"VIEW FROM THE EDGE":

VERNACULAR THEORY AND

CYBERPUNK FANDOM

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by

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Abstract

Cyberpunk, a sub-genre of science fiction that developed in the 1980s, is typified by a dystopian representation of the near future. There is a cultural ethic embraced by cyberpunk fans that is derived from the literature and other media of the genre. This cultural ethic can be recognized as part of a vernacular theory unique to cyberpunk fandom. Vernacular theory proposes that it is not only academics that are able to critique and theorize about social experiences. Thus, through the themes of this cultural ethic (marginalization, creation of identity and image, technology and the body, and global integration and conflict) fans demonstrate a certain understanding of their social reality, address issues of concern, and reflect an awareness of and ability for critical theory.

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1. Preface

The term "cyberpunk" is perhaps most famously associated with the science fiction of William Gibson, and many mistakenly attribute the term to him (for example, see Loyd Blankenship *GURPS Cyberpunk High-Tech Low-Life Roleplaying*, 1990, 4). However, as Kevin McCarron notes in "Corpses, Animals, Machines and Mannequins: The Body and Cyberpunk," "It is commonly accepted that the word 'cyberpunk' was first used in a Bruce Bethke story called 'Cyberpunk,' published in the November 1983 issue of *Amazing Stories*. Certainly the word rapidly became ubiquitous when an article in the *Washington Post*, dated 30 December 1984, used the word to describe the work of several writers" (263-4). Thus, the term cyberpunk came to represent a movement in science fiction which took hold in the 1980s. It is a genre characterized by two key elements: the interaction of humans with technology, and class conflict manifested in military, social, economic, or personal struggle (Blankenship 4). As a style, it encompasses several media including books, short stories, comics and graphic novels, movies, television, magazines, role-playing games, and the Internet.

A particular cultural ethic is represented in cyberpunk fandom which derives from the literature, mass media and social interaction of the various fan communities on-line and off-line. Camille Bacon-Smith comments:

> these writers and readers make a totally different use of literature. Science Fiction is a learned rhetorical discourse for the argumentation of social issues of interest to its community over decades. Issues of war and intellectual freedom, of positivism and social disintegration are argued in the commercial literature, in the private literature, and in the halls and corridors of hotels across the nation. (Special Issue 2)

The themes of the cyberpunk cultural ethic reflect a certain understanding of social reality and address issues of concern. These themes can be recognized as part of a vernacular theory, a non-academic way of understanding and criticizing social structure, particular to the cyberpunk movement. Thomas McLaughlin, in *Street Smarts and Critical Theory: Listening to the Vernacular*, discusses the ability of groups within the larger hegemonic mass culture to critique their social reality. He writes:

> One of the most powerful pedagogical agents in contemporary culture is of course the popular culture industry. Critical theorists have long understood that mass entertainment has taught and enforced codes of behavior, belief, and value within popular culture. Some theorists have emphasized the success of that teaching, seeing fans as products of that pedagogic process. Others have emphasized the fans' resistance to that teaching, their insistence on constructing a meaning of their own out of what is available in the everyday. I want to claim that fans can and do recognize the existence of this pedagogy and understand its intention, that they theorize. (McLaughlin 14)

In the Introduction to my thesis, I will further discuss vernacular theory as proposed by McLaughlin and I will provide greater detail of the history of the genre, the social issues cyberpunk addresses and the social relevance its subject matter and various media have to the fans. I will also incorporate a further discussion regarding formation of fan groups in the types of interactions and fan activities that occur. The following four chapters of the thesis will examine vernacular theory embodied in four main themes of the cyberpunk cultural ethic: marginalization, the creation of identity and image, technology and the body, and global integration and conflict.

The first theme of the cultural ethic explored is marginalization. Bruce Sterling notes that cyberpunk is unique in its dramatic characters in that "rather than the usual passionless techies and rock-ribbed Competent Men of hard SF [science fiction], [the] characters are a pirate's crew of losers, customers, spin-offs, castoffs, and lunatics" (*Burning* x). Thus, while the dramatic figures do manifest elements of the hero, they are also people who have not had much success, power or influence. This generic characteristic makes it possible for universal identification by the fans with a heroic action ideal. John W. Roberts explains, "the actions that a group recognizes as heroic are those that it perceives as the most advantageous behaviors for dealing with an obstacle or situation that threatens the values that guide action within specific temporal or social, political, and economic contexts" (5). Since conflict is a key characteristic of the genre, these apparent losers prove that they are best able to overcome adversity.

The next theme I will discuss is the creation of identity and image and the role of this theme in the lives of the fans. The creation of an image or an alter-ego is also common to the genre, both within fictional narratives and as a key element of role-playing games and Internet interaction. Blankenship, in his guide to a role-playing game, notes that "[w]ho you really are is less important than the image you project – who people think you are, or might be" (5). The role-playing games offer an extensive cast of characters that can be adopted and modified by participants in order to become a unique image presented to the group. The image may also be manifested in other forms of interaction, particularly on the Internet. Today, even those who are not participating in

cyberpunk culture employ Internet nicknames or create on-line personas in order to portray a certain image to others.

Perhaps the most significant thematic element of the genre and the cultural ethic is the interface of the body with technology, and this will be the focus of the next chapter. Technology is both an integral part of the action and a source of conflict. In the genre, it is common to find cyborgs, a blend of human and machine, and mental invasion through computer manipulation. Since the genre is based in a certain amount of realism, the technology that is part of what makes the genre is also possible today. Thus, the concerns often mirror ethical debates occurring today by pushing the imagined limits of the technology to its most functional form of human interaction.

The last theme to be examined is the theme of global integration and conflict. Borders do not figure significantly in this genre. The action takes place on a global scale facilitated by the satellite media net and the multinational corporation. The role of the hacker becomes to challenge the global forces of information control and is paramount in protecting the status of the individual within this globalized social framework. We also find that within the fiction, people are connected by a vast computer network and this is reflected in the community of fans of the genre itself. Since much interaction can occur on the Internet, communication with fans from other countries makes this a world-wide community.

Finally, I will conclude with an examination of the contribution of this thesis to the existing literature on science fiction fandom. To a large extent, the academic studies of science fiction fandom have focussed on a segment of fans who are often associated

with fan activities surrounding such television science fiction staples as *Star Trek* and *Dr. Who* and include, among other things, slash fiction writing, filking songs and convention attendance. This thesis examines a significantly different genre of science fiction that is characterized as dystopian and addresses issues of social conflict. Cyberpunk fandom and its vernacular theory can be viewed as a form of counter-hegemony.

1.1 Research Methodology

My thesis research has involved face-to-face interviews with people who self-identify as fans of cyberpunk or various role-playing games. Over the summer of 1999, in Toronto, Brantford and Paris, Ontario, I spoke with seven people about their cyberpunk fandom. Each interview was voluntarily tape-recorded and I provided consent forms to each informant specifying the information provided in the interviews would be used anonymously and for the purpose of the completion of this thesis. In addition to this fieldwork, I established contact with other fans through a posting on the Internet forum alt.cyberpunk and they, after consenting to the use of their statements, e-mailed me with their thoughts. It was indicated in my initial posting that any statements would be used anonymously upon their request. Lastly, I made contact with others who self-identify as fans through networking and these people, after receiving an explanation of the focus of my thesis, also provided me with voluntary and consensual statements via e-mail.

1.2 Informant Background

Overall, fan activity surrounding cyberpunk in the late 1990s seems to be largely dominated by white males in their mid-to-late twenties. Of my seven interviews, only one was with a woman, who was younger (age 22) than the men interviewed and whose interest in cyberpunk came at a later age (early twenties) through cinema and participation in on-line role-playing games in the late 1990s. The six men comprise two separate fan groups: one from Paris, ON and the other from Toronto. These men all fall into the same age range of their mid-twenties at the time of the interviews and both groups are centred around local face-to-face role-playing games. The men's interest developed at a much younger age than my female interviewee. They became interested in cyberpunk and began playing the role-playing games in the mid-to-late 1980s.

Through my Internet posting on alt.cyberpunk, I received e-mail comments from an additional six men, one of whom is a cyberpunk author. Three are pursuing post-secondary education and one is a professor at a university. While a few provided me with their proper names, others opted to only utilize their on-line nicknames for their correspondence. I also engaged in e-mail correspondence with another two men, one of whom I met at his cyberpunk film premiere and the other I contacted through the connections of a co-worker. Both of these men also fit the generalization of the typical cyberpunk fan as being white males in their mid-twenties to early-thirties.

1.3 Notes on Transcription

The informants who provided me with information during tape-recorded interviews are identified throughout this thesis by first name and last initial. People who contributed statements via e-mail are identified either by proper name or by on-line nickname, whichever was indicated by the informant.

The portions of the tape-recorded interviews that have been transcribed and included in this thesis have been minorly edited to eliminate hesitations and false starts to facilitate comprehension. In addition, any statements received via e-mail that have been included have been quoted verbatim. In some cases, this means that there are spelling and/or grammatical errors throughout the quote and these have been indicated using the notation sic. However, in other quotes, the fans have employed an on-line shorthand, which includes variations in spelling, punctuation and capitalization, and these passages have been reproduced in this manner and indicated as such.

2. Introduction

Cyberpunk is a sub-genre of science fiction literature which flourished in the 1980s and has become mainstream sci-fi today. It is most famously associated with the work of William Gibson and in particular with his novel *Neuromancer* (1984). Other authors whose works are considered part of the cyberpunk canon include Bruce Sterling, Lewis Shiner, Pat Cadigan, Neal Stephenson and Greg Bear. In essence, the genre is characterized by two key elements: technology and conflict; hence, the cyber and the punk. Though the cyberpunk genre began as a literary one, it has been incorporated into a wide variety of media encompassing television, cinema, role-playing games (RPGs) on- and off-line, and comics and zines (independently-produced fan magazines). As well, since the 1980s, its fan base has expanded from a select group of ardent fans to a dispersed population, some even unaware that there is a name for the genre (personal interview). Groups of fans of the genre have been forming since the 1980s and the members take part in various fan activities. Peter Narváez notes that "Perhaps the most obvious manner in which fans manifest enthusiasm is through acts of consuming electronic media forms, clothing, fanzines, printed ephemera, and assorted bric-a-brac. The modern fan is a consumer of mass produced cultural goods" (37). As communication technology advances and becomes more ubiquitous, there has been a trend in the dissolution of physically tangible groups for individuals who now connect to one another via the Internet.

As noted earlier, a particular cultural ethic is represented in cyberpunk fandom which derives from the literature, mass media and social interaction of the various

communities on- and off-line. A certain understanding of social reality is reflected and issues of concern are addressed through the themes of this cultural ethic: marginalization, the creation of identity and image, technology and the body, and global integration and conflict. These themes will each be examined as part of a vernacular theory or non-academic social criticism unique to cyberpunk fans in the following chapters. Thomas McLaughlin, in *Street Smarts and Critical Theory: Listening to the Vernacular*, comments on the ability of groups within the larger hegemonic mass culture to critique their social reality citing Paul Willis's study of British working class youth groups:

> It is this untutored deconstruction, this street-smart sense of the multiplicity of truth, that strikes me in Willis' marginalized working class kids. They have used their experience with official education and the skeptical practices of their informal group and their general class culture in order to ask serious questions about the culture they live in. (12)

McLaughlin's vernacular theory is suggestive of Antonio Gramsci's ideas in that it "rejects traditional ideas of intellectuals as members of a separate and freewheeling class who have escaped class backgrounds because of their education in a tradition of analytical method that allows them to discover truths that transcend class interests" (McLaughlin 10). For Gramsci, "The notion of 'the intellectuals' as a distinct social category independent of class is a myth" (3). He writes, "The central point of the question remains the distinction between intellectuals as an organic category of every fundamental social group and intellectuals as a traditional category" (15).

