A Very Short History of Cyberpunk

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Many people seem to think that William Gibson invented The cyberpunk genre in 1984, but in fact the cyberpunk aesthetic was alive well before *Neuromancer* (1984). For example, in my opinion, Ridley Scott's 1982 movie, *Blade Runner,* captures the quintessence of the cyberpunk aesthetic: a juxtaposition of high technology with social decay as a troubling allegory of the relationship between humanity and machines ---in particular, artificially intelligent machines. I believe the aesthetic of the movie originates from Scott's own vision, because I didn't really find it in the Philip K. Dick's novel, *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep* (1968), upon which the movie is (very loosely) based.

Neuromancer made a big splash not because it was the "first" cyberpunk novel, but rather, because it perfectly captured the Zeitgeist of anxiety and wonder that prevailed at the dawning of the present era of globalized economics, digital telecommunications, and exponential technological progress --things which we now take for granted but which, in the early 1980s were still new and frightening. For example, Gibson's novels exhibit a fascination with the "Japanification" of Western culture --then a major concern, but now a forgotten and laughable anxiety. This is also visible in the futuristic Los Angeles of Scott's *Blade Runner*.

Another early cyberpunk author is K.W. Jeter, whose imaginative and disturbing novels *Dr. Adder* (1984) and *The Glass Hammer* (1985) exemplify the dark underside of the genre. Some people also identify Rudy Rucker and Bruce Sterling as progenitors of cyberpunk. I beg to differ. Rudy Rucker is one of my favourite authors, and he has written several clever novels around themes of robot intelligence (for example, *Software* and *Wetware* , republished in a single volume as *Live Robots*). However, Rucker is just too upbeat and fun-loving to be called cyberpunk; his novels always come across as comedies, and lack the gritty, dystopian, noir quality that characterizes most cyberpunk. Rucker isn't cyberpunk... maybe "cyberhippy".

Bruce Sterling is talented and intelligent, but he has a huge ego and a tendency towards self-promotion that makes Camille Paglia look positively self-effacing by comparison. He claims to have basically "invented" cyberpunk, by editing the "first cyberpunk anthology", *Mirrorshades* (1986). Obviously Bruce and I differ on the definition of cyberpunk, because half the stuff in *Mirrorshades* doesn't seem very "punk" to me, and most of Bruce's writing certainly isn't. Maybe my concept of the genre is too restrictive, but it seems to me that, if Gibson is cyberPunk, and Rucker is cyberhippy, then Jeter is cyberGoth, P.K. Dick is maybe cyber-Beat Poet, and Sterling.... is cyberRock'n'Roll. Lots of flash and attitude, and a nice leather jacket, but is it really the music of a revolution?

Of course, cyberpunk was not the first science fiction to seriously examine philosophical questions related to artificial intelligence, the embodiment of human minds in computers, and related issues. The first SF author to seriously consider the ramifications of AI was probably Isaac Asimov, whose "Robot" stories of the 1940s and 1950s revolve around troubling questions about the rights and moral status of artificial minds. There is also a vast genre of philosophical literature and short fiction devoted to these problems. An excellent anthology of essays, parables, dialogues, and short stories on philosophical problems of mind and embodiment is *The Mind's Eye* (1981), edited by Douglas Hoffstadter and Daniel Dennet.

Hoffstadter is a cognitive scientist who studies the problems --both practical and philosophical --- of human and artificial intelligence. His 1979 book, *Godel, Escher, Bach: An Eternal Golden Braid* , won the Pullitzer prize, and is a brain-bending exploration of the paradoxical, recursive nature of consciousness.

Daniel Dennet is a philosopher; in my view, probably the smartest philosopher currently thinking about issues of minds and machines. His 1991 book, *Consciousness Explained*, while it falls short of its title, still contains some truly brilliant and revolutionary ideas.   In terms of moral questions about technology an early tale is Mary Shelly's *Frankenstein: The Modern Prometheus* (1818).   In the late 1980s and early 1990s, cyberpunk was "discovered" as an identifiable "genre" by the SF community, and, like its earlier musical namesake, it became instantly and thoroughly reified. Most of the "cyberpunk" novels written since then are self-conscious genre novels, and therefore inevitably cliché. One notable exception, of course, is Neal Stephenson, whose brilliant 1992 novel *Snowcrash* basically blew the genre apart.

Nowhere is the reification of cyberpunk more clear than in cinema. The low-budget British film *Max Headroom* (1986) perfectly captured cyberpunk's

pessimistic social assessment of present economic and technological trends. The political cynicism of the genre was exemplified by *RoboCop* (a 1987 film which is much better than I think its creators themselves intended). However, in the 1990s, Hollywood marketeers disovered the cyberpunk phenomena, and there followed a string of forgettable high-budget "Netsploitation" movies (e.g. *Hackers* (1995), *f2f, The Net* (1995), *Virtuosity* (1995), etc.).

The authors who have transcended this reification are those who do not identify themselves as "genre" authors; those who simply write about what they find philosophically interesting, and if it ends up sounding like "cyberpunk", it is only by accident. In my mind by far the most interesting of these is Greg Egan, an Australian author who has written some truly brilliant explorations of the philosophical questions surrounding machine intelligence. His early writing is rather weak from a purely "literary" point of view: clumsy narrative devices, stilted dialogue and poor characterization are the weak points of books which are simply overflowing with fascinating and original ideas. His more recent novels, *Distress* (1995) and *Diaspora* (1998), and his anthology *Luminous* (1998), are even more intellectually stimulating, however, and his skills as an author have now improved considerably.

Another author who has written extensively on issues of machine intelligence and mind embodiment is Vernor Vinge. His novel, *A Fire Upon the Deep* (1992), while more "cyber-space opera" than "cyberpunk" is, in my opinion, one of the finest pieces of science fiction ever written on these topics.

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