What Put “Punk” into the Cyber World?
—The Punk Flavor in the Cyberpunk Science Fiction

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Cyberpunk rose in the mid-1980s as a science fiction genre movement, referring to the “bizarre, hard-edged, high-tech” works created by a group of young and hot and new writers (Dozois, 1984:9). But the influence of this movement went beyond in a literary genre into the cultural reality. The label of “cyberpunk” was also given to films, TV plays or series, etc. Some people started calling themselves, or being called by the media, cyberpunks. What made it so popular a term? The answer lies in the combination of “cyber” and “punk”, which has made the genre truly genuine: the merge of complex technology and street culture. This fusion is also the key to understanding cyberpunk.

I. Etymology of Cyberpunk
“Cyber” in “cyberpunk” comes from “cybernetics”, the science studying control and communication in the animal and the machine, as coined and defined by
Norbert Wiener in 1948. The term is rooted in the Greek word “kubernetes” which means “pilot” or “steersman”. Originally, cybernetic system was a feedback loop giving a controller information on the results of its actions. “Cyber” is the term which helped create the computer, so it became associated with the computer technology. As computers were adapted for use in many control systems throughout the 1960’s and 1970’s, it isn’t cyber-anything without interaction, information, and communication. Cybernetics also refers to machines that imitate human behavior. It represents the ration and order.

“Punk”, is an anarchistic, dense, and fast youth movement which had shocked the world in the 1970s and early 1980s. The mess was caused by the loud hard-core rock music made popular by groups such as the Sex Pistols. The word means originally “rotten” or “junk”. A “punk” is a troublemaker, an “antisocial rebel or hoodlum”. In terms of literature and social movements, “punk” refers to a “counterculture” and a sort of “street-level anarchy”, and focuses more on attitude and outlook than on music and criminal activity. In cyberpunk, “punk” leans more to the anarchistic and anti-authoritarian part of this word.

“Cyber” and “punk” respectively emphasizes two basic aspects of cyberpunk: technology and individualism. So “cyberpunk” denotes something like “anarchy via machines” or “machine rebel movement”. This is a combination of high tech and low life. In this future world, technology is highly developed, and there is always a system in control of this world. Computers are part of the cyberpunk world. The power of computers to simulate environments is central to cyberpunk, with the computer user jacking into this virtual environment or cyberspace by some means: through the spine, eye sockets, or head chips. Human beings are augmented by the high technology. Floating in this cyber world are those living on the margins of the society: the working or lower-middle class characters, the have-nots, who are featured as drug dealers, drug users, musicians, skateboarders, as well as hackers.

There is one thing that must be noted: when cyberpunk later has developed into a cultural formation, it comes in all shapes and sizes. They can be defined in many different ways, but no one can give an exact meaning. Different people appropriate different aspects from cyberpunk and augment it into something really important. Cyberpunk became indefinable. As Gibson said somewhere in a short story, “Cyberpunk is the stuff that has EDGE written all over it. You know, not edge, it’s written EDGE. All capital letters. Now ask me how I’d define EDGE. Well, EDGE is not about definitions. To the contrary, things so well known that they provide an
exact definition can’t be EDGE. They probably once were but now they ain’t. SO
DON’T TRY TO DEFINE IT!!"[1]

This is the irony of cyberpunk: just like punk, as soon as cyberpunk was named
and defined, it was in fact over. Nowadays, when talking about punk, we had
better define it in terms of the spirit and attitude that epitomized its innovative
peak[2]. It is an irrepressible attitude. This is just what matters in cyberpunk and
what makes it so popular in the 1980s. Cyberpunk exists when people identify
with it. For instance, *Cyberpunk Handbook: The Real Cyberpunk Fakebook* (1995)
dictated how to dress, what drugs to take, where to live and how to survive in a
cyber world. To be cyberpunk was to be part of the elite that was fighting against
the world controlled by a system using technology. This is the inheritance from the
punk movement, whose "essential robustness and relevance of the key theme—
that everyone should question authority and do it for themselves—" is just as
relevant 10 years later in America. (Colegrave, 2001:13)

II. Where is Punk in the Cyberpunk?

Cyberpunk began as a science fiction movement launched by a group of science
fiction writers, instead of one single author. They established the elements in the
early 1980s for other writers to follow and generated this new genre of science
fiction known as 80s cyberpunk.[3] Among these elements is the punk flavor.

