Good books are good books, period.
Everything else is just marketing.
–Michael Dirda

The term “cyberpunk” first appeared in the title of a short story by Bruce Bethke in 1983 and was later used by Gardner Dozois to categorize a certain type of sf that mixed technology with punk attitudes (Booker and Tomas 110), yet it wasn’t until Bruce Sterling began to propagandize the term that it gained a core set of tenets. A distinctly 80s phenomenon, cyberpunk sf combined the explosion of emerging personal technology with the philosophic worldview of postmodernism, where high/low culture and human/machine representations comingle, producing an ideology completely disruptive to the dominant social order. Accordingly, the social concerns of cyberpunk sf belong to the underground elements of society: the hackers, assassins, and thieves, rather than the bankers, CEOs, or politicians. SF critic Istvan Csicsery-Ronay, Jr. calls this reliance on the underground cyberpunk’s “ruling deity of sleaze and thrill” (“Cyberpunk” 193).

Cyberpunk also represented a reimagining of older sf movements, such as the New Wave and Hard sf, whose aesthetic concerns of literary style and extrapolated technology placed them in distinctly future worlds. In contrast, cyberpunk seems hopelessly infatuated with a decayed near-present; the urban areas and technology described in its texts seem just a few years ahead, not decades as in previous sf. And in cyberpunk sf, that technological progress happened to go very well and social utopianism happened to go very poorly. This dedication to the near-present marked off a specific territory for cyberpunk authors.
In his introduction to *Mirrorshades: A Cyberpunk Anthology*, Sterling comments that cyberpunk is the “integration of technology and Eighties counterculture. An unholy alliance of the technical world and the world of organized dissent—the underground world of pop culture, visionary fluidity, and street-level anarchy” (xii). Sterling implicitly views this technological progress as a means of opposition to the dominant culture. Technology allows the marginalized, “street-level” population the ability to break down the social order, which crushes them under the stifling weight of multinational capitalistic greed. Sterling notices this aspect of technological rebellion, of using the tools of the oppressors against them, when he writes:

the gap is crumbling in an unexpected fashion. Technical culture has gotten out of hand. The advances of the sciences are so deeply radical, so disturbing, upsetting, and revolutionary, that they can no longer be contained. They are surging into culture at large; they are invasive; they are everywhere. The traditional power structure, the traditional institutions have lost control of the pace of change. (xii)

Cyberpunk’s dystopic social vision explores this crumbling gap between technical and normal human culture by exposing the effects technological worship creates in, and upon, its literary anti-heroes. The invasiveness and proliferation of radical technological change, where progress goes uncontrolled and/or unmediated by the “traditional” authorities of governmental, corporate, or social institutions, extends not only into some immaterial cultural space but into physical bodily spaces, as well: “Not outside us, but next to us. Under our skin; often, inside our minds” (Sterling xii). Technology changed humanity’s conception of the horizon of possibility, as “Eighties tech [stuck] to the skin,
[responded] to the touch: the personal computer, the Sony Walkman, the portable telephone, and the soft contact lens” (xii). These products supplemented, or overtook, the human condition which allowed humans to alter and improve their physical nature; the above products can be considered the first wave of bodily modification, “implants” attached to the physical “meat” that created new and wondrous (maybe even grotesque and awful) bodies. This body modification presents a new technological subjectivity at the heart of cyberpunk sf.

Sterling writes that this distinction of the technologically altered human form elucidates the central themes of cyberpunk: “The theme of body invasion: prosthetic limbs, implanted circuitry, cosmetic surgery, genetic alteration. The even more powerful theme of mind invasion: brain-computer interfaces, artificial intelligence, neurochemistry—techniques radically redefining the nature of humanity, the nature of self” (xiii). In cyberpunk sf the human body no longer contains only the organic anatomy, but becomes defined by the amalgamation of the technological and the organic. Yet, it is difficult to call these alterations “invasions” when people undergo these changes willingly, almost religiously. It is no stretch to comment that every character in cyberpunk sf has endured some form of technological alteration, either a physical (shown) or mental (hidden) modification.

