrorshades* anthology, cannily describes the cyberpunk school's aspirations not in terms of conceits, but as the reflection of a new cultural synthesis being born in the Eighties, making it essentially a paradoxical form of realism. Cyberpunk art, Sterling says, captures "a new kind of integration. The overlapping of worlds that were formerly separate: the realm of high tech and the modern pop underground [ix]."

> This integration has become our decade's crucial source of cultural energy. The work of the cyberpunks is paralleled through the Eighties pop culture: in rock video; in the hacker underground; in the jarring street tech of hip-hop and scratch music; in the synthesizer rock of London and Tokyo. This phenomenon, this dynamic, has a global range; cyberpunk is its literary incarnation . . .
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> Suddenly a new alliance is becoming evident: an integration of technology and the Eighties counterculture. An unholy alliance of the technical world and the world of organized dissent—the underground world of pop, visionary fluidity, and street-level anarchy. [x]

Heady stuff. An art reflecting these trends must surely be the vanguard white male art of the age, a literature competing and allied with video-games, MTV and no wave rock. But Sterling's claims immediately raise some questions. The question of the "integration" for one. What is this world of a high-tech pop underground? The punk club world of Sonic Youth and Pussy Galore, acts never to be simulated on MTV? The violently sexist stylized gangster-chic of unsanitized ghetto rap? Where's the "organized dissent," and how does it jive with "street-level anarchy"? Sterling hints at some new political attitude with technical know-how and anti-establishment feelings, an "alliance," and "integration," a "counterculture." To put it mildly, it's hard to see the "integrated" political-aesthetic motives of alienated subcultures that adopt the high-tech tools of the establishment they are supposedly alienated from. It seems far more reasonable to assume that the "integrating," such as it is, is being done by the dominant telechtronic cultural powers, who—as cyberpunk writers know very well—are insatiable in their appetite for new commodities and commodity-fashions. The big question for Eighties art is whether any authentic countercultural art can exist for long without being transformed into self-annihilating simulations of themselves for mass consumption, furthering central cultural aims. Given the chances of cyberpunk's success in the amusement-marketplace, its potential for movie options, i.e., its ripe co-optability, one might suspect Sterling's enthusiasm for his "integration" is based on less than thorough social analysis, if not on less than sincere motives.

Another interesting question is exactly what cyberpunk literature can offer that video games, hip-hop, and Rejection Front rock cannot. At one point in *Mirrorshades*, Sterling speaks of the "classic cyberpunk mix" of "mythic images and technosocial politics" (125). But to my mind that is a very different thing from the putative "integration"—closer to the traditional ways of SF perhaps, but pretty far from the street and counterculture.

It's also hard to see how Sterling's claims are borne out by the writing associated with the *Mirrorshades* anthology. Right off, one should be suspicious of any movement said to include writers as remarkable, and remarkably different, as Greg Bear, Rudy Rucker, and William Gibson. Bear's and Rucker's inclusion among the cyberpunks smacks more of friendly endorsement than of truly shared aesthetic aims. And it's hard to tell whether Sterling means his "literary incarnation" to be a direction within the popular science-fiction industry, a visionary style transcending the SF ghetto-boundaries, or an artistic "integration" of high and low culture, or all three. In the first case, "cyberpunk" might actually be just an intra-professional label—like the old "New Wave"—intended to distinguish a new, more daring generation of writers from the old farts who once controlled the means of literary production. The second and third require some convincing proofs.

Maybe one shouldn't want too much "philosophy" from a style that proclaims its allegiance to pulp hard SF as proudly as Sterling does. Still, how many formulaic tales can one wade through in which a self-destructive but sensitive young protagonist with an (implant/prosthesis/telechtronic talent) that makes the evil (megacorporations/police states/criminal underworlds) pursue him through (wasted urban landscapes/elite luxury enclaves/eccentric space stations) full of grotesque (haircuts/clothes/self-mutilations/rock music/sexual hobbies/designer drugs/telechtronic gadgets/nasty new weapons/exteriorized hallucinations) representing the (mores/fashions) of modern civilization in terminal decline, ultimately hooks up with rebellious and tough-talking (youth/artificial intelligence/rock cults) who offer the alternative, not of (community/socialism/traditional values/transcendental vision), but of supreme, life-affirming *hipness*, going with the flow which now flows in the machine, against the spectre of a world-subverting (artificial intelligence/multinational corporate web/evil genius)? Yet

judging from even the best of writers in Sterling's anthology, for cyberpunks, "hipness is all."