McLaughlin reflects Gramsci's hegemony theory in his recognition that cultural hegemony is not absolute. The subordinate groups do exercise some degree of power in that the dominating group must make some concessions in order to remain dominant. As Gramsci writes, "the fact of hegemony presupposes that account be taken of the interests and the tendencies of the groups over which hegemony is to be exercised, and that a certain compromise equilibrium should be formed—in other words, that the leading group should make sacrifices of an economic-corporate kind" (Gramsci 161). This leaves openings for the "organic intellectual" who "contributes to sustain a conception of the world or to modify it, that is, to bring into being new modes of thought" (Gramsci 9). McLaughlin maintains that vernacular theory, "in its local, momentary insights into the ways of power and the workings of culture, it does remind us that ideological power isn't total, that political resistance is made possible by intellectual critique, and that it is not only 'intellectuals' who can produce that critique" (29). As Narváez indicates, the fan "is not necessarily a helpless pawn or the victim of mass entertainment industries. Fans engage in complex manipulations of mass mediated culture for purposes of status and communication" (38). Thus, for the fans of cyberpunk, the genre allows them to exert some measure of hegemonic resistance through contextualizing and articulating their own experiences from a theoretical perspective.

2.1 The Literary Aesthetic and the Development of the Genre

The cyberpunk mise-en-scène (whether a mental picture or an image on-screen) is typically set in the near post-apocalyptic future and is crowded with imagery. Lewis

Shiner recalls the first time he read Gibson's manuscript for "Burning Chrome." It begins:

> It was hot, the night we burned Chrome. Out in the malls and plazas, moths were batting themselves to death against the neon, but in Bobby's loft the only light came from a monitor screen and the green and red LEDs on the face of the matrix simulator. I knew every chip in Bobby's simulator by heart; it looked like your workaday Ono-Sendai VII, the 'Cyberspace Seven,' but I'd rebuilt it so many times that you'd have had a hard time finding a square millimeter of factory circuitry in all that silicon. (Gibson *Burning* 195)

Shiner comments, "I was hooked instantly. The first paragraph was full of heat, neon, vivid reds, cathode greens. There were malls, silicon chips, LEDs, and brand names. All this in the first paragraph. A cartoon bulb went on over my head. Science fiction could be energetic, hip, lean, and best of all, real" (20). Cyberpunk differs from its science fiction predecessors in its realism. As Bruce Sterling notes, "We see a future that is recognizable and painstakingly drawn from the modern condition . . . It derives from a new set of starting points: not from the shopworn formula of robots, spaceships, and the modern miracle of atomic energy, but from cybernetics, biotech, and the communications web – to name a few" (*Burning* 10-11). Frances Bonner describes the shared generic characteristics of the literature with film and television projects: "Most notable among the shared characteristics are the frenetic pace, the excess of information, the inverted millenarianism (figured especially in various forms of decay), and the concentration on computers, corporations, crime, and corporeality" (191). This generic aesthetic developed because of and in response to cultural, social and technological changes in the Western world.

While the technological preoccupations of the genre are paramount, there is one element to cyberpunk that dramatically differentiates it from its science fiction predecessors: its punk rock influences. Sterling writes, "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. Cyberpunk comes from the realm where the computer hacker and rocker overlap, a cultural Petri dish where writhing gene lines splice" (*Mirrorshades* xiii). He comments that the cyberpunks "are in love with style, and are (some say) fashion conscious to a fault. But, like the punks of '77, they prize their garage-band esthetic . . . Some critics opine that cyberpunk is disentangling SF from mainstream influence, much as punk stripped rock and roll of the symphonic elegances of Seventies 'progressive rock'" (*Mirrorshades* x). Larry McCaffery, in his "Introduction," also notes the similarities of the development of punk rock with the development of cyberpunk:

> The overall effect of cyberpunk within SF is analogous to what occurred within rock music in the mid-1970s when punk music rudely and crudely deconstructed nearly everyone's relationship to popular music. When the slam dancers cleared out, and the pieces of amps, guitars, and vocal sounds were once again rejoined into something that seemed vaguely recognizable, there was a certain sense of sane clarity (or clear insanity) in the air. In the case of both punk and cyberpunk, however, this sense did not produce a constricting attitude of conformity among ambitious writers and musicians . . . Rather, there was a feeling in both the rock and SF communities that whatever direction these forms were now taking, they could be reconstructed afresh so that priorities could once again be recognized. (13)

McCaffery, in "Cutting Up: Cyberpunk, Punk Music, and Urban Decontextualizations," further argues:

That cyberpunks would be intrigued by figures from the punk music scene is hardly surprising. Not only was punk arguably the most significant artistic movement of the 1970s, but it shared with cyberpunk the same urges to use technology as a weapon against itself, and to seize the control of its form from the banalizing effects of the media industry and re-establish a sense of menace, intensity. Decked out in mirrorshades and leather jackets, quoting Lou Reed and the Stones and Johnny Rotten as often as Einstein and Heisenberg, the cyberpunks aimed at presenting themselves in much the same way as the punk musicians did: as "bad," as extreme, as in touch with what was happening now, and, of course, as being *daring*. (289, emphasis in original)

He notes that "[o]ne way to view the mid-1980s cyberpunk phenomenon is to suggest that it represented a synthesis of SF with postmodern aesthetic tendencies and thematic impulses" (Introduction 11). The cyberpunks who began writing in the 1980s were products of our late capitalist post-modern Western culture and were influenced by many things. As McCaffery explains, "Cyberpunk was written by a generation of authors once-removed from the 1960s New Wave innovators, and this ten- or fifteen-year age difference was evident in their work in several ways" (Introduction 12). He continues:

For one thing, the cyberpunks were the first generation of artists for whom the technologies of satellite dishes, video and audio players and recorders, computers and video games (both of particular importance), digital watches, and MTV were not exoticisms, but part of a daily "reality matrix." They were also the first generation of writers who were reading Thomas Pynchon, Ballard, and Burroughs as teenagers, who had 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 comic books, and the gore-and-splatter SF/horror films of George Romero, David Cronenberg, and Ridley Scott. In their works and in numerous, highly contentious public debates that took place at SF conferences and conventions, the cyberpunks

> presented themselves as "techno-urban-guerilla" artists announcing that both the technological dreams and nightmares envisioned by previous generations of SF artists were already in place, and that writers as well as the general public needed to create ways of using this technology for our own purposes before we all became mere software, easily deletable from the hard drives of multinationalism's vast mainframe. (12)

The rapid development of technology in the twentieth century had a significant impact on the development of cyberpunk literature. Information technology was a considerable part of the "daily reality matrix" of the cyberpunk authors and is an important factor in the development of a postmodern aesthetic. Neil Postman, in *Technopoly: The Surrender of Culture to Technology*, argues that the Western world has reached the stage of a Technopoly culture:

> From millions of sources all over the globe, through every possible channel and medium—light waves, airwaves, ticker tapes, computer banks, telephone wires, television cables, satellites, printing presses—information pours in. Behind it, in every imaginable form of storage—on paper, on video and audio tapes, on discs, film and silicon chips— is an ever greater volume of information waiting to be retrieved . . . The milieu in which Technopoly flourishes is one in which the tie between information and human purpose has been severed, i.e., information appears indiscriminately, directed at no one in particular, in enormous volume and at high speeds, and disconnected from theory, meaning, or purpose. (69-70)

According to Postman, we are now culturally dealing with the ramifications of this rapid technological development, this condition he refers to as "information glut" (72) against which society's defences have broken down. He writes, "Technopoly is a state of culture. It is also a state of mind. It consists in the deification of technology, which means that culture seeks its authorization in technology, and takes its orders from

technology. This requires the development of a new kind of social order, and of necessity leads to the rapid dissolution of much that is associated with traditional beliefs" (71).

Postman's description of the Technopoly is reminiscent of Jean-François Lyotard's position that the postmodern condition describes "the state of our culture following the transformations which, since the end of the nineteenth century, have altered the game rules for science, literature, and the arts" (xxiii). This has resulted in an "incredulity toward metanarratives" (xxiv). As Lyotard notes, "the status of knowledge [is] unbalanced and its speculative unity broken" (35). John Storey summarizes:

> Postmodernism is said to signal the collapse of all universalist metanarratives with their privileged truth to tell, and to witness instead the increasing sound of a plurality of voices from the margins, with their insistence on difference, on cultural diversity, and the claims of heterogeneity over homogeneity. (174)

Postman, in his discussion of the developments of the information revolution and the creation of Technopoly, also mentions the significance of the shift in perception of information to a commodity (67-8). This is also an element of the postmodern condition found in the work of Jean Baudrillard. Steven Connor paraphrases Baudrillard's thoughts: "It is no longer possible to separate the economic or productive realm from the realms of ideology or culture, since cultural artefacts, images, representations, even feelings and psychic structures have become part of the world of the economic" (51). As Storey explains, "there has been a historical shift in the West, from a society based on the production of things to one based on the production of information" (177). For Baudrillard, this is "the mutation of this properly industrial society into what could be

called our techno-culture, from the passage out of a *metallurgic* into a *semiurgic* society"
(185, emphasis in original).

McCaffery maintains that "the challenge of finding a suitable means to examine
the 'postmodern condition' has produced a vigorous and highly energized response from
a new breed of SF authors who combine scientific know-how with aesthetic innovation"
(Introduction 9). Thus, the cyberpunks, being products of a postmodern condition,
created a genre that became widely recognized as the decisive postmodern literature
(McCaffery; Connor; Olsen).

2.2 The Cyberpunk Canon

The canon of seminal cyberpunk works is ever expanding, but there are some key
pieces to which people are repeatedly referred when discussing the genre. George
Slusser comments, "that if there is something we call a cyberpunk 'canon,' it has
emerged spontaneously, and perhaps spuriously, from within a field of vastly different
modes and media" (8). While the key work cited as primary in the cyberpunk movement
is Gibson's *Neuromancer* which, in Sterling's words, is the "quintessential cyberpunk
novel" (*Mirrorshades* xiv), there are many other pieces worthy of note. A good overview
of many of the cyberpunks' works in the 1980s is *Mirrorshades: The Cyberpunk
Anthology*, edited by Sterling, which features the work of Greg Bear, Pat Cadigan,
William Gibson, Rudy Rucker, Lewis Shiner, and Bruce Sterling, among others. Richard
Kadrey and Larry McCaffery compiled a chronological bibliography, "Cyberpunk 101:
A Schematic Guide to *Storming the Reality Studio*," in an attempt to provide the reader

with a "quick list of the cultural artefacts that helped to shape cyberpunk ideology and aesthetics, along with books by the cyberpunks themselves" (17). This guide includes many works from earlier periods in science fiction because they have been influential on the cyberpunks, or because they can be viewed as pre-cyberpunk pieces in which it has become evident only in retrospect that these works contain elements of the cyberpunk aesthetic.

