

**Cyberpunks: A Sociological Analysis With Special
Interest In The Description Of Their Online Activities**

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1. Cyberpunk - an etymological enquiry

In the first section I try to examine the origin and word history of the term 'Cyberpunk'. In order to make a more exact investigation I will split up the term into its two constituents 'Cyber' and 'Punk'.

According to the American Heritage Dictionary the word 'Cyber' means " the theoretical study of control of processes in electronic, mechanical, and biological systems, especially the flow of information in such system" (as cited by Timothy Leary - The Cyberpunk, in McCaffery 1991: 250). The term 'Cyber' comes from the English word 'Cybernetics'.

"The Word 'cybernetics' was coined by Norbert Wiener (1948), who wrote, ' We have decided to call the entire field of control and communication theory, whether in the machine or in the animal, by the name of Cybernetics, which we form from the Greek word for steersman. ' " (Timothy Leary - The Cyberpunk, in McCaffery 1991: 249)

But the term 'Cybernetics' derives, other than Norbert Wiener assumes in his statement, from the latin word 'gubernetes'.

"The basic verb gubernare means to control the actions or behavior of, to direct, to exercise sovereign authority, to regulate, to keep under, to restrain, to steer." (Timothy Leary - The Cyberpunk in McCaffery 1991: 249)

This latin verb has its roots in the Greek word kubernetes - pilot.

"The Greek word 'pilot' becomes 'governor or director' ; the word 'to steer' becomes 'to control.' " (Timothy Leary - The Cyberpunk, in McCaffery 1991: 250)

One can now see the difference between the Greek and the Roman concept, the controlling pilot is replaced by the controlling and regulating leader.

"Pilots, those who navigate on the seven seas or in the sky, have to devise and execute course changes continually in response to the changing environment. They respond continually to feedback, information about the environment. Dynamic. Alert. Alive. The Latinate 'steersman', by contrast, is in the situation of following orders."(Timothy Leary - The Cyberpunk, in McCaffery 1991: 251)

According to Timothy Leary, the term 'Cyber' follows the Greek meaning pilot and emphasizes the responsibility for one's own actions. The second part of the term 'Cyberpunk' - 'Punk' - has its roots in Anglo-American language and means 'miserable', 'worthless', 'waste' or 'muck'.

Additionally, the term 'Punk' denotes a youth movement that began at the end of the 70's and which refused civil norms, arising before the background of increasing economic and social crises. Norman Spinrad says about this movement:

"... the new Punks of the seventies were intellectual anti-intellectuals; no naive, naturally nihilistic rebels without aim and direction, but self-confident nihilistic pessimists, who raised cynicism to a more or less compact philosophy, and knew what they were doing." (Norman Spinrad 1986 in Gibson 1987: 353)

This refusal of civil norms is also outwardly recognizable as consciously chosen conspicuous appearance, e.g. loud, dyed hair, torn clothes, metal chains and the like. Furthermore, the word 'Punk' also implies, generally speaking, an oppositional attitude towards dominant life-styles and capitalism, the rejection of bourgeois norms, criticism of consumption and a sort of preference for anarchy and chaos. The term 'Cyberpunk' in its entirety comprises persons which are - according to Leary - characterized by the following features:

"... the resourceful, skillful individual who accesses and steers knowledge/ communication technology towards his/her own private goals. For personal pleasure, profit, principle, or growth."
(Timothy Leary - The Cyberpunk, in McCaffery 1991: 253)

Cyberpunks use their technical skills, without applying physical force or theft of material objects, searching for theories, models, paradigms, metaphors, pictures and symbols, in order to get along in reality. They normally do not try to gain control over others, however. As Leary sees it, most Cyberpunks live in accord with the code 'Think for Yourself, Question Authority (TFYQA)'. One meets such persons at various places and in different occupations, e.g.:

"Cyberpunks are the inventors, innovative writers, techno-frontier artists, risk-taking film directors, icon-shifting composers, expressionist artists, free-agent scientists, innovative show-biz entrepreneurs, techno-creatives, computer visionaries, elegant hackers, bit-blipping Prolog adepts, special-effectives, video wizards, neurological test pilots, media explorers - all of those who boldly package and steer ideas out there where no thoughts have gone before. Cyberpunks are sometimes authorized by the governors." (Timothy Leary - The Cyberpunk, in McCaffery 1991: 253)

Leary thinks Cyberpunk will become the prominent role model in the information age of the 21st century.

2. Cyberpunk - a literary enquiry

Norman Spinrad writes that the term 'Cyberpunk' was invented by Gardner Dozois, publisher of the Isaac Asimov's Science Fiction Magazine, and that it denotes a sub-genre of the Science Fiction novel. This literary movement developed out of Hard Science Fiction and the New Wave movement of the 60's. The most important authors of this new sub-genre are Bruce Sterling, Rudy Rucker, Lewis Shiner, John Shirley, Pat Cadigan and William Gibson. Bruce Sterling describes what made these authors so unique:

"The cyberpunks (science fiction writers) are perhaps the first SF generation to grow up not only within the literary tradition of science fiction but in a truly science-fiction world." (Bruce Sterling in Bukatman 1993: 6)

The trigger of this at first only literary movement was William Gibson's novel 'Neuromancer' in 1984. Neuromancer, which was awarded with the Hugo, Nebula, Locus and Philip K. Dick Awards, combines in an exemplary way New Wave and Hard Science Fiction. Gibson makes his scientific and technical extrapolations and speculations just as thoroughly as Hard Science Fiction authors like Heinlein, Poul Anderson, Hal Clement or Gregory Benford. But his style, philosophy, aesthetics and his psychological - characterial position are rather related to New Wave authors such as Ellison or William S. Burroughs.