The postmodern sensibility has come to suspect the idea of depth, "profundity," with a vengeance; true punks don't even have to know how to play the instruments they perform with, true hackers need no other goals than challenges to their programming skills. Still, there's a line between suspicion, and a belief that the truest cultural struggles of the strange Eighties are style wars. Hip is a hard goddess. Who is so hip as to be above Hip? There's a very tricky premise in that aesthetic, in presenting the *idea* of cyberpunk's Meta-Hip as a mode that can transcend the trash and competition for shelf-space of Eighties SF; for if Sterling's cyberpunks are right, and win their aesthetic wager, they lose: their style will die with the next trend in the telematic culture-industry, with the next style to be certified as a hip "integration." Hence, perhaps, all those self-destructive artists in their works. Hence the second- and third-rate writing that passes for style, not even worrying about art.

My suspicion is that most of the literary cyberpunks bask in the light of the one major writer who is original and gifted enough to make the whole movement seem original and gifted. That figure is William Gibson, whose first novel, *Neuromancer*, is to my mind one of the most interesting books of the postmodern age. I suggest then that we think of cyberpunk not as a movement in the U.S. and Japanese SF trade, but as a more encompassing aesthetic—as it is embodied by Gibson and certain other postmodern artists. Viewed like this, cyberpunk is a legitimate international artistic style, with profound philosophical and aesthetic premises. It has already produced a body of significant work in literature (Gibson's novels) and especially in film: Riddley Scott's *Alien* and *Blade Runner*, *RoboCop*, and Cronenberg's *Videodrome*. It has its philosophers: Delleuze and Guattari, Jean Baudrillard, and the Canadian Arthur Kroker; it even has, in Michael Jackson and Ronald Reagan, its hyperreal icons of the human simulacrum infiltrating reality.

I spoke of philosophy. Although the main point of the label "cyberpunk" may be to signify the irreverence of the high-tech hipster, a macho substitute for the neutre "hacker," the terms of the oxymoron imply certain conceptual possibilities that the most ambitious cyberpunk artists are very well aware of. Both

cybernetics and punk transcend familiar distinctions. Cybernetics provides the pretext for the mechanized control of social life, of the body itself, and all of it through the delicate nets of non-machine-derived mathematical formulae. Cybernetics represents the hardening and exteriorization of certain vital forms of knowledge, the crystallization of the Cartesian spirit into material objects and commodities. Cybernetics is already a paradox: simultaneously a sublime vision of human power over chance, and a dreary augmentation of multinational capitalism's mechanical process of expansion—so far characterized by almost uninterrupted positive feedback. Cybernetics is, thus, part natural philosophy, part necromancy, part ideology.

So is punk, but in reverse. A self-stupefying and self-mutilating refusal to dignify or trust anything that has brought about the present world, even the human body, all for the promise of an authenticity so undefinable it can't ever be known, let alone co-opted. Punk is sentimentalism's *Schone Seele* inverted: it slam-dances angrily out of the world, playing "power chords" to deafness. Yet for all that, it embodies philosophy. The punk is a sarcastic mirror-reflection of the social-engineers' dream. The punk pretends to be a soft machine, but the machine is savage and intractable. "Cyber/punk"—the ideal postmodern couple: a machine philosophy that can create the world in its own image and a self-mutilating freedom, that is that image snarling back.

This broader sense of cyberpunk reflects the increasingly pervasive influence of a particular moment of science fiction on postmodern culture: the moment when science fiction depicts what one theorist, Zoe Sofia, calls the "collapse of the future on the present." Beginning in the 50s science fiction writers began to abandon the conventions of expansionist SF: heroic planetary exploration, space travel without boredom, the dignity of aliens, small groups of harmonious researchers, and in style, lucid, utilitarian prose emphasizing the no-nonsense attitudes of adventurer-scientists in command and control. The expansive forms of SF reflected the optimistic and secure ideology of scientistic humanism, which held that classical liberal virtues have some moral-ethical control over the forces of technological production. Moreover, the mythologies of the expansion of human consciousness into "outer space" were to represent guarantees that they would be implanted or strengthened

in the future. The point of the expansive mode was to show that human consciousness can contain the future. Its future was the dominant ideology of the present purified of uncertainties. In Asimov's robots, artificial intelligences were endowed with superhuman ethics; majestically superior intelligences, like the Krell in ***Forbidden Planet***, fell pray to "monsters of the Id"; and radically different forms of being worked hand in hand with human adventurers in Clement's ***Mission of Gravity***, proving the ideal synthesis of bourgeois technicism and bourgeois virtue on all possible worlds.