This punk flavor, or sense of punk, in cyberpunk fiction comes first from, but not
limited to, its characters who are punk musicians and their music. John Shirley’s
*City Come A-Walin’* (1980) is regarded as a cult classic and the first cyberpunk
novel, an important prologue in the story of cyberpunk. It emphasizes the punk
aspects of the genre: mean street of the city and punk attitude depicted through gay
areas, sadists leading masochists around on leashes and other details. It is
extrapolating from a 1970s vision of the city of San Francisco. The sense of cyber is
comparatively weaker, coming from the idea of machines connecting the world, a
global village, and a call for letters to be sent electronically. The protagonist Stu
Cole was the owner of the popular nightclub—Club Anesthesia. The city was one
that Stu Cole lived in and felt deeply affiliated to. He used to be a burglar, and
became cold to the violence he had to commit very quickly while protesting against
committing it. He was visited by City, a living personification of the city’s
consciousness, who wore mirrorshades and could radiate rock music when
committing a miracle. The femme fatale Catz, a cyberpunk-type heroine who could
take care of herself, sang with telepathic power in a band named Angst Rock playing in Stu’s club. She saw through City’s intention of alluring Stu to do things for him, and tried to persuade Stu from following him.

In Eclipse (1985), the first volume of Shirley’s A Song Called Youth Trilogy, fascist totalitarianism rose as a powerful system, and pop, politics, and paranoia collided in a high-tech struggle for survival. The resisting force, New Resistance, was organizing people to fight against this fascist system. The narrative is based around a musician, Rickenharp, a performer living in the outer section of the artificial Freezone for rich people living in the center section. He was actually pre-punk, a rocker preferring to The Velvet Underground. Disappointed by the fake rock fashion of the rock market dominated by the artificial technology-mediated minimono using wire dancers to attract audiences, he decided to quit the band after his last gig with them to join the resistance fighters and follows them to Europe where he becomes a good resistance fighter. Unfortunately, he became blind in one battle but insisted that his fellows help bring the band equipment found in the relics of a music store. On the way to meet other fellow fighters, they were attacked by the SA forces, but Rickenharp, blind as he was, was not daunted at all. He stood among the chaos caused by the attacking killing machines Jagernau...nts, defiantly playing a song of youth to fulfill his dream of a gig on the battle ground, ending the story in tragic sublimity. As a rock musician, John Shirley himself is definitely expert in describing the parts concerning music. It is full of tension and energy, where readers can strongly feel the rebellious but powerful and energetic punk spirit. It is like a musical carnival. William Gibson once wrote, “Sometimes reading Shirley, I can hear the guitars, like there’s some monstrous subliminal wall-o’-sound chewing at the edges of the text.”

In many cyberpunk stories, punk music mainly serves as a background, which is not very much related with the development of the plot and characterization. Set in 2020, Software (1982) by Rudy Rucker begins with Cobb Anderson who was now a retired pheezer, namely, freaky geezer. He suffered from a failing heart needing replacement but beyond his affordability, drinking and grooving at the old tunes in Florida retirement hell. His wife, Annie Cushing, disappointed with her husband’s ignorance of her and indulgence in drinking, felt bored and lonely. “Beatles music drifted out past her....The long last chord of ‘Day in the Life’ hung in the air. Annie couldn’t have said which song she had just heard—after fifty years her responses to the music were all but extinguished—but she walked across the room to turn the
stack of records over. "If only something would happen," she thought for the thousandth time, "I get so tired of being myself." (1-2) In this part, the rock music is employed mainly to create an atmosphere of boredom and loneliness, as well as a nostalgia.

But cyberpunk does not only point to the punk music or musicians. It also symbolically refers to people with punk spirit, those freedom lovers. Cyberpunk focuses on these people who often use the technology designed to control them to fight back. The story lines usually bend toward the world of the illegal and there is often a sense of moral ambiguity. The protagonists are "antiheroes". Neuromancer, for instance, combines a shattered postmodern cityscape with Gibson's vision of a three-dimensional virtual landscape created by networked computers. The protagonist Case, a master hacker and drug addict able to send his personality into the computer networks, lost his power to enter the cyberspace which was his whole life. This was because he stole information from his own employer, who then punished him by having his nervous system filled with a mycotoxin that prevented him from jacking into the matrix. He desperately traveled in the dark market in Chiba of Japan for recovery of his damaged nerve system, using up all his money, till he was offered a job with the promise of healing him from his damage. This was an unusual task—working as a hacker to help for a mysterious agent. It turned out that this agent was an AI removing its hardwired limitations to become something else: the sum of all human knowledge, a sentient representation of the net, God in the matrix. In the end, the AI achieved his goal with Case's help and Case got what was promised to him and returned to normal life as a hacker.