Although Sterling never explicitly states that these body modifications are an example of posthumanist theory, theorists explicate the role technology has on hybridizing a definition of humanity when, at one extreme, humans incorporate machines into themselves, and at the other extreme, when society becomes dominated by the uses of technology. The cyberpunk ethos is defined in part by this posthuman context.
The postmodern critic Veronica Hollinger, in her essay “Posthumanism and Cyborg Theory,” explores the concept of posthumanism as “human nature in pervasive technoculture” (267). Fueled by speculative technologies, human culture has expanded its scientific knowledge in myriad new ways. These new breakthroughs inform and they reframe the debates on the human condition as each new gadget mediates new interactions with machines and technology. The term “human” becomes an unstable “ontological category” with each new generation of technological advancement, as machines at first become outwardly attached to bodies and then fully integrated into them, where removal of the machine from the organic is ultimately impossible. This fetishization of the posthuman organic/technical body, into an almost mythical projection of mankind’s hopes of an endless future, permeates the texts of cyberpunk, even as, and mostly likely because, cyberpunk concerns itself with decayed and destroyed urban dystopias. The clinical/pure spaces of virtuality provide a relief from the decay, debris, and refuse humanity and individual bodies endlessly produce. Giving up the body to become pure, mathematical, clean “information,” when the alternative is a diseased, decaying bodily existence, is an attractive option for cyberpunk characters.

One subject of cyberpunk, with its focus on what sf author Ted Chiang terms folk biology, is the uploading/downloading consciousness into virtual spaces and bodies. This activity represents one, extreme, definition of posthuman possibility. The other is that of the technologically grafted body. The cyborg identity is that of a human being aided through technological means: “an exemplary figure representing the hybrid natural-cultural, organic-technological, authentic-artificial nature of the contemporary subject” (Hollinger 274). These categories could mean implants or prostheses attached or grafted
onto bodies, but the applications refer to any human reliant upon technology to meet his or her needs. In this way, a cyborg could mean a physically technologically altered human, or the cyborg acts as a metaphor for the human that uses any form of technology to accomplish tasks; examples from cyberpunk fiction include the headset terminals which allow people to inhabit virtual spaces, such as those seen in the film *The Matrix* (Wachowski 1999) and the novel *Neuromancer* by William Gibson, and weaponized modifications like the implanted blades which extend or retract, such as the character Molly from *Neuromancer*. The metaphor of the cyborg has direct applications in reality as people use artificial limbs, computers, cellphones, and automobiles to aid in everyday life. In a culture so dependent on technology for the most basic of “human” tasks, we are all, to a certain degree, cyborgs. A fact cyberpunk sf forces readers to consider and reflect upon.

Sterling’s *Mirrorshades* introduction also explores the historical precursors and conditions that informed the aesthetics and concerns of cyberpunk. Sterling notes, “[t]he cyberpunks are perhaps the first SF generation to grow up not only within the literary tradition of science fiction but in a truly science-fictional world. For them the techniques of classical ‘hard SF’—extrapolation, technological literacy—are not just literary tools but an aid to daily life” (Sterling xi). Where previous generations of science fiction authors needed to invent or imagine the technology of their stories from the rudimentary examples in daily life (where many of the concepts had never been designed, tested, or built within ontological reality), the cyberpunks’ lives were so infused with examples of high-technology they could, as Steve Brown suggests, gather “bits and pieces of what was actually coming true, and feed it back to readers” (quoted in Cavallaro 19). For the
cyberpunks, present technology provided enough imaginative capital that it entered their works largely unchanged, and this focus caused Sterling to describe cyberpunk as a “modern reform,” one where the style “is a natural extension of elements already present in science fiction, elements sometimes buried but always seething with potential” (xv). Instead of focusing that potential upon a far-future setting, cyberpunk authors viewed the current technological, economic, and social conditions as inherently relevant topics for a present discussion of science fiction. Because of this tendency, the cyberpunks are often described as postmodern authors. And as postmodernism is a term fraught with controversy, cyberpunk was not free of critics.