"In a postmodern manner different genres are combined, the narrative styles of cinema, computer games, TV advertisements and MTV are integrated, as well as established literary forms are imitated and playfully used." (Winter 1996: 3)

In general, Cyberpunk literature is concerned with humans who live in highly technicized logical-cultural systems at the margin of society.

In these stories, the environment normally is controlled by a system which dominates the life of normal humans, e.g. a repressive government, a group of corporations or fundamentalist

religions. This system is supported by different technologies, mostly information technologies such as computers or mass media.

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Often, these technical systems extend themselves on human beings by the means of brain implants, artificial organs or prostheses. Thus man becomes part of machines. This could be called the literary 'Cyber' aspect of the term Cyberpunk. In all cultural systems, however, exist human beings who live on the periphery and others, who live on frontiers or who try to cross and change boundaries like criminals, outsiders or visionaries. Individuals, who often simply seek their own personal peace or want to go their own way. Cyberpunk literature is concerned with this kind of human beings and how they use the technological system for their own advantage. This could be called the literary 'Punk' aspect of the term Cyberpunk.

Cyberpunk stories are frequently set in urban areas, with a dark atmosphere and a pessimistic mood. Concepts are presented to the reader without explanation, just as new technical developments often are presented to us. A moral ambiguity can also be made out often, as only fighting the system doesn't make the protagonists of these novels automatically heroes. These specified features can be discerned very easily in the novel *Neuromancer* by William Gibson. In *Neuromancer*, Case - a cyber-cowboy whom one could also call a Cyberpunk - tries his luck by retrieving and the selling data. To this end, he directly connects his nervous system with a computer network - the matrix. This matrix (also called Cyberspace by other authors) is in the 21st century, a time where information is capital, under control of transnational corporations. But like every good Science Fiction novel, *Neuromancer* goes beyond only giving a view of the future.

" '*Neuromancer*' takes place in the near future, but the novel deals with social processes and social transformations, which have already begun in our time and points out their possible consequences." (Winter 1996: 3)

3. Cyberpunk - a sociological enquiry

A New York Times article describes Cyberpunks as outwardly inconspicuous, jeans and T-shirt wearing computerfreaks, who spend their spare time in the world of electronic networks (cf. Winter 1996). But today's Cyberpunks mainly have in common with normal hackers the preoccupation with electronic networks and the love for technology. Erich Schneider describes the beginning of the Cyberpunks' development as follows:

"Spurred on by cyberpunk literature, in the mid-1980's certain groups of people started referring to themselves as cyberpunk, because they correctly noticed the seeds of the fictional "techno-system" in Western society today, and because they identified with the marginalized characters in cyberpunk stories. Within the last few years, the mass media has caught on to this, spontaneously dubbing certain people and groups 'cyberpunk' ". (Erich Schneider in Cyberpunk FAQ list 1996: 2)

Hackers, Crackers, Phreaks and often Cypherpunks and Ravers too are seen or see themselves as persons associated with Cyberpunk. Hackers are the magicians of the computer community, they have a large understanding for their work with computers and spend most of the time in electronic data networks. Crackers are the console-cowboys, persons who - mostly for their personal satisfaction and not for material reasons - remove the copy protection of computer programs and pass them on. Phreaks use and manipulate the telephone system. They do so not only for their personal pleasure, but to direct attention to possible risks, too. It should be noted that the US telephone system offers many more possibilities (e.g. virtual - acoustic rooms) for manipulation than the European does so far. Additionally, there are the Cypherpunks and Ravers. Cypherpunks spend their spare time collecting and spreading encryption software to beat or impair "the system". Ravers mainly have contact with computers when producing their sampled and

synthesized music or computer-generated psychedelic images. Beyond this, Cyberpunks are a subculture or a neo-tribe, distinguishable outwardly and by content from dominant culture.

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"Thus the Cyberpunk style is a conspicuous, wild looking fashion, with ties to the shock aesthetics of Punks. 'Industrial waste' is recycled, put together with the black garb of Rockers and enhanced with new technological gadgets." (Winter 1996: 1)

If we follow Winter in his view that Cyberpunks represent a special media culture, we should detect clear preferences for certain media texts, (literature, movies, music or games), specific ways of behavior, unique rituals, a special fashion and a particular world view. Among the aforementioned media texts of literature are Cyberpunk and Science Fiction novels or such magazines as Hot Wired or Mondo 2000. Among the movies are Science Fiction movies like Bladerunner (Director's Cut 1992) by Ridley Scott or Strange Days (1995) by Kathryn Bigelow. Industrial, electronic Independent or Techno music can be categorized as Cyberpunk music. Real (i.e. played at a table and on a board) or computer role playing games are the preferred games. The Cyberpunk culture is a mixture of high-tech special culture and urban street culture. Besides some few local meeting places like Internet Cafés, it is computer networks which enable Cyberpunks to meet similar minded people. Their anarchistic attitude and subversive use of information and communication technologies make Cyberpunks an avant-garde in the field of technology and culture.