One of the earliest works ever cited as pre-cyberpunk is Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*. Slusser contends, "Mary Shelley's work is indeed the first SF novel, by which I mean simply that it seems to be the first work in which the processes of traditional fiction and modern science meet in any meaningful fashion" (46). Kadrey and McCaffery open their list with *Frankenstein* for much the same reason. They write:

> The recycling of body parts, the creation of life (or monster making), murder, sex, revenge, the epic chase, the brilliant scientist working outside the law, a brooding, romantic atmosphere—this book is a veritable sourcebook for SF motifs and clichés. It also created the first great myth of the industrial revolution, and reflects the deeply schizophrenic attitude toward science so evident in postmodern culture and in the fiction emerging from this culture. (17)

Though the reasons for choosing *Frankenstein* as one of the earliest science fiction novels are fairly evident, the work can also be read as pre-cyberpunk in that it shares similar motifs and themes with the genre. Aside from the most obvious comparison of the cyborg (the fusion of human and machine), cybernetics and body modification, Jeff K., a fan of RPGs, explains the similarity of Shelley's treatment of technology to its treatment in cyberpunk:

It starts with the mind, not with the machine or the end result. So, I think it all comes back to the imagination and, of course, our view of the world is created. It's not something that we just start with. Anything that we walk around, buildings and everything, architecture, it all is our creation. And so, I think with, Mary Shelley was very concerned with the extent of how far you can go with your imagination. And the end result for her is, "Hold on, let's," you know, typically English, conservative, "Whoa, let's not open the floodgates all the way." And so, I wonder, in cyberpunk are they doing the same thing sometimes because it never seems to be this happy, apple-pie song. It's always dark. Robocop – the melding of man and machine to make the perfect police officer, who's quite destructive . . . So, I don't know if it's, I think it creates just as many pains as it does opportunities to get rid of it. And I think, once again, Mary Shelley's aware of this set of contraries. It's a sort of this great love/hate relationship we have with technology, for better or worse, for richer or poorer . . . (8 July 1999)

These concerns regarding society's relationship (or marriage, as Jeff K. articulates) to technology have been with us throughout the last century and have grown with the increased pace of technological development. This continued to be a theme of many works written throughout the twentieth century.

Other influential pre-cyberpunk pieces include William S. Burroughs' *Naked Lunch*, the writings of Marshall McLuhan, Anthony Burgess' *A Clockwork Orange*, Philip K. Dick's *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* (which became the basis for the film *Blade Runner*), Alvin Toffler's *Future Shock*, and Thomas Pynchon's *Gravity's Rainbow* (Kadrey and McCaffery).

Aside from the literature, the cyberpunk genre has also permeated other media. In addition to Ridley Scott's film *Blade Runner*, there is David Cronenberg's *Videodrome* and the later *Existenz*, James Cameron's *The Terminator* and its sequels, Ridley Scott's

Alien and its sequels, Paul Verhoeven's *Robocop*, and most recently, the Wachowski brothers' *Matrix* trilogy. On television, the creation of MTV influenced a generation, the series *Max Headroom* aired in North America from 1987-88 and, most recently, James Cameron's *Dark Angel* aired from 2000-02. Cyberpunk imagery has also been co-opted by mainstream marketing companies for product campaigns which have resulted in commercials like the ones that launched Listerine Pocket Packs, which featured a cyberpunk bad breath germ killing hero – with the Listerine strip being the cutting edge technological weapon.

There have been many cyberpunk RPGs on the market that are played both on- and off-line including *Shadowrun*, *Cyberpunk 2020* and *GURPS Cyberpunk* and others that have been created in on-line forums such as MUDs (Multi-User Dungeons/ Domains), MUSHs (Multi-User Simulated/Shared Hallucinations), and MOOs (MUDs, Object Oriented).

2.3 Why Cyberpunk Matters

Cyberpunk remains an interesting, entertaining and relevant genre for fans who utilize its themes and motifs for theorizing about their own cultural reality and social experience. Web forums such as alt.cyberpunk are still active, hacker groups like 2600 have meetings and an on-line newsgroup, and new collectives like cyberpunkfilm, an independent film production company, are being created. Cyberpunk fiction comments on society's present condition and makes a call to arms to challenge both writers and

readers to think about technology and how to control its effects on culture. As Mike Featherstone and Roger Burrows comment, the fiction

> sketches out the dark side of the technological-fix visions of the future, with a wide range of post-human forms which have both theoretical and practical implications; theoretically, in influencing those who are trying to reconstruct the social theory of the present the near future, and practically, in terms of those (largely young people) who are keen to devise experimental lifestyles and subcultures which aim to live out and bring about selected aspects of the cyberspace/cyberpunk constellation. (3)

In general, for most fans, the discovery of the genre that resonates with them is an individual one, and only later do they connect with others in various forms of groups (gaming, forums, conventions, etc.) to share their fandom and engage in social activities. As Camille Bacon-Smith, in her discussion of the formation of fan groups in *Enterprising Women: Television Fandom and the Creation of Popular Myth*, writes, "Most fans make the first two choices – genre content and delivery channel – before they become aware that an organized community of fandom exists, and they choose their social group accordingly" (16).

Cyberpunk captures the interest of people for variety of reasons. Nicholas Butta, who contacted me through alt.cyberpunk, quite simply puts it, "I enjoy the genre because of the emphasis on empowered individuals and because of the atmosphere created by good CP authors" (4 Oct. 2001). Peter Burkowski, a fan contacted through a personal referral, explains:

> I think what appeals most me about the Cyberpunk genre is that it is the Future, but not *Futuristic*. People go about their business with borgs and AI's and who-knows-what all over as if there's nothing to notice—and for them, there

isn't. It might be the Future to us, but for the characters its [sic] a very normal Present. I know that most people would say that all Sci-Fi sub-genres are like that, but I would disagree. Gibson's short story *The Gernsback Continuum* nicely illustrates the detachment that overly 'glitzy' sci-fi produces. The Cyberpunk genre appeals to me because among Sci-Fi genres it seems more accessible, more down to earth, than other types of Science Fiction. The characters really *live in* the settings. In Star Trek nobody ever seems to need to pee, but in the world of Neuromancer a shave and a shower can be a significant character goal. (19 April 2005, emphasis in original)

And Chance, another alt.cyberpunk poster, reflected:

I can't tell you what drew me into the genre - I hated it at first – I loathed the shades of grey, the lack of moral definitions. But, it grows on you. You can tell any type of story with the genre, it's [sic] conventions are flexible and it provides many venues for exploration of the human (and non-human) soul. It blends the worst of all possible worlds with the best of all possible possibilities. (5 Oct. 2001)

The cyberpunk literary aesthetic was appealing to many people. They responded to the genre's realism in both setting and dramatic figure.

However, for many others, the genre also has a significant social relevance. For example, David Geelan, in response to my post on alt.cyberpunk, writes:

I do find that I turn to cyberpunk tropes more and more to explain the world I see around me. This is not in the sense of strict predictions of technologies but more in social trends. The security clamp-down, with poitential [sic] life imprisonment for hackers, in the wake of Sept. 11 seems to me like a perfect example of the corporations using a human tragedy to get exactly what they want, and to subjugate the individual further. (30 Sept. 2001)

Peter Burkowski comments:

I think the Cyberpunk genre is still quite relevant—if not more relevant than when it first began. Technology is

advancing, governments are untrustworthy, and knowledge is more free than ever. Neural interface software and nanotechnology are being developped [sic], and hard currency is becoming outmoded. Cyberpunk stories have practically blueprinted society's current direction. I think their relevance is now as a cautionary example. If anyone dislikes the dystopian near-future portrayed by the genre they had better look into trying to change things, because it seems to be right where we're headed. (28 Nov. 2004)

And, Andrew Holden, founder of cyberpunkfilm and maker of the educational film *The Cyberpunk Educator*, when considering whether cyberpunk had influenced his worldview, reflected, "Mos [sic] definitely. I think more than anything else, it provided confirmation. When I was desperate and working in the factory, in Virginia, there wasn't much around me socially or otherwise to validate my feelings toward the company. Cyberpunk articulated how I felt, and I ran with it" (31 Oct. 2004).

When asked to further comment on his perception of cyberpunk's social relevance, Andrew writes:

> Well, since I see cyberpunk as a combo of Romantic Tragedy and Existential Irony, to me it has tremendous relevance, because like any modal art, it helps us describe our lives, and create our identities. Obviously, the Gibson or William Blake model of overwheliming [sic] hierarchal power and individual angst is still very much with us in politics and our morality as individuals.
> I see a lot of new cyberpunk films that minimize the most obvious aesthetic conventions of cyberpunk, while maintaining it's [sic] core imagery and message-The Bourne Supremacy, for example-it [sic] one of the most cyberpunk films I've ever seen. So the art is still with us.
> I don't belive [sic] that it's 'past' it's [sic] time. Given that cyberpunk is partially informed by a marxist critique of technology in the face of exploding capitalism, I expect to cyberpunk to go through periods of mass popularity in places like China, Cuba, in the next 100 years.

Also, I still think the majority of those who determine culture-the powers that be—are in a romantic phase in the 19th century sense. Various Imperial governments and even religions, [sic] are propped up on the figure of the romantic hero, pure in soul, protecting the pastoral for his people. Since, of course, this is a fiction, we'll see some resistance in the form of irony (parody), and cyberpunk will play a part in that by mocking the labyrinth bureaucratic institutions and technologies employed to this end. (31 Oct. 2004)

Andrew's vernacular theory is heavily influenced by academic concepts although he never received a college education. McLaughlin also encountered this academic awareness in the vernacular theory in some producers of zines. He writes that there are "pieces of evidence that suggest some zine producers are postundergraduates who have heard something about academic cultural theory and want to pursue some of its concerns in a vernacular mode" (McLaughlin 67). This sense of academic theoretical awareness permeates Andrew's film and his commentary about the cyberpunk genre.

Many fans view cyberpunk as an articulation of the Western world's current cultural state of Technopoly. For Jillian, she sees the world around her becoming more and more cyberpunk. She writes:

With technology at the point it's at now, we've already reached George Orwell's "Big Brother" with all the cameras watching everything we do, and this is well into a cyberpunk world as well. As technology leaps forward, so will the mainstream effects of it jump forward, and a true cyberpunk world is already well on it's [sic] way. Sometimes I look around the world today and see what's happening, and think the only thing really missing from it being truly cyberpunk is the enhancements put in people on the mainstream level. (7 Oct. 2001)

And, for other fans, because cyberpunk has become a social reality, it can no longer be viewed as that sub-genre of science fiction that they love. They question how one can write science fiction when, to a large extent, it is now fact. Chance comments:

> As far as the cyberpunk "movement" goes - well, as literature the genre is pretty dead right now. There's not a lot to say with the present so much in flux. It was easier to write about the dystopian future when we were farther from it. The movement in movies and films is just coming into it's [sic] own, as the information age gives way to the age of communication - that approaching near-hive mind state everyone with a cell phone and two pagers is contributiong [sic] to. The here and now is making the fiction seem clumsy and out of touch. Also, maybe a little to [sic] close to real for people to feel comfortable. (5 Oct. 2001)

And Alias, another poster on alt.cyberpunk, reflects in his on-line shorthand:

> . . . i'm tempted to use the past tense for this entire thing, cause [sic] IMO [in my opinion] CP [cyberpunk] is dead. very dead. The WTC [World Trade Center] bombing was the icing on the cake, but it was dying for a long time now. Back in the day CP was strange and hard to understand . . those of us that did . . the hackers and the phreaks . . the hangers on and the punks . . we were different and special in some small way cause we had this thing that we knew would be huge . . that no one else had. Now its [sic] everywhere . . our next war (this war) will be fought with remote drones and economic tactics. info war. CP is reality, hence CP is dead. (1 Oct. 2001)

More and more, cyberpunk is seen less as a science fictional construct and increasingly as a prediction or warning for a social reality that has come to pass.