Other punkish characters in this novel include Molly, Armitage, Maelcum, and Peter Reviera. Molly, the "razor girl", was Case's partner, wearing black leather jacket and trousers and mirrored glasses. She was once a prostitute for some time, but now worked as a street samurai and mercenary. She had extensive cybernetic modifications, including retractable, 4cm double-edged blades under her fingernails which can be used like claws and an enhanced reflex system and implanted mirrored lenses covering her eye sockets, outfitted with added optical enhancements. Armitage used to be a Green Beret before heavily injured both physically and psychologically in a mission. After he was reconstructed with personality, he sank into the criminal underground. Maelcum was Case's Rastafarian pilot, a Raggae character speaking nonstandard English but capable in using the machine. Reviera could project holographic images using his implants. He was also a thief, sadist and
drug addict. All these make it safe to say that to some degree, Gibson’s *Neuromancer* is the representative cyberpunk novel that could be used to define what the cyberpunk genre is like.

### III. What Put “Punk” into the Cyber World?

1. The Counterculture Tradition

Cyberpunk started as a small literary movement based on a radical approach to science fiction. One of its sources was the counterculture, especially punk culture, which had a significant influence on cyberpunk writers’ early writing and on the emerging cyberpunk movement in general in the mid-to-late 70’s and early 80’s.

Cultural change tied to the evolution of cyberpunk narratives contributes to the “punk” aspect of this genre. Inspired by punk culture’s anti-utopian (no-future) look, cyberpunk writers depict a realistic near-future earth. But the origins of this movement reach back, farther than the punk culture of the late 1970s and early 1980s, to the countercultural, anti-authoritarian movements of the 1960s that led to areas of individual empowerment appropriated by cyberpunk writers, particularly in the arenas of drug culture and the evolution of computer hacking.

This could even be further traced back to the 1950s in literature when the counterculture against the mainstream culture was beginning to take shape. Punk as a concept began with the Beat poets, among whom William Burroughs has been called the “grandfather of punk”. (Colegrave, 2001:29) They expressed their protest against any form of mainstream culture and established values both in their writings and in their living, such as practicing drugs, homosexuality, naked reciting, retreating, etc. As a result, youth began to step onto the social and cultural stage.

In the 1960s, the countercultural movement moved from literature to rock music. This was a totally new form of music with strong beats and noisy sound, with which the youth protested against oppression in collective. The representatives included the Beatles, the Rolling Stones, etc.. At the same time appeared the Hippie movement, one of punk’s greatest inspirations. Without the peace and philosophy of love of the hippies, punk would have had nothing to react against. “Contentment is the enemy of creation, and we at times need the banal in order to provoke the revolutionary.” (Colegrave, 2001:14)

But in the most time the 1970s, rock music had become so artistic and complicated that it was reduced to just a leisure industry. It was the time for an injection of new energy, and here came the birth of punk music, an effort founded on a rebellious
attitude toward the mainstream and a relentless dedication to reviving rock and roll. It brought revolution to music, changing the map of society and culture as well. Through this new style of music, the youth described their own real experiences, expressed what they were exactly thinking and doing, their despair, anger, boredom, sense of insecurity, etc..

What made them different from their predecessors who were trying to topple and establish something, punk sought for individual independence, teasing the sovereignty and system. It evolved into a do-it-yourself trend, an attitude—the punk attitude, something much more than a musical style. The representatives in America were Romones, Clash, Blondie, Headtalking, etc. But the most influential was definitely The Sex Pistols from Britain who had much more revolutionary significance than its American counterparts. Punk gave everyone a chance to say something. That is revolution.

