TEN YEARS AFTER

by Pat Cadigan

Has it really been ten years since cyberpunk SF (to use the instantly recognizable term) began sending its first ripples through the SF field? Well, more or less. It's ten-ish, at least, so what the hell, let's call it a decade. And during that entire time, I've refrained from writing manifestos, articles, position papers, or even letters to the editor—any editor—for whatever reason. One more voice in the controversy was only going to turn up the noise level, I reasoned, and besides, I was writing and I had a baby to take care of. When you're trying to meet a deadline and you have to get up for a two A.M. feeding, your response to somebody's diatribe is less along the lines of *My esteemed colleague is stuffed full of wild blueberry muffins* and more like *For chrissakes, doesn't this bozo have a life?*

Anyway, it's hard to run commentary on something while it's going on—it's hindsight that is the clearer vision because the scope is always larger. You see, finally, the elements of the big picture—that is, the *bigger* picture—that you are inevitably part of and only then is a real understanding possible. (Not necessarily probable, but possible.)

Now, I thought about this a lot before I wrote it. Did I have anything to say about cyberpunk SF that would be at all enlightening? Who would care, and did that matter? And anyway, I don't write non-fiction. Hell, these days I can barely write *letters*. The book's late (the book's *always* late), I owe three people short fiction, and the world has managed to keep turning without my pronouncements on the subject of cyberpunk, so why fix it if it ain't broke?

(At this point, I don't know what comes next—I may have talked myself out of writing this article. Stay tuned.)

Well, let's face it—there are three inexorable human drives: the drive to reproduce, the drive to rewrite someone else's copy, and the drive to shoot your mouth off. (In fact, in the early days of the field, it was the first two drives getting intertwined that would result in the third— which is to say, writers who felt they'd been screwed by editors changing their text would complain loudly. See? Every kind of life has its own ecology.) So, I'm going to shoot my mouth off, an activity that has a long and honorable tradition in this field, and in the field of literature in general. But I would venture to say that SF in particular has benefitted from the willingness of certain, uh, mouth-shooter-off-ers to get up and say, "Hey, that emperor's *naked*!"—and others to say, "No, not naked, just tacky!", and still others to say, 'That's no emperor, that's your mother!"

In this case, however, I'm here to tell you that while everyone was arguing about what the emperor was wearing, the government was toppled in a swift and silent coup, and the emperor has been replaced by a global anarchy that doesn't care what any of us thinks.

Which is to say, the word *cyberpunk* has appeared on the cover of *Time* magazine, and it ain't just for SF any more.

(Is it a measure of my provincialism to talk about an American weekly magazine? Well, see the twenty-first century edition, in which periodicals like *Time* go electronic on the international nets and become market-specific rather than nation-specific, to appear as hard copy only by individual request.)

The first reaction I heard to the *Time* cover story within the field was: "That must mean cyberpunk is dead for sure." Must be an echo in this continuum because I've been hearing that one since *Mirrorshades* came out. People have been wishing this movement—a misnomer—dead practically from the beginning, for a wide variety of reasons, some stupider than others. Others have tried to abort it retroactively by insisting there was never any movement in the first place and it's all just a marketing gimmick. And still others try to pre-empt it by insisting that Alfred Bester did it all first, so it's all old news to begin with.

Well, you can get up every morning, face the east, and repeat the mantra, *The moon is made of green cheese* fifty times before breakfast every day of your life, and I promise you that this will have absolutely no effect on the moon whatsoever. I also promise you that the moon's seeming refusal to alter is not a personal affront to you and all the other green cheese lovers.

Popular culture—for many people, this term verges on the obscene, conjuring images of *People* magazine, Teen-Age Mutant Ninja Turtles, and Geraldo with a broken nose. It is enough to send anyone screaming into the streets. But this is because *popular culture* is one of those terms like *clothes*—it's only specific enough to let you know you won't be discussing the principal exports of Paraguay or the life-cycle of anaerobic bacteria.

When I use the term *popular culture*, I am referring to contemporary artistic attempts, successful and otherwise, that mirror current events and/or cultural shifts. Collectively, this is what all art does. Even bad art.

In America, the first amendment guarantees our right to see lots of art, bad, not so bad, and pretty good. The all-pervasiveness of mass media pretty much ensures that even the most ethereal artists can't help being influenced to some degree by the tenor of their times. These days, you really have to go out of your way to avoid the mass media, television in particu-lar—and if you did, the life you would live would be, in most cases, highly abnormal in comparison to the society around you.

Now, it has been chic for a number of years to talk about how much better off we would be without television, and what a great cultural wasteland it is. But—and I feel a little silly saying this, as if I'm explaining why you ought to know the alphabet in order—television isn't any more responsible for its condition than your bathroom mirror is for the way you look when you get up in the morning. If you don't like what you see, throwing out the mirror is one way to handle it but frankly, it also means you're an idiot.