The most dire, and most consequential, criticism of cyberpunk fiction states that the entire subgenre was created as a marketing device to increase sales and create a literary sensation. The critic Mark Bould comments that although cyberpunk sought to describe a “movement, subgenre, or an idiom,” it “was also an undeniably commercial label, attracting a lot of attention from readers, writers, journalists, critics, and marketing people” (217). Adam Roberts writes in his text The History of Science Fiction, that “[a]s the number of commercial prose SF titles increased it became proportionately harder for one writer to make an impact” (311). James Patrick Kelly and John Kessel, in their introduction to Rewired: A Post-Cyberpunk Anthology, observe that to cynical critics, writers, or fans of the community, “it was nothing but a marketing ploy to advance the careers of those select few who were permitted to hang their leathers in the secret Node Zero clubhouse” (vii). The gatekeeper was of course Bruce Sterling and the anthology Mirrorshades set out to elect the few authors he believed were writing cyberpunk.
One reason why cyberpunk is often so denigrated as a label stems from the textual and thematic diversity of Sterling’s anthology: “works that fell under the blanket term of cyberpunk did not necessarily share the coherent vision representative of the subgenre as described by editor and self-proclaimed cyberpunk spokesperson Bruce Sterling” (Booker and Thomas 111). Examining these contributions according to the definition of cyberpunk described within Sterling’s introduction to Mirrorshades, the stories rarely hold together a complete cyberpunk aesthetic or ideology; William Gibson, Bruce Sterling, Rudy Rucker, and Lewis Shiner may be the only truly cyberpunk authors anthologized within the collection. The fact that several of their stories have absolutely nothing to do with cyberpunk defeats the entire classification system Sterling worked so hard to define. In fact, one of the contributors, James Patrick Kelly, is more easily framed within the humanist camp of contemporary sf. Kelly and Kessel describe Sterling’s initial proposal for Mirrorshades in Rewired:

The Hugo Award-winning editor David Hartwell tells the story of how Bruce Sterling approached him in 1983 with a proposal for an anthology of short stories…The book was to be a kind of literary manifesto for the newly emerging cyberpunk movement. David said he was indeed interested and asked how many writers would be in Mirrorshades. Bruce said he had five or six in mind. David relied that five or six was not enough for a movement and that Bruce would need at least a dozen. So Bruce set out to recruit writers for the movement…even if they were not card-carrying cyberpunks. (vii)
It could be argued that Sterling’s enthusiasm for cyberpunk damned it before it truly even started. Even though he acknowledged “that the typical cyberpunk writer does not exist” (ix), his actions speak to a need to create the perfect cyberpunk writer within the anthology. Filling his anthology with writers outside of the fledging movement, or choosing non-cyberpunk pieces by cyberpunk authors (see William Gibson’s included story “The Gernsback Continuum,” which is actually a critique of the tenets of Hugo Gernsback’s SF journal Amazing Stories), created a confusing mixture of works that contradicted his overarching theme. Sterling is defined by contradictions: “The eleven authors here are only a part of this broad wave of writers, and the group as a whole already shows signs of remarkable militancy and fractiousness” (xv). This begs the question of why document a dead genre. M. Keith Booker and Anne-Marie Thomas write that “cyberpunk was declared dead as early as the publication of the Mirrorshades anthology” (114), and while they suggest that public interest destroyed the underground credibility of the “hip and cutting-edge” movement, the difficulty of coming to terms with the disparateness of Sterling’s anthology probably did more to kill the movement. After all, how could the public discern what exactly cyberpunk was when the examples were so convoluted? Sterling’s hyperbolic introduction labels, critiques, and kills the very thing it hoped to create.