This revolution’s ripple found its way into the science fiction genre. Most of the Cyberpunk writers were born in the 50’s, and grown out of this counterculture tradition. They expressed this influence in their writings, intentionally or unintentionally. In other words, punk found it new way out in science fiction, in the new context of cyber age, and indirectly paved the way for the emergence of cyberculture in the 1990s. In cyberpunk novels or stories, many details would ring familiarity to the readers knowing about the punk movement, such as youth characters wearing black leather jacket, black sunglasses and particular hair styles. Maelcum in *Neuromancer*, a Rastafarian pilot, for instance, would definitely remind readers of the Reggae music from Jamaica, which disseminated Rastafarism, or Rasta doctrine, exerting great influence on the American punk music in the 1980s.

But cyberpunk has its own features in terms of counterculture. It focuses more on the relationship with technology. According to Bruce Sterling, the counterculture of the 1960s was rural, romanticized, anti-science and anti-tech. (Sterling, 1986:xii) He saw the contradiction deep in this culture. However, as years passed, after the 70’s, in cyberpunk, the contradiction became integrated in the 80’s, because technology had now slipped control and reached street level. “[The] technical revolution reshaping our society is based not in hierarchy but in decentralization, not in rigidity but in fluidity. The hacker and the rocker are this decade’s pop-culture idols, and cyberpunk is very much a pop phenomenon: spontaneous, energetic, close to its roots”. (Sterling, 1986:xiii) Cyberpunk comes from the place where the computer hacker and the rocker overlap, a combination bizarre, even
monstrous, for some, but a “powerful source of hope” (ibid.) for others.

To sum up, what makes cyberpunk distinct from other science fiction writings is its integration of counterculture into the cyber world, earning itself the identity as a science fiction sub-genre. So cyberpunk “seemed to offer an alternative value structure for popular needs and interests that remained marginal from the point of view of that Enlightenment model” (Foster, 2005:xvi). This alternative solution is reflected in its integrating punk flavor into high technology, a unique way to explore the problem of progress. This is why it was so popular at that time and had so great a cultural influence.

2. The Punk Attitudes of Cyberpunk Writers

Tracing the life of the cyberpunk writers would reveal that they were born around the 50’s and grew up in the 60’s and 70’s, a period for the development of various countercultures. Among these, the most prominent are punk music and some representative of countercultures. This has inevitably exerted its influence on cyberpunk writers’ personalities, and their later writings, another source of the punk flavor in the cyberpunk. William Gibson, when asked about the “punk” in cyberpunk and whether he saw any real connections between what he wrote and punk rock, answered, “[... ] when I was fifteen, that was my wildest dream [... ] There was a while, at the start of all this cyberpunk stuff, when I contemplated dressing up like that, getting a foot tall blue mohawk or something [... ]. I hung out with some of them [Gothicks punk] in London.” (Wershler-Henry, 1989:32)

Larry McCaffery pointed that the cyberpunks were not only the first generation of artists witnessing and enjoying the emergence of high technology, but also the “first generation of writers who were reading Thomas Pynchon, Ballard, and Burroughs as teenagers, who grown up immersed in technology but also in pop culture, in the values and aesthetics of the counterculture associated with the drug culture, punk rock, video games, Heavy Metal mer, David Cronenberg, and Ridley Scott”. (McCaffery, 1991:12) William Gibson, admitted quite often that he was invoked by figures as various as William Burroughs, Timothy Leary, Stewart Brand, David Bowie, Lou Reed, and Blondie, etc.: “What Burroughs was doing with plot and language and the science fiction motifs I saw in other writers was literally mind expanding.”(McCaffery, 1991:278) His hot-wired prose and mannerisms, his collage methods and his focus on urban subcultures have been consciously affected by punk aesthetics: “I’ve been influenced by Lou Reed, for instance, as much as I’ve been by any ‘fiction’ writer.” (McCaffery, 1991:265) Reed’s songs were full of
brutally honest, street-tough yet vulnerable figures and Gibson had chosen them for his central heroes. William S. Burroughs, with his graphic, wickedly humorous portrayals of drug addiction, violence, sexual perversion, and just about any other form of human depravity imaginable, had a profound impact on both punk music and cyberpunk fiction.

