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What and Why was Postcyberpunk?
Greg Egan and Bruce Sterling in the 1990s

In 1998, Lawrence Person coined the term

take Person's claims for a new kind of fiction seriously, and to supplement his observations with the techno-historical specificity of the 1990s.

In his short essay, Person calls science fiction author Bruce Sterling "Chairman Bruce," alluding to the role he has played as a spokesperson for the cyberpunk movement. Sterling's skills in articulating its ideas are on show in the Preface to the defining *Mirrorshades* collection, where he identifies the post-human and "tools of global integration" as two pre-eminent concerns of its authors.[2] In his postcyberpunk article, Person further argues that the hero of cyberpunk is "cold, detached and alienated." It is this abstract quality of cyberpunk characters, their reflection of corporate computing technology, that is disappointing for some readers of the subgenre. In an interview with postcyberpunk writer Greg Egan, Marisa O'Keefe voices her disappointment with a cyberpunk that promised emancipation for the subject but whose heroes never really broke with those masculine stereotypes that make up the patriarchal structures of so much narrative. O'Keefe reveals that her dissatisfactions with cyberpunk are grounded in more than boredom with an outdated mode of literary production, phrasing her disappointment in political terms: she says that while cyberpunk once had the potential to create "a good space for people to go crazy in and invent new possibilities for human interaction," it never delivered on these promises.[3] Instead, an older narrative heroism remained the template for cyberpunk, as men moved through corporate and military hierarchies that had been re-established in digital renditions of space.

The heroes of postcyberpunk are different: instead, having jobs. Person writes that they are "integral members of society," from "the middle class," with "families, sometimes even children." The postcyberpunk hero negotiates new technological

developments with the responsibilities and anxieties that come with bourgeois life. While it was possible for Sterling to describe cyberpunk as "radical Hard SF," insofar as its novels are more interested in technology than people, postcyberpunk represents a shift across the generic dyad to social SF.[4] As Person explains of these novels, "their social landscape is often as detailed and nuanced as the technological one." If the generic identity of cyberpunk lies in its dense and thriller-like interest in the aesthetics and pyrotechnics of near-future technologies, postcyberpunk is innovative on the level of cognition, as it wants to answer the questions posed by technology to subjectivity.

The transition from cyberpunk to postcyberpunk is most clearly traced in the work of Sterling himself, from the earliest novels, *Involution Ocean* (1977), *The Artificial Kid* (1980) and *Schismatrix* (1985), to *Islands in the Net* (1988), *Holy Fire* (1996), *Heavy Weather* (1994), *Distraction* (1998), *Zeitgeist* (2000) and *The Zenith Angle* (2004).[5] It is hardly possible to work through all of these novels here, except to make a few helpful comparisons. *The Artificial Kid* and *Distraction* both have heroes wanting to succeed in public life. The cyberpunk hero, The Artificial Kid, is a media star, living amongst other media stars in a real-time studio where fights and ongoing adventures determine their popularity for an audience that remains invisible in the novel. Cameras follow the Artificial Kid wherever he goes, in a life of extravagant celebrity and violence. The hero of *Distraction* is, instead—consistent with Person's ideas about postcyberpunk—a professional media campaigner. The reader meets Oscar as the publicity manager for an

When he closed his eyes, Oscar actually could feel the sensation

finally leads to this rejuvenation experiment, which not only extends life, but restores

youth. Yet the effects of the treatment will bring the gentrocrats to abandon it as a way

forward, as Maya's internal life reverberates with the destiny of the world.

It is the personalisation of such transformations that makes postcyberpunk such a

vibrant subgenre. The reader follows both Oscar and Mia through representations of their

cognitive transformations, and also through their renewed understandings ofs

neurological technology and corporatisation. Nick's brain has been altered by "mods," or neurological modifications, manufactured and sold by megacorporations. Bought over the counter and inhaled through the nose, they enable their users to do everything from telling the time to accessing the internet, playing games to translating foreign languages. Simply plugging into these new technologies can, however, be a recipe for disaster in this Egan novel. The mod "Night Switchboard," for instance, cannot be used while awake for fear of serious disorientation. Knowledge is placed directly into the user's mind, so that one comes to "simply wake, *knowing*."[8] Users come to the sudden realisation that a message has arrived, without the need for an interface. "Night Switchboard" is useful for communicating confidentially, since it is more difficult to eavesdrop on a knowledge that has not been encoded into language. The trauma associated with "Night Switchboard," however, places a certain distance between the subject and his technological instantiation. This distance is repeated throughout the novel as Nick constantly negotiates with his mods, his relationship with the virtual.

The innovation of the mod recalls George Alec Effinger's Marid Audran novels, published between 1987 and 1991. It is worth pausing on these books to map the transition from cyberpunk to postcyberpunk. In Effinger's *When Gravity Fails* (1987), *A Fire in the Sun* (1989) and *The Exile Kiss* (1991), cognitive changes are wrought by "moddys," which are not just additions c 0 Tw ( )Tj

struggle with technologies of the mind. After wearing a moddy that dumbs him down for reasons irrelevant here, the Audran character feels "angry for half an hour."[9] While this internal dialogue is an aside to the gangster narrative of this novel, in Egan it becomes the very motivation for the hero's actions. If the moddy is a convenience or inconvenience for Effinger's characters, in Egan the mod is a narrative device.

The moddy's total takeover of the personality is very different from the fracture that Egan's mods inflict upon cognition. In *Quarantine* Nick accesses mods without becoming them. They enable him to mine remote information databases and evade security systems, but also to induce different states of consciousness and talk to virtual personalities. One of these personalities is a simulation of his dead wife.

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examples from the 1990s that showcased the new roles of virtual technologies and

biotechnologies in aligning the global with the cognitive. The first was the 1991 Gulf

War, in which the US military showcased its armoury of remote, visually mediated

destruction. The second was the development of genetic biotechnologies, which in this

period came to demonstrate how easily the boundaries between capital and nature could

dissolve, suddenly making science fiction scenarios of global biological transformation

less fictional. These technologies were also caught up in an expanding regime of military

and corporate power.

The 1991 Gulf War resituated the cyberpunk imagination into a fully articulated

military campaign, as soldiers wired into interactive technologies carried out a campaign

of destruction. That which O'Keefe once thought held "new possibilities for human

interaction" quickly turned into a way of expanding US power in the world.[15] After this

war the cyberpunk hero resembled less the protégé of a new technological era than the

pilots of this wartime offensive. Yet cyberpunk was never a utopian subgenre. In its most

famous novel, William Gibson's *Neuromancer* (1984), the spatialisation of the virtual

takes place in a cyberspace that the military in fact invented. Gibson describes its origins:

"Cold blue military footage burned through lab animals wired into test systems, helmets

feeding into fire control circuits of tanks and war planes."[16] In *Neuromancer* this

technology has mutated into a netwteGed"mut7( )Tj002 Tc -0.002 Tw [(c)-4(ir)5(h1(ac)-10(t)]TJ 0)-2(o)]T

interests of the state."[17] CNN had near-exclusive broadcast rights from the US

to sell altered seeds on a global market. When in *Holy Fire* Maya catches a train across

vertigo of a sheer virtuality represented by the interstellar,