Such expansion was usually represented as a sort of manic explosion, in which projecticles of human consciousness fly giddily out into "outer space," where they encounter either the variety of being or the final proof of the universality of consciousness. They either learn to learn more and better, or they learn to accept the laws of ***moira***. The important knowledge was to be gained by spreading out. In SF's expansive phase, it did not matter whether the "moral" was liberal-optimistic as ***Star Trek*** or Freudian-conservative as ***Forbidden Planet***; the truth was discovered through exploration of what was not Earth. Hence, the Earth was placed in a bubble that insured its safe and secure historical development within liberal constraints.

In the 60s this vector was reversed, and most writers who used science as a metaphor in their work dwelt on its inherent paradoxes, its reverses, its self-defeating assumptions. Most of all, they depicted the destruction of liberal ideology by autonomous technology. Nowadays this SF of implosion dominates everywhere. Where there was uncontrolled expansion, the ***afflatus*** of an expanding technicist ego hallucinating cosmic humanism, now there is implosion, a drastic, careening plunge toward some inconceivable center of gravity that breaks up the categories of rationality by jamming them together. While the expansion was fueled by the desire for containment, implosion is fueled by the desire for dissolution.

The metaphor of implosion comes up often in theoretical writings on the crisis of representation and politics in the postmodern condition, especially in the work of Jean Baudrillard and Arthur Kroker, who might be taken as the central theorists of cyberpunk philosophy. Theory and metaphor follow practice here. The boom fields of current scientific research—which are naturally the favored topoi of current SF—also demonstrate this sharp inward turn. Microbiology, data-

storage miniaturization, bionic prosthetics, artificial intelligence, particle physics, the world-shrinking global grid of communication-and-control systems, and the marked decrease in enthusiasm for space exploration (which must not be attributed solely to the Challenger disaster): all these interests require the radical shrinking of focus onto microcosms, and all imply the impossibility of drawing clear boundaries among perceptual and cognitive, indeed even ontological, categories. The current scientific scene is entranced by the microstudy of boundaries no longer believed to be fundamental: between life and non-life, parasite and host, human and machine, great and small, body-brain and cosmos. Expansive SF was based on historical analogies of colonialism and social Darwinism, the power struggles of the old against the new, the ancient against the scientific. The topoi of implosive SF are based on analogies of the invasion and transformation of the body by alien entities of our own making. Implosive science fiction finds the scene of SF problematics not in imperial adventures among the stars, but in the body-physical/body-social and a drastic ambivalence about the body's traditional—and terrifyingly uncertain—integrity.

This is cyberpunk's formative culture. It is related to, and overlaps, the literature of horror, especially the '70s and '80s's splash and splatter films. But different values are involved in the two genres. The horror genre has always played with the violation of the body, since it adopts as its particular "object" *fear*—the violent disruption of the sense of security, which, precisely because it is a sense, works from within the body, the house of the senses. Hence, in horror, the house/body's integrity is generally threatened from within, using analogues of disease and unconscious psychosomatic pathology, or by evil entities that hate the flesh and wish not only to destroy it, but to torture and degrade it. The demiurge of horror works out a drama of pollution and curse—which terrorizes the mind by assuring it it will feel the utmost conceivable pain.

The drama of pollution and curse has recently been raised, in the horror genre, to a level of confusion and fury where splattering brains and organs without bodies are required to show the punishment of the physical. In the past, it was bad enough to violate the dignity of life (anachronistically preserved in such current crimes as "wrongful death" and "depriving of civil rights," i.e., homicide). Strangling and poisoning seem almost

clean, intellectual crimes nowadays, far less interesting than the savage dismemberments we have come to expect. SF does not have to emulate such effects from the horror genre (except perhaps to increase sales). But as it concentrates increasingly on the vulnerability of the body, it deals more and more with the ways in which science reveals and creates new ways of intruding on that vulnerability. (Greg Bear's marvellous ***Blood Music*** is a model of the way SF can use the ambivalence of the scientific attitude to "redeem" the devices of horror.)

Even when the same images or motifs are used as in the horror genre, they have a different value in SF because they attack not the image of the body, but the ***idea*** of the image of the body, the very possibility of "imaging" the body (to borrow a metaphor from cyber-medicine). This implies that the object of attack is a calm, intellectual-rational still-point, the locus of reflection and constraint that both science and much art assume as the black box mediator of experience into design—the prerequisite for conceiving of a psychodynamics, or indeed a psyche in the first place. This is where the computer plays a decisive role both as actor and symbol. For the computer represents the possibility of modelling everything that exists in the phenomenal world, of breaking down into information and then simulating perfectly in infinitely replicable form those processes that pre-cybernetic humanity had held to be inklings of transcendence. With the computer, the problem of identity is moot, and the idea of reflection is transformed in to the algorithm of replication. SF's computer wipes out the Philosophical God and ushers in the demiurge of thought-as-technique.