These influences could be also easily found in other cyberpunks authors. Rudy Rucker also said, with his love to the Beats, "[…] rock music is important to me: the Stones, Bob Marley, Zappa. Although I have been trained as a scientist, I am just as comfortable with ecstatic, mystical modes of perception. During the late sixties I was an underground cartoonist."[5] John Shirley and Lewis Shiner prominently involved themselves in the counterculture as rock musicians. Shiner tended to have rock music as a theme or main focus in his works, especially the musicians of the late 1960s: the Beatles, Brian Wilson, The Doors, etc. Shirley, while living in New York City and Paris in the 1980s, was also a lead singer of the post-punk funk-rock band Obsession, on Celluloid Records, and was later in the band the Panther Moderns. He was cyberpunk’s master of guerrilla street theatrics, inspiring most of the other talents (William Gibson included) with his vicious, balls-forward writing style, particularly the part involving music which would be full of tension and energy. Unlike many “street” flavored writers, Shirley’s personal experiences as a recovering drug addict and punk rocker brought real verisimilitude to his darker, urban-tinted writing. His novels are very graphic in their depictions of sex, violence and gore, adding to the bleak view of the future which is common in cyberpunk fiction.

Pat Cadigan, in answering the question “why was there so much hostility to cyberpunk”, showed a confident punk attitude. “Jeez, I don’t know—put it down to human nature. People are funny.” (Cadigan, 2002: ix) Bruce Bethke, who first coined the word “cyberpunk”, thought Cyberpunk belonged to the public, and there should be no trade mark registered for this word.

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 that’s the first point I want to stress. The term cyberpunk is in the public domain, and NO ONE has the right to Cyberpunk™ the comic book, or Cyberpunk™ the card game, or Cyberpunk™ the crappy derivative franchised YA novel series.[6]
Some cyberpunk writers even refuse to accept the label of "cyberpunk", which itself is a kind of punk attitude: individuality. Greg Bear, author of *Blood Music* and *Eon*, was sometimes marked as a cyberpunk writer. But he refused to accept this label: "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 they can. [...]" Even William Gibson, the well-recognized founding father of cyberpunk, was reluctant to be strictly classified to any specific group, because "I [...] have the impression that being widely accepted sort of neutralizes us one-time ‘angry young men’. [...] 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".

Bruce Sterling, the editor of the science fiction zine *Cheap Truth* exemplified this punk attitude in issuing the zine. *Cheap Truth*, Cyberpunk’s one-page propaganda organ, was given away free to anyone who asked for it. It was never copyrighted; photocopy “piracy” was actively encouraged. The contributors were always pseudonymous, an earnest egalitarian attempt to avoid any personality-cultism or cliquishness. *Cheap Truth* deliberately mocked established “genre gurus” and urged every soul within earshot to boot up a word processor and join the cause.

This is the result of cyberpunks’ intention to draw influences from other fields. John Shirley said in an interview that “I think Bruce felt that most science fiction was cowardly in its vision of the future. It was coy, winsome, mild mannered, or when it had energy it was oriented toward the kind of guys who took fencing lessons...and dressed up like the characters in the original book *Starship Troopers*”. Obviously, Shirley refers to the previous New Wave science fiction writing which had lost its energy. Like their avatars Pynchon, Ballard, Dick, and Burroughs, cyberpunk authors constructed works that moved seamlessly through the realm of hard science and pop culture, realms that included chaos theory and Madonna, dada and punk rock, MTV and film noire, Arthur Rimbaud and Lou Reed, Arnold Schwarzenegger and Oliver North, instant reruns and AI. (McCaffery, 1991:12) In another interview Shirley said, “We wanted a science fiction that was open to other cultural influences, like, yes, punk, like modern art, like surrealism, like the more artful noir films and fiction, and people like William Burroughs; and we wanted to dilate the iris of SCIENCE FICTION so that it took in more sheer FUTURE.” In his literary work, Shirley often used pop cultural symbols to create
dark metaphors for the message he wanted to deliver, to “trick people into thinking the unthinkable”. Using narrative, humor, and social satire to draw readers into “higher questions” of the metaphysical, spiritual, sociological, and political, his stories are disquieting and entertaining at the same time.