Whether viewed as past its prime or not, cyberpunk offers its fans a way by which to understand our social reality in terms of capitalistic and technological issues and to theorize about the impact of these forces on their own lives and in the world they see

around them. It remains a meaningful and thought-provoking genre that captures the interest and imaginations of many people.

3. Marginalization

As one of the Wachowski brothers (director, *The Matrix*) comments off-camera in the documentary *Making the Matrix*, "What's interesting about the whole idea of cyberpunk is that it's, it's a great way to create a sense of alienation and disconnection" (Oreck). The theme of marginalization is a significant one in both the genre itself and in the vernacular theory expressed by fans. In cyberpunk, there is a lack of a traditional heroic ideal. Bruce Sterling notes that cyberpunk is unique in its dramatic characters. He comments, "Rather than the usual passionless techies and rock-ribbed Competent Men of hard SF, [the] characters are a pirate's crew of losers, hustlers, spin-offs, castoffs, and lunatics" (*Burning* 11). People in cyberpunk may do heroic things but they are not infallible, not purely good. This aesthetic of imperfection and social marginalization in its dramatic figures appeals to fans, once again in large part, because of the emphasis on realism which allows fans to make correlations with their own experience. The cyberpunk fans interviewed for this thesis do not come from positions of great social power or influence. Some are students or recent graduates, and most hold hourly-wage employment in entry-level positions. Thus, they are able to identify with the cyberpunk "anti-hero." Marginalization also affects the fan community as a whole. Henry Jenkins, in his study of television fan groups, recognizes that fandom is marginalized by mainstream society as a form of social control (19), though the fans, through their activities, attempt to subvert that control.

In cyberpunk, we do not see, as James L. Hodge maintains, the science fiction hero that continues the tradition of "Paul Bunyan, Pecos Bill, Stormalong the Sailor, and

then still further back to our European origins—to divine or merely semi-divine heroic figures like Beowulf, Thor and CuChulainn" (38). According to Hodge, "The heroic figures of today's fantasy and science fiction are merely the latest in a long line of culture heroes who purport to be models of all that is best in our society, and thus offer a comforting example of how truth and goodness—not to mention The American Way—prevail against evil and lies" (37). This depiction of the heroic ideal is common in the science fiction that precedes cyberpunk. One recent example is Gene Roddenberry's *Star Trek: The Next Generation's* Captain Jean-Luc Picard and the Enterprise crew who stand for Good and battle Evil through diplomacy or, when necessary, confrontation. Other science fiction traditional heroes include Luke Skywalker from George Lucas' *Star Wars*, Buck Rogers and superheroes like Superman and Wonder Woman. These figures represent the social value of truth and goodness. As Hodge comments, "This disinclination to allow our heroes to indulge habitually in deceit speaks volumes about our attitudes toward covert operations, misinformation campaigns, and diplomatic lies" (41).

Cyberpunk, on the other hand, diverges from this formula. Lance Olsen, in his comparison of cyberpunk and neorealism states, "Neorealism ultimately expresses a conservative narrative and metaphysical consciousness; cyberpunk in its purest form expresses a profoundly practical one" (147). He notes that "cyberpunks explore the heterogeneous fringes of our culture" (Olsen 148) and that the literature is populated with "morally numb characters drifting emotionlessly through wasted cityscapes that for them possess no inherent value or meaning" (Olsen 147). Robert Donahoo and Chuck

Etheridge, in their article, "Lewis Shiner and the 'Good' Anarchist," write "This dangerous, tenuous environment actually serves as the primordial soup that provides the proper conditions for the hero to evolve the vision necessary to bring about the new order. This pattern, a descent into anarchy generating new vision in a 'hero,' is most fully realized in [his] novels" (186). They comment,

> In Shiner's view, the anarchist is at one with timeless drives and universal rhythms. Though in traditional terms his heroes might be branded outlaws, murderers, or at least psychologically unbalanced, their stories reveal them as the necessary agents of beneficial and natural change. They are not deluded pests but instigators of regeneration. (Donahoo and Etheridge 183)

The idea of the outlaw as hero has a long tradition in Western Culture. Kent Ladd Steckmesser, in *Western Outlaws: The "Good Badman" in Fact, Film, and Folklore*, comments on this type of hero, the "Good" Badman, and also recognizes the importance of this figure to the social order. He writes:

> What distinguishes the "good" outlaw from the "bad" one? First of all, people have to believe that he serves the Higher Law. A Robin Hood is most likely to appear when a certain social situation exists; namely, one in which the law is corrupt . . . In such cases, the outlaw, though technically a criminal, may become a folk hero by serving the higher cause of justice. He takes it upon himself, so the legend says, to restore moral order (141).

This type of protagonist is often referred to as an "anti-hero." *The Concise Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms* defines the anti-hero as

> a central character in a dramatic or narrative work who lacks the qualities of nobility and magnanimity expected of traditional heroes and heroines in romances and epics. Unheroic characters of this kind have been an important feature of the Western novel, which has subjected idealistic

heroism to parody since Cervantes's *Don Quixote* (1605) (Baldick 11).

A popular summary of the anti-hero is provided by the on-line encyclopaedia Wikipedia: "A good working definition of the anti-hero is a paradoxical character who is, *within the context of a story, a hero but in another context could easily be seen as a villain* or simply as unlikable" (www.wikipedia.com 25 April 2005, emphasis added).

The cyberpunk anti-hero is marginalized and lives on the fringes of society. A recent example is Neo, the anti-hero of the film *The Matrix*. When he first appears on screen, he is depicted as a computer hacker, a loner living in a small unkempt apartment (see Fig. 3.1) and involved in illegal activities of selling pirated software and associating with drug-users who are part of an S&M (sado-masochism fetish) scene (see Fig. 3.2). By day, he is known as Thomas Anderson and is a software programmer for a major corporation. Even though he operates in the corporate world, he is not in a position of power and has become a hacker because he is looking for something more. Neo is looking for fame and for a connection with a group of like-minded individuals. Hackers in *The Matrix* are portrayed with an element of celebrity among their own group, although they are persecuted by mainstream society. As noted above, in one context he is admired by other hackers, though from another perspective, he is viewed as criminal.

Another example is Case, the protagonist in Gibson's *Neuromancer* (1984), who was once a "cyberspace cowboy" and now lives in the Japanese underground after suffering the consequences for betrayal. Gibson describes him:

> Case was twenty-four. At twenty-two, he'd been a cowboy, a rustler, one of the best in the Sprawl. He'd been trained by the best, by McCoy Pauley and Bobby Quine, legends in the biz.

Fig. 3.1 "Wake Up Neo." *The Matrix*. DVD. Larry and Andy Wachowski, dir. (Warner Bros., 1999)

Fig. 3.2 "Follow the White Rabbit." *The Matrix*. DVD. Larry and Andy Wachowski, dir. (Warner Bros., 1999)

He'd operated on an almost permanent adrenaline high, a byproduct of youth and proficiency, jacked into a custom cyberspace deck that projected his disembodied consciousness into the consensual hallucination that was the matrix. A thief, he'd worked for other, wealthier thieves, employers who provided the exotic software required to penetrate the bright walls of corporate systems, opening windows into rich fields of data.

He'd made the classic mistake, the one he'd sworn he'd never make. He stole from his employers. He kept something for himself and tried to move it through a fence in Amsterdam. (5)

Case is a typical Gibson cyberpunk character. Like the characters of Gibson's other books of the period, Case is in a socially underprivileged position and strives, through technology, to overcome his situation. Neil Easterbrook notes:

> [The] metamorphic, transformational technology [of cyberpunk] is paradoxical in that it simultaneously provides the vehicle of subversion for groups marginalized or repressed by corporate culture. Molly, Case, The Finn, and later Bobby (the "Count" of Count Zero) and Mona (of Mona Lisa Overdrive) are all characters with working-class or underclass backgrounds, characters who exploit threshold technologies to escape from the dead-end despair of tenements and mind-numbing boredom of television; however, escape is only possible by following those traces of influence, by remaining within the way power is structured, by climbing the ladder it occasionally leaves hanging. (379-380)

According to John W. Roberts, "the actions that a group recognizes as heroic are those that it perceives as the most advantageous behaviors for dealing with an obstacle or situation that threatens the values that guide action within specific temporal or social, political, and economic contexts" (5). These apparent cyberpunk losers demonstrate that they are best able to overcome the adversity depicted in their world. Case, in *Neuromancer*, ultimately is rewarded for his abilities. The damage done to his nervous

system by the employers from whom he stole was repaired and he was given a chance at a new life: a valid passport and a great sum of money (Gibson 268). And Neo, in *The Matrix*, is freed from slavery and embraces his new destiny as the saviour of humankind. He overcomes his matrix nemesis, Agent Smith, through his ability to visualize and control the data that is the program constructed to subjugate humans. In both examples, the protagonists find companionship through their tasks and beyond in a community of like-minded individuals with similar backgrounds. Though he or she does not come from a privileged position in society, the cyberpunk anti-hero not only survives, but defeats that which attempts to subjugate and marginalize him or her.

For Kevin G., the dramatic figures of cyberpunk are a significant factor that contributes to his enjoyment of the genre's realism. For him, it is precisely the idea that people do not have to be labelled good or bad, that there are mitigating circumstances which drive people's motivations, that allows him to identify with a realism that is in sync with his own perceptions:

> They focus on the people who fell through the cracks, which gives you a really nice hero archetype. They also don't really have heroes. Everyone in cyberpunk was shades of, is shades of grey. If you step back and examine the main characters in Neuromancer, which is like the definitive book, y'know, all the main characters are small-time criminals and they're engaged in doing a reasonably major criminal act. Y'know? But at the same time, they have justifications for it. And, y'know, it's not a clear cut these people are good, these people are evil scenario. Which is a hell of a lot more believable than, y'know, good guy is wearing white, bad guys wearing black with nothing in between. (5 July 1999)

Alias, an alt.cyberpunk poster, recognizes how important criminals can be in challenging the social order and facilitating social change through the "poaching" (de Certeau; Jenkins) of cultural artefacts.   In his e-mail written in on-line shorthand, he comments:

> one of the interesting things about Cp as a genre is that its [sic] one of the first to accept the anti-hero or at least an unlikely hero as its saviour. no one is an angel in a CP world . . no one is perfect . . the guy ur rooting for is likely a drug dealer . . or a criminal . . or a loser . . or crazy. Theres [sic] a reason for that as well . . Criminals are one of the few groups left challenging the status quo. thier [sic] contrary to society . . they have thier [sic] own rules. something that i think appeals to the CP mindset . . not so much crime, but the freedom to choose what is right and wrong for urself . . the lack of mental censorship that allows u to do the unexpected . . "think outside of the box." that slogan, stolen by corporate desk-hacks, was said much earlier than the 90's in a slightly different way. "The street finds its own uses for things." well it does . . thats [sic] CP, finding ur own uses for the artifacts of society and the technology that u come across. (1 Oct. 2001)

For Alias, the anti-hero serves as a model for the cyberpunk mandate of "creat[ing] ways of using this technology for our own purposes before we all bec[o]me mere software, easily deletable from the hard drives of multinationalism's vast mainframe. (McCaffery 12).

This concept of "finding ur own uses for the artifacts of society and the technology that u come across" or "poaching" is a practice that has been recognized by Michel de Certeau in *The Practice of Everyday Life* as "models of action characteristic of users whose status as the dominated element in society (a status that does not mean that they are either passive or docile) is concealed by the euphemistic term 'consumers.'