Over the past four or so decades that television has been generally available, its role has enlarged from amuser/babysitter to eyewitness/testifier—who would have thought that the thing that put "I Love Lucy" in our living rooms would also put the Viet Nam War there as well? Television, that propagator and distributor of popular culture, was the first modern medium that could not only document our cultural shifts but instigate them as well.

Among other things, this does tend to mean that people who grew up with television are quite different than people who grew up without it, and if you would like to know exactly how someone in the latter group can be at an extreme disadvantage by failing to adapt, get in touch with George Herbert Walker Bush, who has a lot more spare time to answer his mail these days than he used to.

Which is the long way round to another obvious point: cyberpunk SF (still using the instantly recognizable term here, and 1 refuse to apologize for it) was able to come into its present existence *only after* the desk-top computer entered the mainstream, general use the way television did back in the 1950s. The PC and the TV have since been engaged in a *ménage à trois* with the telephone, and the fact that the three of them have not yet merged into one creature is only because the technical details haven't been worked out yet.

Does that sound like some kind of wild cyberpunk SF scenario, with computers becoming not just sentient but horny? Well, don't blame me, I just work here.

Cyberpunk SF was the response to the start of the desk-top computer era—speculative fiction concerning new developments in technology. Does that description sound familiar? ("Oh, no. she's made cyberpunk sound *respectable!*" Chill out, homey—it's only a description of the thing, not the thing itself. Like the man said, *Ceci nest pas une pipe*.) Of course, it had its own generational and temporal characteristics, just like anything else—Buddy Holly and Eddie Van Halen, for example, probably picked up their guitars for similar reasons, but the sounds they chose to make are completely different. But then, if you enjoy the sounds of one or the other—or both—is it really because you've made a tedious study of the motivations involved?

In any case, SF is and has always been a popular culture art form in that it has mirrored the tenor of its time even while trying to extrapolate—sometimes quite successfully —from that

time. Cyberpunk SF came into existence because several writers were responding to a cultural shift—without fully realizing it at first. This is the nature of the initial artistic response, in that it is spontaneous, not calculated. In any case, because of developments in general-use technology, what has become known as cyberpunk SF was inevitable, and you cannot wish it away or invalidate it any more than you can insist cable TV doesn't exist by ripping out the connecting cord—or never having it put in.

The appearance of cyberpunk as *Time* magazine cover story material means that the cultural shift is still going on, and is affecting the lives of more people, and more different kinds of people—like the advent of television. Science fiction got a mention in the *Time* article, but it was not the primary focus of the article. Cyberpunk SF turns out to be "SF about cyberpunk things" but then, it always was.

Critics, adherents, writers, observers, readers, editors, and the marketing guys, all of us together made this important initial mistake—we kept saying cyberpunk was about science fiction. It isn't, and it never was. To think otherwise is like believing America's space program was about science fiction.

The culture didn't "catch up" —not exactly, anyway. To put it that way would seem to imply that the culture was following the science fiction deliberately, and that simply is not, has never been true. Had there been no SF about cyberpunk, we would still have this same cover story in *Time* magazine, probably with that same word, "cyberpunk," because we would still have desk-top computers, computer nets, hackers, viruses, and all the rest of it. As there are millions of people who go into bookstores every day without ever stopping to browse the science fiction section, there are millions of people who use networks every day and never read science fiction.

In other words, Galileo is still right—the earth goes around the sun, not vice versa.

Eventually, as many people have pointed out, cyberpunk concerns will be absorbed into the mainstream; many SF readers and writers insist that the conventions and themes of cyberpunk SF have already been absorbed into "mainstream science fiction" (if you can believe *that* term). And I have to say that I would be shocked if they were not.

As for cyberpunk SF—rather than SF about cyberpunk things —that's going to be one hell of a magical mystery tour. Eventually we *must* change from observers to participants. I think of Hypertext and interactivity and I say let's push it and see how far we can go into a landscape morphing into near-unrecognizability for the children of Gutenberg.

Cultural shift is never about SF, but vice versa—and cyberpunk, being a cultural shift rather than a form of science fiction, cannot be declared either alive or dead because nobody owns it.

Nobody owns it and everybody participates. So you can say you're tired of it, or you don't like it any more, or you're bored because all the new wore off, or you want to do something else . . . but you can't say it's over. The cultural shift is still in progress; you can ignore it at your peril, or you can stay alert and see what's coming up next.

(Guest Editorial: Ten Years After, (ed) Asimov's Dec 1993, p. 4-9.)