3. The Ambivalent Social Milieu of the 1980s

Actually, cyberpunk is more importantly an instant response to the reality of technological development in the 80’s and a representation of the cultural milieu of that time. The 80’s was both an optimistic and a disturbing era, an era of reassessment, of integration, of hybridized influences, of old notions shaken loose and reinterpreted with a new sophistication, a broader perspective. Cyberpunk gained its name on the media in 1984, but it did not appear overnight. It had been written before that year for quite a few years. So it was actually emerging in the late 1970s and early 1980s, an era overlapping a turning point in American politics: the centre-left government of Democratic President Jimmy Carter to be displaced by Ronald Reagan. This dislocation produced a tremendous sense of dread and tension. New York existed in a peculiar bubble of Weimar-like decadence: drugs, drink, polymorphously perverse sex. “The city as a whole might have been teetering on the edge of bankruptcy, but the artists of the L.E.S. found ways to have a wild time in the midst of collapse.” (Reynolds, 2005:56)

For most Americans, 1980 began badly and got worse. People, unsatisfied with the Carter administration, craved leadership but had lost faith in government and most politicians. Since the mid-1970s, ordinary families were facing great pressure from the growing federal deficits, accelerating inflation, slow economic growth, factory closings, gasoline shortages and price hikes, and rising rates of crime, divorce, welfare, single parenting, and drug use. According to Michael Schaller, for the first time since World War II, a majority of Americans reported that they expected that their children live with mounting debts passed on to them and a declining living standards, instead of a better life. (Schaller, 2007:vii) Even after 1984 when Reagan was on the successful way of revitalizing America, there still existed uncertainty: Americans remained deeply uncertain about the recent past, the current state of affairs, and future directions of their society. Although material life improved for some Americans, and many more were buoyed by the resurgent national spirit of the times, reality did not always match either President’s glowing rhetoric. (Schaller, 2007:115) Some old problems deepened, and some distributing new economic and social trends arose.
Furthermore, by the 1980s, as Lisa Yaszek pointed out, Americans seemed to be far more preoccupied with the impact of computerized and automated technologies in the workplace. Proponents of these technologies prophesied that they would free employees from the burdens of monotonous, alienating physical labor and allow them to become transcendent “new workers” defined by newly-integrated forms of work and a newly-restored intellectual and psychological autonomy. (Yaszek, 2002:97) Enthusiasm for this possibility led *Times* magazine to give the personal computer its “Man of the Year” award in 1982. This implied that computers seemed to take on increasingly human attributes, so that it is hardly surprising that Americans began to think seriously about how they themselves might be transformed by their increasingly intimate connections with such machines. And “nowhere was speculation about his possible transformation more apparent than in the new mode of science fiction that also emerged in the 1980s—cyberpunk”. (Yaszek, 2002:97)

The 1980s is considered as the golden time of postmodern culture characteristic of the breakdown of distinctions between pop culture and “serious” culture, different genres, different art forms, which has had a liberating effect on writers of cyberpunk generation. This resulted from the transformation of social infrastructure and centralization on information technology in the 1980s, which thus also changed human identity and subjectivity. Cyberpunk fiction succeeded in grasping this kind of social structural change. The cyberpunk writers, as the first generation of authors who witnessed and enjoyed the development of high technology, did not want to stand as passersby or outsiders of this era; they began exploration of this new culture from their standing point of science fiction writing. In this sense, like punk, cyberpunk is an exemplary postmodernist art form in their acceptance of the principle that “only by playing with and transforming these signs and technologies can we hope to avoid being played with and transformed by them. In other words, use it (our humanity) or lose it”. (McCaffery, 1991:307)

Popular culture in general is a reflection of what is going on in its society. That goes double for science fiction; “maybe even triple”. (Cadigan, 2002:viii) What cyberpunk did was just to reflect what was the situation during late 1970s and early 1980s, and “left its mark not just on the genre known as science fiction, but on the popular culture in general”.(ibid.) Cyberpunk writers have always been very sensitive to contemporary trends, especially the trends of pop culture: the subcultures, the aesthetics, the fashion, the music and the jargon. They were
independent explorers, with their work reflecting something inherent in the decade, in the spirit of the times. The term cyberpunk, as Bruce Sterling recognized, “captures something crucial to the work of these writers, something crucial to the decade as a whole: a new kind of integration. The overlapping of worlds that were formerly separate: the realm of high tech, and the modern pop under ground. This integration has become our decade’s crucial source of cultural energy”. (Sterling, 1986: xi) Throughout the 80’s pop culture was seen in rock video, the hacker underground, the jarring street tech of hip-hop and scratch music, the synthesizer rock of London and Tokyo. This dynamic even had a global range and cyberpunk is just its literary incarnation.