Everyday life invents itself by *poaching* in countless ways on the property of others" (xi-xii, emphasis in original). De Certeau, in a fashion reminiscent of Gramsci's hegemony theory, furthers his discussion of the significance of the actions of poaching for a marginalized segment of society that is ever increasing:

> Marginality is today no longer limited to minority groups, but is rather massive and pervasive; this cultural activity of the non-producers of culture, an activity that is unsigned, unreadable, and unsymbolized, remains the only one possible for all those who nevertheless buy and pay for the showy products through which a productivist economy articulates itself. Marginality is becoming universal. A marginal group has now become a silent majority.
> That does not mean the group is homogenous. The procedures allowing the re-use of products are linked together in a kind of obligatory language, and their functioning is related to social situations and power relationships. . .
> Like law (one of its models), culture articulates conflicts and alternately legitimizes, displaces, or controls the superior force. It develops in an atmosphere of tensions, and often of violence, for which it provides symbolic balances, contracts of compatibility and compromises, all more or less temporary. The tactics of consumption, the ingenious ways in which the weak make use of the strong, thus lend a political dimension to everyday practices. (xvii)

The fans of cyberpunk are not solely part of that subculture, they are also part of the mass society that consumes cultural products. Cyberpunk, however, articulates for them this consciousness of the importance of poaching in balancing societal power relations between the dominant group and the marginalized.

Henry Jenkins has extrapolated de Certeau's concept of poaching and applied it to his own study of science fiction fans in *Textual Poachers: Television Fans and*

Participatory Culture. He recognizes fan culture as "an interpretive community"

(Jenkins 2) that poaches cultural products. Jenkins comments:

> Unimpressed by institutional authority and expertise, the fans assert their own right to form interpretations, to offer evaluations, and to construct cultural canons. Undaunted by traditional conceptions of literary and intellectual property, fans raid mass culture, claiming its materials for their own use, reworking them as the basis for their own cultural creations and social interactions. (18)

He also examines fandom as "an alternative social community" (Jenkins 2) and indicates

that a sense of marginality regarding fan groups comes from mainstream society which is,

in large part, an aspect of social control. According to Jenkins,

> The fan, whose cultural preferences and interpretive practices seem so antithetical to dominant aesthetic logic, must be represented as "other," must be held at a distance so that fannish taste does not pollute sanctioned culture. Public attacks on media fans keep other viewers in line, making it uncomfortable for readers to adapt such "inappropriate" strategies of making sense of popular texts or to embrace so passionately materials of such dubious aesthetic merit. Such representations isolate potential fans from others who share common interests and reading practices, marginalize fan activities as beyond the mainstream. These representations make it highly uncomfortable to speak publicly as a fan or to identify yourself even privately with fan cultural practices. (19)

Kevin G., an avid sci-fi convention attendee, is an interesting example in that he

displays this dual aspect of demonstrating an awareness of the media's role in

marginalizing the genre, but also following social convention and seeming careful to set

clear limits as to how much a role his interest in cyberpunk has played in his life. For

instance, when the school shootings occurred in Columbine High School in Littleton,

Colorado, the media scapegoated many things including the then recent film *The Matrix*

(as the protagonist wears a long black trenchcoat and carries many weapons) as being

causes for the violence (Howell; Pevere). Kevin questions the validity of this comparison:

> The people who blame The Matrix for the tragedy in
> Columbine, well, The Basketball Diaries wasn't cyberpunk
> and The Basketball Diaries was a lot closer to what
> happened, especially since The Matrix came out either just
> before or shortly after the tragedy in Columbine, so it
> wouldn't've have really had much of an effect on these
> guys. They were obviously, they were obviously getting
> their weapons ready long before The Matrix came out.
> Those people, those groups, I would say, would be
> detractors for cyberpunk, but they tend to be detractors on a
> general scale for a lot of mass media entertainment. (5 July
> 1999)

He is also aware that the mainstream media will embrace aspects of the genre in order to

turn a profit by releasing such films in the first place but maintains that the critical impact

of cyberpunk is minimized by its popular distribution and states that "counter-culture is

becoming so mainstream that the counter part of it is only paid lip service" (5 July 1999).

According to Kevin, "Well, you get more cyberpunk ideas, but you also get cyberpunk in

a form that is designed to appeal in a [movie] trailer. So, you have a lot more cyborgs—

they look really nice with all the new special effects, but you have a lot less of the

characterizations and a lot less of the shades of grey concept" (5 July 1999).

However, despite this critical awareness of mass media's vilification of the film

and sanitization of the genre for popular consumption, Kevin is also sensitive to

demonstrating too close an affinity for that which interests him. Throughout the

interview, while he discusses the themes and conventions of the various cyberpunk books

and films in great detail in a way that would suggest that he is an "elite" fan with

specialized knowledge, he refers to others as "hardcore cyberpunk fans and old school

hackers" and asserts that, unlike Andrew Holden for whom the discovery of cyberpunk was a cathartic experience, for him, "it's not like [he] would say that it's necessarily been a life-shattering thing" (5 July 1999). Jenkins, in his study of science fiction fans, also noticed this distancing. He comments, "Even within the fan community, these categories are evoked as a way of policing the ranks and justifying one's own pleasures as less 'perverse' than those of others" (19). In addition, Kevin does not consider himself to dress in any sort of cyberpunk style and while he concedes that he identifies with aspects of the characters, he "tr[ies] not to identify too—like [he tries] not to become a character" (5 July 1999).

Thus, interestingly, while the genre is marginalized and the fans form a relatively marginalized group themselves, it is through the genre that they counter this marginalization. The anti-hero, with whom they can identify, survives and may overcome his or her oppressors, and the fans themselves, by connecting to one another, find strength in a community of shared interests, poach the texts, and embrace the cyberpunk ethic to "create ways of using this technology for our own purposes before we all bec[o]me mere software, easily deletable from the hard drives of multinationalism's vast mainframe" (McCaffery 12). The theme of marginalization permeates the cyberpunk canon and, since it is an issue that confronts the fans on a regular basis, it becomes an aspect to which fans relate. They then can, through the genre, find either an outlet or model for a vernacular theory that addresses this concern.

4. Identity and Image

The anti-heroes that populate the cyberpunk genre are depicted as a marginalized group that operates in the underground, on the fringes of society. These characters embrace the idea that "the street finds its own uses for things" (Alias 1 Oct. 2001) and they attain their status through their ability to subvert authority using technological talents and enhancements. But it is not only their technological prowess that appeals to fans. These characters also embody a lean, sleek, hipness, dressed in black leather and decked out in mirrorshades. Style is a key element of the genre. As Loyd Blankenship, in his guide to the *GURPS Cyberpunk* role-playing game, has commented "[w]ho you really are is less important than the image you project – who people think you are, or might be" (5). The projected identity, therefore, is not only of one who, as Timothy Leary puts it, embraces the cyberpunk code of TFYQA (Think for Yourself, Question Authority) (257), but who also conveys this element of rebellion through image and style. This sense of style and the creation of identity and image also figure prominently in the activities of the fans both off- and on-line and reinforce the importance of this aspect of their cultural ethic.

What makes a person a cyberpunk? According to Leary, quite simply, "Cyberpunks use all available data input to think for themselves" (245). He goes on to further illustrate his point in his article, "The Cyberpunk: The Individual as Reality Pilot":

> 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. (253)

These labels conjure many images: the people who push boundaries, often working alone and without patrons. He catalogues many real-life and fictional examples of personages who qualify as cyberpunks. One of the best examples he provides of characters who TFYQA is the film *WarGames*:

> The film celebrates the independence and skill of cyberpunks who think for themselves and innovate from within the static system. The captain and his wife use high-tech agricultural methods to enhance the potency of unauthorized botanical neuroactivators. The captain makes an unauthorized decision to abort WWIII. In both instances, the captain follows the cyberpunk code: Think for Yourself, Question Authority (TFYQA). He pilots an independent course.
>
> The cyberkid, Matthew Broderick, is equally courageous, outrageous, creative, and bright. He is pulled into the classic confrontation: the Authoritarian Antique Teacher humiliates and punishes the Tom Sawyer kid. Matthew Thinks for Himself and Questions Authority. He rushes to the library and researches the life of Professor Falken, scans scientific journals, scopes microfilm files—not to please the system but in pursuit of his own personal quest. Then he uses his Electron-skills in an unauthorized manner to pilot his own course. (257)

While these descriptions hint at some visual characteristics (the captain is middle-aged, stoic in demeanour while the cyberkid is young and unruly), the presentation or image of the characters is not emphasized as Leary is focussing on the underlying code which informs their behaviour.

It is this code, this ability to TFYQA, that also influences cyberpunk style. Throughout the literature and films, the characters express this attitude of subversion through their appearance. One of the most memorable and earliest examples is Gibson's recurring character of Molly Millions who initially appeared in the short story "Johnny Mnemonic" (originally published in *OMNI* magazine in 1981) and then later figured prominently in *Neuromancer* and the subsequent novels *Count Zero* (1986) and *Mona Lisa Overdrive* (1988). In Gibson's cyberpunk world, technology that was originally developed for military or corporate purposes is co-opted by street culture and becomes a mainstay of the cyberpunk characters' styles. Molly, a hired gun in the cyberpunk underworld, gets her job done utilizing a variety of implants which are as much a part of her image as they are functional. In "Johnny Mnemonic," Gibson describes Molly:

> She was barely inside my fixed field of vision, a thin girl with mirrored glasses, her dark hair cut in a rough shag. She wore black leather, open over a T-shirt slashed diagonally with stripes of red and black . . .
> She stood up. She was wearing leather jeans the color of dried blood.
> And I saw for the first time that the mirrored lenses were surgical inlays, the silver rising smoothly from her high cheekbones, sealing her eyes in their sockets. (18-19)

She appears again in *Neuromancer*:

> She sat with her back to the wall, at the far end of the coffin [hotel room]. She had her knees out, resting her wrists on them; the pepperbox muzzle of a flechette pistol emerged from her hands . . .
> She wore mirrored glasses. Her clothes were black, the heels of black boots deep in the temperfoam . . .
> She shook her head. He realized that the glasses were surgically inset, sealing her sockets. The silver lenses seem to grow from smooth pale skin above her cheekbones, framed by dark hair cut in a rough shag. The fingers curled

around the fletcher were slender, white, tipped with
polished burgundy. The nails looked artificial . . .
She wore tight black gloveleather jeans and a bulky black
jacket cut from some matte fabric that seemed to absorb
light . . .
She held out her hands, palms up, the white fingers
slightly spread, and with a barely audible click, ten double-
edged, four-centimeter scalpel blades slid from their
housings beneath the burgundy nails. (Gibson 24-25)

Molly was not fitted with the technological implants by any corporation or organization.

She had her own use for this technology and she financed her surgeries by working as a

prostitute. The implants were simply items she wanted as part of her person and style.