The horrifying element in implosive SF is the disruption of knowledge in its most tangible form: the madness of the knower. Cyberpunk is part of a trend in science fiction dealing increasingly with madness, more precisely with the most philosophically interesting phenomenon of madness: hallucination (derangement). Tales are constructed around the literal/physical exteriorization of images representing the breakdown of stable, standard-giving rational perceptual and conceptual categories. So the most important sense is not fear, but ***dread***. Hallucination is always saturated with affect. It is perception ***instigated*** by affect. The threefold nightmare of the scientific mind is that such a process, would it extend beyond the confines of individual skulls, will create its own "other" reality, invalidate previous articulations, and use the scientific

mind as its agent, or its victim. It is natural to expect that as technology proves more and more able to construct the world in its own image (i.e., to create simulacra to replace the "real" and the "original")—indeed, to restructure the operations of the multinational capitalism that enables it to exist—there will be an increasing sense of its hallucinatory nature, its arbitrary yet *overdetermining* power. For there seems to be little contest between the overdetermination of technology and underdetermination of theory.

More and more SF treats hallucination as an object in the world—a privileged object, since it does not merely exist among other things, but changes their ontic status by its very "exteriorized" existence. The trend began seriously with Philip Dick, J. G. Ballard and the New Wave, the '60's fascination with hallucinogens and altered states of consciousness; and already with Dick there is difficulty distinguishing between mystical truths and machine dreams. By the time we get to cyberpunk, reality has become a case of nerves—i.e., the interfusion of nervous system and computer-matrix, sensation and information, so all battles are fought out in feeling and mood, with dread exteriorized in the world itself. The distance required for reflection is squeezed out as the world implodes: when hallucinations and realia collapse into each other, there is no place from which to reflect.

What cyberpunk—at least in its most successful works—has going for it is a rich thesaurus of metaphors linking the organic and the electronic. Most of these metaphors lie ready to hand in the telechtronics-saturated culture. Psychology and even physiology are wiring, nerves are circuits, drugs and sex and other thrills turn you on, you get a buzz, you get wired, you space out, you go on automatic. They work the other way, too, of course: there are "virus programs" constructed to work against other information-systems' "immune systems." The advantage these metaphors have over the more deliberate and reflective symbols that usually go into the cybernetic fiction discussed in David Porush's *The Soft Machine*, is that they are embedded in the constantly shifting context of a global culture drawn into ever newer, ever stranger webs of communication command and control. The metaphors themselves have a life. And in the hands of a master, like Gibson, the fuzzy links can become a subtly constructed, but always merely implied, four-level hierarchy of evolving systems of information-

processing, from the individual human being's biological processes and personality, through the total life of society, to nonliving artificial intelligences, and ultimately to new entities created out of those AIs. In *Neuromancer*, each level of the hierarchy is meaningless to itself, yet it creates the material/informational conditions for the evolution of the next higher one, and all participate in a quasi-cosmic "dance of biz."

Cyberpunk is fundamentally ambivalent about the breakdown of the distinctions between human and machine, between personal consciousness and machine consciousness. In almost every significant cyberpunk work, the breakdown is initiated from outside, usually by the pressures exerted by multinational capitalism's desire for something better than the fallible human being. The villains come from the human corporate world, who use their great technical resources to create beings that program out the glitches of the human: the Company in *Alien* seeking a perfect war-machine; the consortium in *RoboCop* constructing the perfect crime-fighter; in *Blade Runner*, Terrell Industries, who have created the Nexus-4 replicants, the perfect servant-worker-warrior; in *Videodrome the conspiracy determined to wipe the Earth clean of anachronistic sadism-loving people; in Neuromancer, the Tessier-Ashpool clan.*

And yet, out of the anti-human evil that has created conditions intolerable for normal human life, comes some new situation. This new situation is then either the promise of an apocalyptic entrance into a new evolutionary synthesis of the human and the machine, or an all-encompassing hallucination in which true motives, and true affects, cannot be known. *Neuromancer*'s myth of the evolution of a new cosmic entity out of human technology is perhaps the only seriously positive version of the new situation—but even it offers only limited transcendence, since the world is much the same in Gibson's second novel, *Count Zero*, set some years later.