In this sense, cyberpunk fiction is not about future, but about present, about the contemporary culture, by means of an unusual fusion of high tech and low life. Cyberpunk authors created a significant body of works that explored vital new connections between high art and trash, beauty and ugliness, avant-garde and pop, delicacy and violence, the utterly programmed and the spontaneous, and, perhaps their most original synthesis, technology and humanism. Cyberpunk didn’t invent this situation of the 1980s; it just reflected it, and its integration of counterculture was just at the same time a reflection of a time when, as Shirley commented, “everybody was having an anti-authoritarian backlash during the Reagan years. Cyberpunk is fairly individualistic and anti-authoritarian”. And what they did was to integrate counterculture into the cyber world. This fusion of cyber and punk constitutes a tension of postmodernism. “The term points to a multidisciplinary of cultural reference.” (Mckay,1999:49) And this is why Fredric Jameson, describes cyberpunk both more narrowly and more grandly as “the supreme literary expression if not of postmodernism, then of late capitalism itself”. (Jameson, 1991:419)

Notes:
[1] Thomas Eicher, cited from “Cyberpunk Definitions”, <http://project.cyberpunk.ru/idb/definition.html>, retrieved on Feb. 6, 2011. EDGE, in cyberpunk’s eyes, means everything which is extreme, fast, smooth, clever, bizarre, decadent, sexy.
[2] Arguably, science fiction entered the postcyberpunk era in 1988 with the publication of ruce Sterling’s Islands in the Net. Just as Sterling’s The Artificial Kid encapsulated many of cyber-punk’s themes before the movement had a name, Islands in the Net prefigured a growing body of work that can (at least until someone comes up with a better name) be labeled
postcyberpunk. (See “Notes Toward a Postcyberpunk Manifesto” by Lawrence Person. Published in Nova Express in 1998 and in Slashdot in October 8, 1999.) See <http://project.cyberpunk.ru/idb/notes_toward_a_postcyberpunk_manifesto.html>, retrieved on Sept. 28, 2012.

[3] Bruce Sterling, “Cyberpunk in the Nineties”, <http://read.ru/bruce-sterling-cyberpunk-in-the-nineties.html>, retrieved on Aug. 20, 2012.

[4] Mark V. Ziesing, “Review”, Wetones by John Shirley. In Omni. 1991. <http://www.darkecho.com/JohnShirley/wetrev.html>, retrieved on Feb. 6, 2011.

[5] Cited from “About the author” on the end page of Rucker’s Software, New York: Ace Books, 1982.

[6] Bruce Bethke, “Etymology of Cyberpunk”, <http://textfiles.meulie.net/russian/cyberlib.narod.ru/lib/criticalbet_cO.html>, retrieved on Aug. 4, 2009.

[7] Different sources mention different authors who are supposed to be these founders. The webpage The Cyberpunk Project puts on the list Bruce Sterling, William Gibson, Rudy Rucker, Pat Cadigan and James Patrick Kelly. According to Tom Maddox, they are William Gibson, Bruce Sterling, Lew Shiner, Rudy Rucker, John Shirley, Pat Cadigan, Richard Kadrey and Tom Maddox himself (1992). <http://project.cyberpunk.ru/idb/cyberpunk_in_80-90.html>. Bruce Sterling includes Gibson, Shiner, Rucker, and himself as the cyberpunk “gurus”.

[8] Daniel Riche, “The Cyberpunks Reinvent Science Fiction”, <http://project.cyberpunk.ru/idb/cyberpunks_reinvent_scifi.html>, retrieved on Nov. 1, 2010.

[9] Daniel Riche, “The Cyberpunks Reinvent Science Fiction”, <http://project.cyberpunk.ru/idb/cyberpunks_reinvent_scifi.html>, retrieved on Nov. 1, 2010.

[10] Bruce Sterling, “Cyberpunk in the Nineties”, Interzone. 1991. Vol.48. pp.39-41. <http://lib.ru/STERLINGB/interzone.txt_with-big-pictures.html>, retrieved on May 20, 2009.

[11] Paula Guran, “JOHN SHIRLEY: Seeking Redemption” (Interview). May 1998. <http://www.darkecho.com/darkecho>, retrieved on Aug. 3, 2009.

[12] “Sunshine Over Shirleyland—John Shirley Interviewed by David Mathew, Interzone (England) November 1998, <http://www.darkecho.com/JohnShirley/jsinterzone.html>, retrieved on Feb. 2, 2012.

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