Molly Millions's image has become the quintessential style of female cyberpunk

characters and is repeatedly drawn upon and re-emphasized in other media. For example,

female character depictions in *GURPS Cyberpunk* and *Cyberpunk: The Role-playing*

Game of the Dark Future utilize various attributes of Molly's style including dark hair,

razor blade fingers, and implanted lenses (see Fig. 4.1 and 4.2). Jillian, an on-line gamer

provides a physical description of her cyberpunk character where, once again, these

clichés are incorporated:

Petite in stature but with lots of feminine curves to be
alluring. Pale skin, chin length straight black hair, bright
red lips (no make-up required). Her irises would be black
like her pupils, so it'd either be a lack of iris, or just the
same colour. She'd have infrared eye enhancements to
be able to see in the dark. She'd also be chipped for
increased agility and could almost melt into shadows to
hide. She'd be a master in martial arts, but would wear
clothing more like you'd see on Selene, the main female
character in "Underworld". Her weapon of choice would
be her retractable blades that extend out from the tips of her
fingers, but is well versed in all methods of assassination.
She'd be able to charm anyone, but is basically only trying
to keep herself alive. She's a mercenary and only in it for
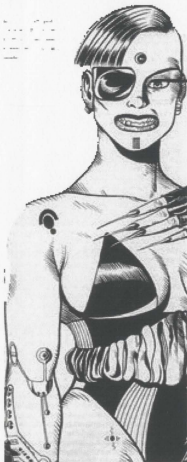
41

Fig. 4.1 Character image. Loyd
Blankenship. *GURPS Cyberpunk:
High-Tech Low-life Roleplaying
Sourcebook*. Ed. Steve Jackson and
Creede Lombard. (Eldridge, IA:
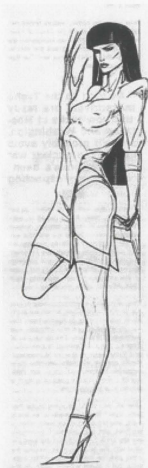Bawden, 1990) 6.

Fig. 4.2 Character image. Mike
Pondsmith et al. *View From the
Edge: The Cyberpunk
Handbook*. (R. Talsorian
Games, 1988) 4.

the job and money. She likes to kill, and doesn't get close
to anyone, but would have only 1 or 2 other people she
would trust and almost call a friend. (5 May 2005)

Recently, the style of Molly Millions made a reappearance in the film *The Matrix* in the

character of Trinity: a fearless, dark-haired, black leather-clad woman in dark sunglasses

and black boots who is as tough as any of the men (see Fig. 4.3).

This image of tight black leather, reflective lenses and gunpower is also portrayed

by the male characters of the film *The Matrix*. The protagonists Neo and Morpheus,

along with Trinity, have been able to question the nature of their reality and free

themselves from the control of the artificial intelligence machines that have enslaved

humanity to function as their fuel source. They have resisted subjugation and whenever

they enter the matrix (the program that keeps people in a dream-like state, unaware of

their reality), they adopt this sleek, tough image (see Fig. 4.4) that is in stark contrast to

the first appearance of Neo (see Fig. 3.1). In this film, image is used to differentiate the

powerless from the empowered. This duality of character is articulated by Agent Smith,

who is attempting to halt Neo's hacking: "We've had our eye on you for some time now,

Mr. Anderson. In one life, you're Thomas A. Anderson, program writer for a respectable

software company. The other life is lived in computers where you go by the hacker alias

Neo and are guilty of virtually every computer crime we have a law for" (*The Matrix*).

Thomas A. Anderson is the man shown slumped at his computer, wearing jeans and a t-

shirt at the start of the film and after he is released from the control of the machines, he is

able to project into the matrix his chosen black leather-clad image of his empowered

identity of Neo.

Fig. 4.3 "Trinity." Inside cover art. *The Matrix*. DVD. Larry and Andy Wachowski, dir. (Warner Bros., 1999)
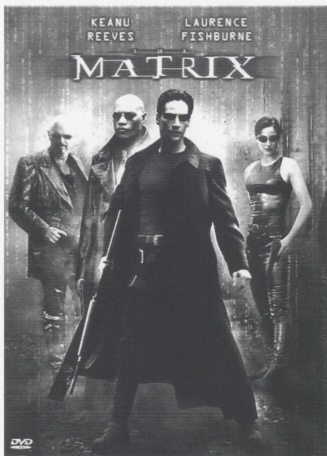
Fig. 4.4 Cover Art. *The Matrix*. DVD. Larry and Andy Wachowski, dir. (Warner Bros., 1999).

As noted above, another medium in which cyberpunk image and style figures significantly is the RPG (role-playing game). There is much effort that goes into character development in RPGs. Each game comes with rules and guidelines that outline the various types of characters that players may choose. For example, *GURPS Cyberpunk: High-Tech Low-Life Roleplaying Sourcebook*, lists eighteen different character types, most of which also contain sub-types and *View From the Edge: The Cyberpunk Handbook* describes nine character types. Both books note the importance of style. In *View From the Edge*, three main points to developing a successful character are discussed:

> This is the essence of *Cyberpunk*—playing your character with the proper disaffected, cynical-yet-idealistic style. Whether you're a biker with leathered skin and metal claws, or a debutante in satin sporting the latest in designer cyberoptics, you're going to need a certain panache, a certain flair, in portraying yourself. To achieve the essence of the 2000s, you need to master three concepts:
> 1) Style over substance
> It doesn't matter how well you do something, as long as you look good doing it. If you're going to blow it, make sure you look like you planned it that way. Normally, clothes and looks don't matter in an adventure—in this world, having a leather armor jacket and mirrorshades is a *serious* consideration.
> 2) Attitude is Everything
> It's truth. Think dangerous; be dangerous. Think weak; be weak. Remember, everyone in the 2000s is carrying lots of lethal hardware and hightech enhancements. They won't be impressed by your new H&K smartgun unless you swagger into the club looking like you know how to use it and are just itching for an excuse.
> Never walk into a room when you can stride in. Never look at someone unless you can make it your best "killer" look. Use your best "I'm bad and you aren't" smile. Don't sit around the flat or cube waiting for the next job. Get on

out and hit the clubs and hangouts. Make sure *you're*
where the party starts.
3) Live on the Edge
The Edge is that nebulous zone where risk-takers and high-
riders go. On the Edge, you'll risk your cash, your rep,
even your life, on something as nebulous as a principle or a
big score. As a Cyberpunk, you want to *be* the action, start
the rebellion, light the fire. Join great causes and fight for
big issues. Never drive slow when you can drive fast.
Throw yourself up against danger and take it head-on.
Never play it too safe. Stay committed to the Edge.
(Pondsmith et al. 2-3, emphasis in original)

In these instructions, style and attitude are closely inter-related. *GURPS Cyberpunk* also

hones in on this relationship. Blankenship writes, "Finally, cyberpunk gaming (and

literature) often stresses style above all else. If you're going to go out, do it not with a

whimper but with a bang – the bigger the bang, the better. After all, once you're gone,

who cares what happens to everyone else? Let 'em eat cake, and hope they choke on it"

(5). Cyberpunk style depicts characters who are self-reliant, rebellious, and forces to be

reckoned with and, as the fans relate to these marginalized anti-heroes, they can

experience the same sense of empowerment through adopting this image.

Role-playing games offer the most direct forum for the creation of identity to fans

of the genre. These can be played either off- or on-line. In either case, players must first

select a character type and then, being as creative as they like, develop aspects of that

character. *GURPS Cyberpunk* offers direction to the gamers:

In cyberpunk, as in other genres, characters should never be
pigeonholed into narrow "classes" that restrict what they
can and cannot do. The following character types describe
some of the most common stereotypes from cyberpunk
literature [assassin, bodyguard, broker, celebrity, cop,
corporate, cyberprep, drifter, mercenary, military, mobster,
netrunner, reporter, splicer, spy, street op, technician, and

thief]. The player is the judge of how closely his character will follow a particular pattern. Some types will be inappropriate or *wildly* altered in different GM's [Game Master's] worlds. The GM should be prepared to discuss with his players how various character types fit into *his* world; he need not follow any more of the literature that he wants to.

The list is by no means exhaustive. Players should feel free to alter these as they see fit, combine two character types (who says you can't have a combination cop/tinkerer?), or come up with their own, entirely new character conceptions! (Blankenship 8, emphasis in original)

Sherry Turkle, in her discussion of the creation of identity in on-line MUDs, comments, "As players participate, they become authors not only of text but of themselves, constructing new selves through social interaction" (12). She later notes, "Play has always been an important aspect of our individual efforts to build identity . . . A MUD can become a context for discovering who one is and wishes to be. In this way, the games are laboratories for the construction of identity" (Turkle 184). The characters may become more than just play; they may serve as vehicles for self-exploration.

Jason L., a long-time gamer, comments on this aspect of identity creation and self-exploration in on-line role-playing:

I made up a character that was a thinly fictionalized version of myself set into a sort of modern day fantasy setting of . . . characters in New York City. And, basically, I, it was partially conscious, partially sub-conscious way to just get to know myself again because I'd, at this point, I was a total wreck in my life. And, I knew exactly that I was what they call "meta-gaming," which is, basically, playing your life through another character or using real life things towards playing a game. And, it was actually really kind of therapeutic because, I mean, a lot of bad that happened to me in a really short period of time and this allowed me to explore them in a fictional setting without

having to, you know, resort to me, you know, flipping out
in real life. And, it was really cathartic . . . (8 July 1999)

According to Jillian, another on-line gamer and cyberpunk fan, the attraction to role-

playing games is for much the same reason. She says, "It's fun to imagine things and to

get together with people from, that have different ideas and get to develop things with

other people and, I don't know, sometimes it's fun to escape who you are and get to be

someone else for a while" (11 July 1999). She sees the games and the MUDs as

opportunities for exploring aspects of herself that she is not comfortable displaying in her

real life interactions. When asked about why she emphasizes her characters' sexuality,

she comments, "I think part of it has to do with the fact that I would like to be more like

that in real life, but I'm scared to because of things that have happened to me and stuff

like that and I don't want bad things to happen again, so on-line it's a safe way of

exploiting it" (11 July 1999). In a later e-mail, Jillian remarks:

> The cyberpunk world is dirty, dangerous and just all round
> depressing if you really think of a world like that. But to
> me, that's exciting, because I can then be the strong person
> who has no issues dealing with problems like I do in real
> life. In the game/book I'm reading I can imagine myself
> being able to confront people on things, when in reality, I
> hate confronting people so I suffer in silence so to speak.
> (26 Sept. 2001)

Some participants in Turkle's research also expressed similar sentiments. One player

comments:

> You can be whoever you want to be. You can completely
> redefine yourself if you want. You can be the opposite sex.
> You can be more talkative. You can be less talkative.
> Whatever. You can just be whoever you want, really,
> whoever you have the capacity to be. You don't have to
> worry about the slots other people put you in as much. It's

> easier to change the way people perceive you, because all
> they've got is what you show them. (Turkle 184)

As Turkle notes, "The anonymity of MUDs—one is known on the MUD only by the name of one's character or characters—gives people the chance to express multiple and often unexplored aspects of the self, to play with their identity and to try out new ones" (12). Players' projected images in the RPG, both off- and on-line, can allow individuals to create identities that better represent the people they would like to be but do not or cannot comfortably appear as in real life. In terms of a cyberpunk aesthetic, this translates into an opportunity to feel empowered, cool and sexy, like the characters the players emulate.

The cyberpunk image is not only a part of gaming and on-line interaction. Some fans incorporate these cyberpunk elements into their own personal style and, in this way, demonstrate resistance to the hegemonic norms of society. This fashion comments upon fans' perceptions of our technological world and upon the need to find one's own uses for things. Dick Hebdige explains in his book *Subculture: The Meaning of Style*, "Style in subculture is, then, pregnant with significance. Its transformations go 'against nature', interrupting the process of 'normalization'. As such, they are gestures, movements towards a speech which offends the 'silent majority', which challenges the principle of unity and cohesion, which contradicts the myth of consensus" (18). This postmodern resistance toward metanarratives and emphasis on "a plurality of voices from the margins, with their insistence on difference, on cultural diversity, and the claims of heterogeneity over homogeneity" (Storey 174), manifest themselves in the cyberpunk fashion aesthetic. These fans embody the TFYQA cultural ethic; they find their own uses

for cultural products and technology, and this sends a message to mainstream (corporate) culture about their individuality and power.