However, this is not to suggest that the movement was baseless or without historical relevance. Cyberpunk’s realization that current technology offers a more interesting approach to fiction, rather than the extrapolated future tech of early New Wave and Golden Age science fiction, allowed cyberpunk authors to ground their fictions within the concerns and trepidations of the times. The proliferation of computers and
other assistance machines redefined the conception of human subjectivity and identity, which to the cyberpunks would bring about a future dystopia where humans were slowly being replaced by their machines. And in postcyberpunk fiction, contentiously writings in the mid-90s, the relationship of human and technology shifts towards ambivalence. These are the second-generation of authors to live in the science-fictional present, and as such, the effects of technology have been internalized, adapted to, and reconfigured. In the 80s, families might not have yet purchased personal computers, cellphones, microwaves, etc., but for postcyberpunk authors the ubiquity of the machine is the dominant cultural norm. Present teenagers and adolescents own cellphones with more computing power than 80s home computers. The pervasive technological present implies that “reality itself is everywhere mediated, and what comes between the characters and reality must constantly be interrogated” (Kelly and Kessel xii). This interrogation of the present was the underlying project of cyberpunk fiction, and postcyberpunk authors have internalized and expanded the project into every area of cultural concern. Sterling’s sentiments that cyberpunk offers a future based upon 80s tech allows the postcyberpunk generation the license to examine present technology with an eye to how these devices have already taken over our reality.

As illustrated above, there is a strong critical desire to judge cyberpunk solely on its content. The materialistic obsession with technology presents a specific nodal point of interest for cyberpunk texts. The ontological worlds also combine the sleazy quality of dystopic civilization on the brink of despair with the unforgiving nature of desperation and greed. And it seems cyberpunk authors were prescient, as the United States government is slowing lurching toward a corporatocracy with the Supreme Court
decision to treat corporation as people for political contribution, *Citizens United v. Federal Election Committee*, which essentially allows corporations to buy offices through unchecked campaign contributions. Current situations, such as the rampant unemployment, daily breakdown of governmental business, and end-of-the-world worshipping cults and militias offer a glimpse into an uncertain future. As cyberpunk and postcyberpunk authors write the near-future, the days of Neal Stephenson’s mob-controlled governments (in *Snow Crash*) and Gibson’s nausea and anguish of branding (in *Pattern Recognition*) must seem eerily close. The Singularity, a fictional hope of the limits of technological progress, is based upon the theories of prominent futurists and scientists who are patiently waiting to upload their consciousness to a hard drive near you. Virtual spaces reform themselves around and through each new invention, redefining the posthuman form before humans have adapted to the latest iteration of the body. The speed of progress informs cyberpunk and postcyberpunk writings: there is no time for humanity to think about the implications of technological progress, only time to act.

Sterling’s insistence that cyberpunk is a product of 80s culture provides an historical moment and a terminal endpoint to the proceedings. Yet, in actuality, it doesn’t have to. Reading between the lines of Sterling’s concept (difficult to do with the oppressive hyperbole), critics can extend Sterling’s obsession into the continuing becoming of all technological progress. Each successive technological generation expands upon the realities of the past, and cyberpunk is no different. The movement can continually reinvent itself within the boundaries of each historical situation: replace Walkmans with iPods, Mirrorshades for designer contact lenses, personal computers with
iPads, and portable telephones with 4G smartphones. Each of these new devices expands on the same function, but is necessarily different from the past iteration, creating new ideas of virtual space. The focus of cyberpunk, the technology, is born again for every generation, recreating a sense of wonder; the sublime, the horrible, and the grotesque. If there are certain sympathies within the sf community of readers, writers, and critics to save the label of cyberpunk from its roots as a marketing device, the constant rebirth of technology and its implications for the present world is one way to go about this reestablishment.

Works Cited


Print.