"They rebel by designing to their own purposes and against established structures and authorities new functions for the computer, also at the same time on the search for new, non everyday experiences." (Winter 1996: 3)

Their work with new information and communication technologies enables Cyberpunks to obtain power and control, but also provides a possibility for the construction and demonstration of identity. Cyberpunks defy monopolizing, centralization and censorship. The fight against censorship is demonstrated for example by the Internet "Blue Ribbon Campaign for Free Speech Online". Time and again the Cyberpunks' demand for free access to all information is most central.

4. The online activities of Cyberpunks by the example of Internet newsgroups

In this section I will try to work out the specific topics this particular media culture is concerned with, on the basis of an investigation of Cyberpunk newsgroups.

Objects of investigation:

4 Cyberpunk newsgroups in the Internet were observed: alt.cyberpunk, alt.cyberpunk.movement, alt.cyberpunk.tech, alt.cyberpunk.chatsubo.

Method of proceeding:

1.) On my request for more information on the topic, sent to the 4 newsgroups mentioned above, I received 3 e-mails. The first e-mail from Moroni gave a very interesting World Wide Web address; the second mail - written by Gerald La Corte - offered me assistance. The third e-mail from Electric Head was typical of Cyberpunk attitudes, since it recommended that I should independently inform myself about the subject. The fact that my inquiry was to be seen in the network for only one day explains, I think, why I only received 3 mails in reply. Old messages are deleted after a relatively short time, due to the great quantity of newly published messages. The Web address turned out to lead to a collection of "Insider" Web addresses, where material on topics as Hacking, Cracking and Phreaking could be found, but also manuals on building bombs and the like.

2.) a.) Investigation of topics discussed in the newsgroup alt.cyberpunk:
(listing of 12/18/95, chronological selection)

Time journeys

Censorship

Definition of Cyberpunk

Abuse of the network by multiple, simultaneous publication of the same message

Cyberpunk fashion

Cyberpunk and drugs

Cyberpunk the subculture

Inquiries about new Cyberpunk literature

New book publications

Discussions about Bill Gates (Satan or God?)

Cyberpunk and society

Inquiry about TV station email addresses in order to send protest

Possibility of computer induced drugs

William Gibson

Bruce Sterling

Computer art gallery

Virtual reality

International socialism controls the world

Bio processors

E-cash

Internet addresses of Cyberpunk magazines and fanzines

2.) b.) Topic summary:

(not according to frequency)

- Definition of Cyberpunk and the subculture
- Cyberpunk music
- Cyberpunk movies
- Cyberpunk literature
- References to other Cyberpunk sources of information
- Censorship and politics
- Future technologies

3.) Results:

· The discussion about censorship and democracy and what can be done to preserve the latter is very intense. Cyberpunks regard the Internet as a base-democratic technology and see each act of censorship as an attack on the by corrupt government already endangered democracy. Contrary to other subcultures they do not limit themselves to discussion, but also give concrete instructions to possible reforms. In extreme cases see Terrorist Handbook 1.5 or the instructions on how to build atom bombs.

· Cyberpunks do not, however, assume that everyone should build bombs to reform the system, but that the relevant information should be available for everyone. Following the formula

INFORMATION IS POWER, everybody and not only the governing should have access to it. Of probably more use to most Cyberpunks is the information on how to deal with the FBI and other (in their eyes) repressive instruments of the state.

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·Cyberpunk as a subculture shows us new methods of communication and delimitation . The new communication is not face-to-face anymore. Instead, Cyberpunks have a special language, which consists to a large extent of abbreviations. These are remainders from the beginning of networking, originally introduced to save time when working with very slow modems.

·The great, technophile interest in future technologies is characteristic of Cyberpunks. They see revolutionary possibilities in new computer technologies, but more often than not also the possibility of abuse by those in power.

5. The future relevance of the Cyberpunk phenomenon

Thesis: CYBERPUNKS AS PIONEERS OF THE COMING INFORMATION ELITE.

I believe that one will find the Cyberpunks to have higher education, a large interest in (high-) technology and a strong, critical consciousness of politics. I furthermore believe this subculture can - both now and during the coming restructuring of society - point out new forms and ways of future social life. As I see it, this restructuring of society will be brought about by the new information and communication technologies and will bring the transition from industrial society to an information and service-oriented society. It will become very important for us to acquire such Cyberpunk skills like navigating through information. Because of the exploding quantities of data and information, a change will take place from the importance of "what we know" to "how can we find the appropriate knowledge". Important strategies will have to be learned, on the basis of which one can judge the importance and reliability of information.

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