There are many pressures in Western society concerning technology and individual freedom and these are felt acutely by many. As noted earlier, David Geelan, in response to my post of alt.cyberpunk, writes, "The security clamp-down, with potential life imprisonment for hackers, in the wake of Sept. 11 seems to me like a perfect example of the corporations using a human tragedy to get exactly what they want, and to subjugate the individual further" (30 Sept. 2001). But, when a fan adopts cyberpunk as a style, it can be an empowering response to these pressures. Chance, another alt.cyberpunk poster, explains, "What do people get out of it? . . . Intellectual stimulation, and the joy of the fierce and free attitude it inspires. When I was in cyberpunk mode – living the life and walking the walk, I was 10 feet tall and bulletproof" (5 Oct. 2001). As Hebdige indicates in his discussion of the book *Resistance Through Rituals* (Hall, Clarke, Jefferson and Roberts, eds.), one can read subcultural styles as symbolic forms of resistance (80). The fans of cyberpunk are reacting to and making a statement about their perceived powerlessness in our ever-increasingly corporate technological world.

In terms of image, how does one recognize a cyberpunk fan? St. Jude, R.U. Sirius and Bart Nagel, in their *Cyberpunk Handbook [The Real Cyberpunk Fakebook]*, write (in a style to avoid profanity and be gender inclusive):

> What is there to know about being a cyberpunk? Leather jacket, mirrorshades—that just about does it, right? This kind of patronizing shirt must farking DIE. You think cyberpunk is just a leather jacket, some chrome studs, and fully reflective sunglasses? You think that's all there is? Hah! You can find those on Kansas City bikers and the

> whole California Highway Patrol. The true cyberpunk
> might tuck a cellular-modem laptop under a spike leather
> arm, and a laser pointer in the upper zip pocket. Or, a true
> cyberpunk may look just like YOU. But sHe who knows
> doesn't tell and hirm [he or her] who tells doesn't know.
> (27)

Once again, the point is driven home that it is not necessarily the image alone that

determines a cyberpunk, but the attitude that one has in regard to one's use of technology

and one's subversion of authority.

Jason L. does, however, identify certain folk groups that are distinguishable

within the larger cyberpunk fan base: the cyberpunks, the cyber-goths, the ravers, and

hackers/geeks. He reflects:

> It's the I want to hack computers and kill people, well not
> really kill people, but it's that group of people that took the
> ethics into, to heart and then sort of live by it. But, it sort
> of fizzled really quickly 'cause a lot of the people went off
> into different forms of geek culture. Those are the cyber-
> goths. They're essentially what I think the more hardcore
> of the cyberpunk fans were. Then you've got your typical
> just techno-anarchists. (8 July 1999)

Kevin G. also concurs with the connection between cyberpunk and gothic fan cultures.

He has observed this relation at various science fiction conventions that he has attended.

He notes that when he sees someone who wears all black and listens to The Cure, it is

likely they will also be interested in cyberpunk as he feels there is a lot of cross-over

between goth culture and cyberpunk and vampire culture and cyberpunk (5 July 1999).

Jillian, in her description of her RPG character, also recognizes this connection between

the goth movement and cyberpunk. For example, she mentions the protagonist Selene

from the film *Underworld*. This film is a prime example of this cross-over interest as it

blends vampires and werewolves with a dark modern-day setting where technology (particularly in terms of weapons and tracking) is at the forefront of the war. Jason L. provides even more detail in terms of the various groups in which cyberpunk fans may align themselves:

> And the cyber-goths were kind of like the geek contingent of the goth movement. They're, 'cause the goth movement isn't exactly as stereotypical "We're vampires. We believe in, we drink people's blood and we listen to Sisters of Mercy all the time." It's a little bit more than that. There's different genres of it. There's the cyber-goths. And then, there's also, from there, the techno-anarchists. That's where I was. They're the hacker underground. Some of them go towards the cyber-goths, some of them go towards other forms of geek culture, like rave culture also came out of it too. And a lot of people involved in rave culture, like there's the whole techno thing . . . we love computers, computers make music sort of ethic behind it and there's lots of creative chemical use involved in the rave culture. And then, there's an amalgamation of this, 'cause there's two different forms of hacker culture. There's the hacker culture of, you know, smelly geeks that just stay in their apartments all the time hacking code and then there's this one that blends in with the rave culture that, more legit uses of hacking. A more creative, artistic hacking . . . But hacker culture is definitely from, well since Gibson came out, it was more of the, it's now the rallying cry of the hacker. You know, "information must be free." And the rave culture sort of also blends into the web-culture of web designers and everything. The more hip, chic web designers are active in the rave culture . . . although the web design one I think is the furthest down the line of its offspring (8 July 1999)

The *Cyberpunk Handbook [The Real Cyberpunk Fakebook]* provides descriptions of these and other cyberpunk sub-groups. Each group adopts its own look. The cyberpunks wear leather jackets, boots and technical paraphernalia (see Fig. 4.5). Cyber-goths are into the gothic or vampire look (black vintage clothing, black hair, white faces, fangs) but

Fig. 4.5 "Cyberpunk." St. Jude, R.U. Sirius and Bart Nagel. *Cyberpunk Handbook [The Real Cyberpunk Fakebook]*. (New York; Toronto: Random House, 1995) 27.

Fig. 4.6 "Cyber-goth." St. Jude, R.U. Sirius and Bart Nagel. *Cyberpunk Handbook [The Real Cyberpunk Fakebook]*. (New York; Toronto: Random House, 1995) 30.

are interested in computer technology (see Fig. 4.6). Ravers are more colourful, but utilize technologies such as electronic music and drugs (especially Ecstasy) and the hacker/geeks lack the menacing aspect of the cyberpunks but are heavily dependent on technologies such as the computer and nutritional supplements or stimulants (to allow them to use their computers for longer periods of time).

The manner in which cyberpunk fans adopt technology as style has been documented in the portraits of photographer Steve Pyke who used an active cyberpunk subculture in London for a series of subjects (see Fig. 4.7). He introduces the few cyberpunk portraits posted on his website: "Cyberpunks, a small subculture, influenced by the work of the author William Gibson and particularly the film Bladerunner [sic], existed in London in the early 1990s. I became interested and photographed a series of about fifty portraits in my studio over a short period" (www.pyke-eye.com 3 Nov. 2004). In these portraits, the preference for black leather or vinyl and the various technological apparatuses which are used for personal adornment are evident.

One last manner in which cyberpunk fans construct their images involves the use of body art. As Bruce Sterling comments, technology, for the cyberpunks, "is pervasive, utterly intimate. Not outside us, but next to us. Under our skin, often, inside our minds" (*Mirrorshades* xiii). Personal adornment is not limited to costume for fans. Body art in the form of tattooing has become extremely popular in a variety of subcultures, including cybercultures. Depictions of electronic technology can be permanently etched into the skin. Some examples include barcodes, computers, game insignias, and biomechanical imagery (see Fig. 4.8). Mark Dery, in *Escape Velocity: Cyberculture at the End of the*

Fig. 4.7 Cyberpunk portraits. Steve Pyke. On-line
(www.pyke-eye.com) Accessed 3 Nov. 2004.

Biomechanical tattoos. © 1995 B. J. Papas. Model: Rick Healey.
Tattoo by Andrea Elston.

Fig. 4.8 "Biomechanical Tattoos." B.J. Papas
(1995). Rpt. In Mark Dery, *Escape Velocity:
Cyberculture at the End of the Century* (New
York: Grove P, 1996) 227.

Century, recounts the experience of Greg Kulz, one of the first people to have a biomechanical tattoo done:

>   "As a kid, I really loved The Six-Million Dollar Man," [Kulz] says, recalling the early seventies TV series about a severely injured astronaut who leaves the operating table a "Bionic Man"—a cyborg able to see through walls with his X-ray eye, run at eye-blurring speed on his prosthetic legs, and lift trucks with his artificial arm. "There was one episode where he tore his arm open and there were circuit boards in there; that really lit a fire under me," remembers Kulz. "Then I got Giger's Necronomicon I, which had pictures of a woman in a body suit that Giger had painted on her. That was so inspiring!
>   "Around 'eighty-three, before anyone I knew had a biomechanical tattoo, I got tattooed by . . . Ed Hardy, who did a section on my arm. It's not really of anything, just tailpipes and circuit boards and distilling tubes and components picked out of Necronomicon I. I wanted my arm to look all machine; I didn't want any hint of meat." (282-283)

Kulz's story reflects elements of the cyberpunk aesthetic. He is influenced by the depiction of a cyborg (the blending of human and machine) from a popular television series and, like Gibson's cyberpunks, has a dislike for the "meat" or flesh, preferring a technological manifestation of the self. These permanent physical modifications are very much in keeping with a cyberpunk aesthetic. It is a present-day form of fusing the body with technology and a subcultural staple for rejecting authority in terms of what has been deemed socially acceptable appearance.

Cyberpunk is all about individual empowerment. Whenever a fan develops an identity on- or off-line through the RPGs or adopts a fashion aesthetic informed by cyberpunk thematic impulses, there occurs an opportunity for self-expression that directly addresses issues of marginalization and the clout of transnational corporations. For those

who feel subjugated in their everyday lives, a cyberpunk image can imbue them with a sense of power that they lacked before. Jason L. reflects:

> In some ways, it allows people to be bad, y'know . . . People, you know, they're really nice and friendly all the time and, you know, they might get trampled on and everything. Taking the cyberpunk ethic to, you know, like a game or what-not, it gives them a chance to be, not necessarily the bad guy, but it gives them this chance to be somebody that's not nice. Yeah, and that, I guess is another case of catharsis. (8 July 1999)

Having the opportunity to be cast in the role of the "other," the "bad guy," the socially unacceptable, becomes a way to resist society's conceptions of what is proper and good, to counter Western culture's hegemonic forces. A cyberpunk image displays one's ability to TFYQA and to find one's own uses for things. In essence, one portrays a street-smart ethic of subversion and empowerment.

5. Technology and the Body

While technology is a key component of science fiction in general, there are specific technologies and uses of technology unique to the cyberpunk sub-genre. Technology is more than an element of style for the cyberpunks and more than fashion or accessory for cyberpunk's fans. Kevin McCarron explains, "The body, for cyberpunk writers, is an 'accident', unconnected to the pure substance of mind. They are fascinated by 'enhancement'; throughout their novels the human body becomes less organic and more artificial, increasingly machine-like" (262). As has been noted, Bruce Sterling writes, "For the cyberpunks, . . . technology is visceral. It is not the bottled genie of remote Big Science boffins, it is pervasive, utterly intimate. Not outside us, but next to us. Under our skin; often, inside our minds" (*Mirrorshades* xiii). This intimate connection with technology manifests itself in two specific human-machine contexts: cyborgs and cyberspace. The themes of physical enhancement through body modification, making the human increasingly machine-like, and an individual's ability to "jack-in" (directly connect one's brain) to a computer network both explore issues of humanness and evolution. Sterling comments:

> Certain central themes spring up repeatedly in 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. (*Mirrorshades* xiii)

Kevin Robins, in "Cyberspace and the World We Live In," comments, "In the new world order, old and trusted boundaries – between human and machine, self and other, body and

mind, hallucination and reality – are dissolved and deconstructed. With the erosion of clear distinctions, the emphasis is on interface, combinations and altered states" (140). And, Samantha Holland, in her discussion of cyborg cinema, recognizes that, "With their human/machine hybrids, these films foreground questions of dualism and personal identity especially clearly, and highlight contemporary concerns about the effects of technology on the human 'self' in the present and future" (157). These are also concerns of the fans and are frequently mentioned as significant influences and considerations of their interest in the genre.