Along with this ambivalent mythopoeia goes cyberpunk artists' irresistible attraction to the nervous excesses of malaise. In a universe where the forces of innovation are constantly tinkering with human beings' own information-processing systems, through telematics, drugs, and surgical intervention, the regulator of experience (ego? self? spirit?) can no longer accept any experience as worth more than any other. The only standard is thrill, the ability to "light up the circuits" of the nervous-matrix, sensation so strong that it can draw consciousness into

the conditions of its own possibility. Rather than putting the mind to sleep, thrill keeps the mind alert, allowing it to keep up with the velocities at which the production of sensation works. In Gibson's world, human beings have nothing left but thrill. It is all that power can offer, but it is also—the ambivalence again—the only way to create new conditions, since old philosophical-moral considerations mean nothing in a world where one can plug in another's feelings or a while personality-memory complex through "simstim" (simulated stimulus), assimilate a myriad of power-programs through "microsofts" plugged directly into "cranial jacks," be rebuilt, redesigned with special features or resurrected through nerve-splicing and elective surgery, or have one's consciousness kept intact after physical death entirely through a program.

So cyberpunks, like near-addicts of amphetamines and hallucinogens, write as if they are both victims of a life-negating system and the heroic adventurers of thrill. They can't help themselves, but their hip grace gets them through an amoral world, facing a future which, for all intents and purposes, has gone beyond human influence, and where the only way to live is in speed, speed to avoid being caught in the web, and getting rubbed out by the Yakuza, the AIs, the androids, the new corporate entities bent on their own self-elaboration. Here the speed of thrill substitutes for affection, reflection, and care, which require room and leisure and relaxation; so there are no families, no art, no crafting of natural materials, no lazy climbing out of the stream. (Where there is a hint of valuable art in the future, it is by psychotics or by marginal non-white folk who are somehow closer to the ancient, the latter a sentimental motif particularly dear to Gibson). Movement all the time: in plot, in theme, in style, and syntax. Huge amounts of new information—neologisms, innovations, twists of plot, secreted levels of hierarchy—are carried along an incredibly swift stream of narrative. In the world: drugs, "biz," metal travelling in cyberspace, orgasm without tenderness, and the constant, wearying drive to *do*, which translates into impelled work. Ultimately, sensation wears matter out. Humanity burns bright in its hotshot suicide; it may live on as "The New Flesh," which may not be flesh at all, and may preserve of us what we admire least.

The knowledge of "what we can do" and "what we can hope for" is left suspended, unasked.

Human intelligence has become a case of nerves, and the meaning of things, if it is to be revealed, will be by an intelligence "not for us."

For us is ***thrill*** and ***work***, and ***maybe*** hope that we will be in the right place at the right time to find the right combination of things, which will benefit our friends (unless they betray us).

All of the ambivalent solutions of cyberpunk works are instances/myths of bad faith, since they completely ignore the question of whether some political controls over technology are desirable, if not exactly possible. Cyberpunk is then the apotheosis of bad faith, apotheosis of the postmodern.

I don't mean that as pejoratively as it sounds. It goes along with the sophistication and ambivalence of cyberpunk artists that they know that their art is in bad faith. But in a world of absolute bad faith, where the real and the true are superceded by simulacra and the hyperreal, perhaps the only hope is in representing that bad faith appropriately.

But let's not get carried away. Cyberpunk artists acquire much of their power like the *poetes maudits* before them by dealing with the Devil. They aren't concerned with the implications of cybernetic knowledge for knowledge and identity—the dizzying process of constructing a self (as in McElroy's *Plus*)—or the philosophical problems of imagining a truly artificial intelligence (as in Lem's *His Master's Voice* or *Golem XIV*—the latter, the ruminations of a "luminal" megacomputer, the diametrical opposite of cyberpunk, in its meditative tedium). For the one thing that cyberpunk is fascinated with above all else, its ruling deity, is sleaze—the scummy addiction to thrill that can focus all of a person's imaginative power on a sensation that wipes out all discipline, and which at the same time sells books, attracts movie options, and generates sequels. They are not delirious fools. They know sleaze, because they have set up shop in the belly of the beast. They are canny men—almost all of them men (why would a woman care about a technological society she had not role in creating?)—who have an uncanny sense that the nightmarish neuromanticism is a powerful drug, too. Reflection on thrill can be a thrill, too, when an audience grows used to the technologies of reflection: replication, commentary, entertainment tonight. This romanticism does not repress "the meat" as the forebears did. This one has permitted itself enough distance to demand that "the meat" show its unruly self, show that it's not only not the enemy,

but that it's the victim—it can splatter, burst, writhe, pulsate, secrete, furiously publicize its anguish. It is helpless and sad, against the powers of exteriorized mind—whose modes are the hard, cruel, gunmetal cold, spiky, and unyielding ways of self-proliferating hard stuff. The flesh is sad, and then some—romance is a case of nerves.