As Mike Featherstone and Roger Burrows explain in "Cultures of Technological Embodiment," the prefix cyber and the terms cyborg, cyberspace, and cyberpunk, all of which came to prominence during the 1980s, originate from the term "cybernetics" that was coined by Norbert Weiner in 1948. He used the term "to describe a new science which united communications theory and control theory" (2). Featherstone and Burrows continue:

> For Weiner, cybernetics encompassed the human mind, the human body and the world of automatic machines and attempted to reduce all three to the common denominator of control and communication. From this perspective, the image of the body becomes less one of an engineered body with the key tasks being the transfer and conservation of energy, but more of a communications network based upon the accurate reproduction and exchange of signals in time and space. Hence information, messages and feedback which facilitate control and communication become seen as the key aspects of both organisms and machines. (2)

It is from this concept of cybernetics that the ideas of cyborgs and cyberspace developed because it became possible to imagine the integration of organic and mechanized communication networks with one another.

The cyberpunks were fascinated by cybernetic technology itself and imagined the possibilities of the cyborg. A cyborg is created when human and machine are integrated for the purposes of bodily enhancement or to reduce the amount of body and increase the capacity and efficiency of a person's network. As David Tomas writes, "A hardware-based cyborg integrates or interfaces, in its most extreme and evocative form, a human body with pure technological environment (machine elements, electronic components, advanced imaging systems)" (38). He indicates that the term cyborg was proposed in 1960 by Manfred E. Clynes and Nathan S. Kline and came from the phrase "cybernetic organism" and is significant because it "identif[ies] a new kind of human/machine interface, a new type of 'organism'" (Tomas 35). Tomas continues:

> Since that time, this organism has had a powerful hold on the way the body is imaged, imagined and constructed at the outer limits of western science, technology and industry, as well as at the outer limits of its military and aerospace industries. This hold has even extended to university-based as well as non-university-based intellectual and artistic speculations on the future of the human body. Moreover, this organism's fundamental impact on the construction of a Western Imaginary can, one suspects, be traced to the fact that it reintroduces mimesis in the shape of anthropomorphism back into the history of automata. (35)

This early conception of the cyborg was an effort to find solutions through cybernetics "to the problems of space travel as they impinged on the neurophysiology of the human body" (Tomas 35). Since then, the idea of the cyborg has also become famously

associated in the academic discourse of Donna Haraway, who employed the concept to represent the liminal entity that we have become and which provides the means to subvert male-dominated political control. She writes:

> Cyborg politics is the struggle for language and the struggle against perfect communication, against the one code that translates all meaning perfectly, the central dogma of phallogocentrism. That is why cyborg politics insist on noise and advocate pollution, rejoicing in the illegitimate fusions of animal and machine. These are the couplings which make Man and Woman so problematic, subverting the structure of desire, the force imagined to generate language and gender, and so subverting the structure and modes of reproduction of 'Western' identity, of nature and culture, of mirror and eye, slave and master, body and mind. 'We' did not originally choose to be cyborgs, but choice grounds a liberal politics and epistemology that imagines the reproduction of individuals before the wider replications of 'texts'. (176)

The idea of the cyborg has become commonplace in Western thought scientifically, academically, politically and culturally.

Joseph Dumit and Robbie Davis-Floyd note, "From the Six-Million-Dollar Man to the Terminator, cyborgs have populated the American cold-war space-race imagination for decades, evolving in tandem with our cultural attachment to technological solutions to life problems" (1). Jennifer L. Croissant maintains that cyborgs and the human imagination have a far longer connection. She compares the academic approaches to cyborgs of Donna Haraway, who notes that "[in] a sense, the cyborg has no origin story in the Western sense," (Haraway 150) and Per Schelde. In keeping with Schelde's argument in *Androids, Humanoids, and Other Science Fiction Monsters*, Croissant comments:

> . . . cyborg and monster stories are an important folklore,
> complete with origin stories and morality plays. Narratives
> of cyborgs in Western popular and technical cultures, when
> taken together, are stories of creation and control. For
> example, cyborgs are generally anxiety-ridden creatures,
> searching for a stable identity. Or consider that cybernetic
> research relies on themes from evolutionary narratives: the
> achievement of bipedalism, digitality in conjunction with
> an opposable thumb and use of tools, strict cortical
> organization and neurological sophistication, language, and
> sociality and sexuality in human evolution are used as
> templates for both justifying and organizing cybernetic
> research. In particular, human-machine synthesis is seen as
> the next stage of human evolution. (285)

While cybernetic research "relies on themes from evolutionary narratives," to build

toward this next stage in evolution, Weiner also recognized that it has developed out of a

new conceptualization of the human body. The various ways in which people have

understood the human body have helped contribute to a long tradition of cyborgs or

automatons in folklore. According to Tomas, "Weiner presented a history of automata

that was divided into four stages: a mythic Golemic age; the age of clocks (17th and 18th

centuries); the age of steam, originator of the governor mechanism itself (late 18th and

19th centuries); and, finally, the age of communication and control" and, he goes on to

note, "that these stages generated four models of the human body: the body as a

malleable, magical, clay figure; the body as a clockwork mechanism; the body as a

'glorified heat engine . . .'; and, most recently, the body as an electronic system" (23).

From these conceptualizations, we encounter magical folkloric figures like the Golem

from Jewish tradition, Frankenstein's monster, and today's Terminator or Robocop.

As Dumit and Davis-Floyd write, "We are immersed in cyborgs; they saturate our

language, our media, our technology, our ways of being, posing questions we cannot

answer about the exact location of the fine line between 'mutilating' a natural process in a negative and destructive way and 'improving' or 'enhancing' it" (1). These questions, along with the question, "What aspect of humanity makes us human?" (McCarron 264) are explored in cyberpunk "any time a writer introduces a cyborg, android, replicant, robot, an Artificial Intelligence Unit. Whenever the textual stress is on prosthetics, on the kind of technology that fuses blood and iron, the debate is really about the human, and its sometimes opposite, the inhuman" (McCarron 264). These issues and questions are not lost on the cyberpunk fans. In fact, these technological struggles are often at the core of their recognition of the relevance of the genre. As Dennis Lindström, a cyberpunk fan from Sweden, writes, "I'm just fascinated with the CP [cyberpunk] future and environment. Cyborgs is [sic] something I find very appealing, a human merging with the machine ?and reaches a new step in evolution?. Thus my nic's [nicknames] 'cyb' and 'cyb78red'" (30 Sept. 2001). Chance, an alt.cyberpunk poster, commented, "You can tell any type of story with the genre, it's conventions are flexible, and it provides many venues for exploration of the human (and non-human) soul . . . I liked the fact that the characters of cyberpunk worlds lived on an evolutionary edge – always seeking to be faster, stronger, smarter than those they hated" (5 Oct. 2001).

For Jillian, the concept of cyborgification is not something merely from the realm of science fiction. She recognizes elements of the merging of human and machine around her and entertains the notion of the possibility for enhancing herself. She writes:

> To me it's interesting because it's something so high-tech where people can be enhanced, and that would be something I would actually be interested in doing. It lets my mind wander about what amazing things we'll be able

to do in our own future because there's already signs of body enhancement through electronics etc (ie. the electrical implants for paralyzed body parts that will send signals to the brain so the body part will function again and the implants for blind people to let them see light and dark, which is only just the beginning). (26 Sept. 2001)

Dennis shares Jillian's views regarding the inclination to enhance oneself, although for Dennis this interest has developed into a philosophical outlook or belief. He comments, "Anyway CP was the first step I soon moved on to extropy aka transhumanism, and it's basicly [sic] a big part of my life and way of thinking" (30 Sept. 2001). When asked to further expand on his thoughts regarding extropy, Dennis responded:

The Cyborg: If you could improve your body would you do it? I would! I'm not talking about beauty surgery, I mean the physics and capacity of the body. Strength, endurance, intelligence etc… . This is a part of extropy to take control over our own life, evolution and future. Not just by machinery, in anyway at all. Extropians basically believe that humans can create a better world and that we should go beyond the limitations set by mother nature.
This desire to improve myself is something that I always carry. I want to acquire more knowledge and more skills. This I hope will give me a better chance to get more out of my life and maybe it will help me survive tomorrow. (I also think it's fun.) (1 Oct. 2001)

He also included "The Extropian Principles," version 3.0 by Max Moore in his email which essentially outlines an approach to life that emphasizes the application of "science and technology creatively to transcend 'natural' limits imposed by our biological heritage, culture, and environment" to create a new society that supports "social orders that foster freedom of speech, freedom of action, and experimentation [and oppose] authoritarian social control and favo[r] the rule of law and decentralization of power. Prefe[r] bargaining over battling, and exchange over compulsion. Openness to

improvement rather than a static utopia" (1 Oct. 2001). Like a cyberpunk, Dennis embraces the idea of cyborgs, but unlike the dystopian cyberpunk aesthetic, extropianism strives for a more utopian society based on respect and freedom.

Despite this difference, extropians and people who subscribe to the principles of transhumanism are identified as groups that are related to cyberpunk subculture. Alt.cyberpunk's FAQ (Frequently Asked Questions) page (version 4.2.4) includes both transhumans and extropians in their definitions of the various cyberpunk subcultural groups:

> - Transhumans are actively seeking to become 'Posthuman'. This involves learning about and making use of new technologies that can potentially increase their capacities and life expectancy. They follow Transhumanism, a set of philosophies of life (such as the Extropian philosophy) that seek the continuation and acceleration of the evolution of intelligent life beyond its currently human form and limits by means of science and technology, guided by life-promoting principles and values, while avoiding religion and dogma.
> - Extropians are dedicated to the opposition of Entropy, or lack of balance in human society. Politically, extropians are close kin to the libertarians, including some anarchists, some classical liberals, and even a political neoconservative or two. But many extropians have no interest in politics at all, and many are actively anti-political. Extropians have a principle called 'Spontaneous Order', but politics is by no means the only domain in which they apply it. (www.synthetic.org.uk/cyberpunk/alt.cyberpunk.faq.txt 9 March 2001)

The use of cyborg technology to enhance or improve the human body and move toward the next step in evolution is an important aspect of cyberpunk literature and fandom. It creates a context for the exploration of questions of humanness and the social and cultural

benefits (or dangers) of these technologies. The cyborg, however, is not the only avenue that cyberpunks utilize to examine these issues. Cyberspace is another important concept which fuses the human and the machine, and is, for cyberpunks, perhaps an even more idealized manner of intimately connecting with technology.

Cyberspace is a term that originated in the cyberpunk genre and is used to refer to the virtual environment accessed via a worldwide computer network in which people can interact. Michael Benedikt notes that it is "a word from the pen of William Gibson, science fiction writer, *circa* 1984 . . . that gives a name to a new stage, a new and irresistible development in the elaboration of human culture and business under the sign of technology" (29). As Featherstone and Burrows summarize, "cyberspace is best considered as a generic term which refers to a cluster of different technologies, some familiar, some only recently available, some being developed and some still fictional, all of which have in common the ability to simulate environments within which humans can interact" (5). In *Neuromancer*, Gibson imagines it for us:

> Cyberspace. A consensual hallucination experienced daily by billions of legitimate operators, in every nation, by children being taught mathematical concepts . . . A graphic representation of data abstracted from the banks of every computer in the human system. Unthinkable complexity. Lines of light ranged in the nonspace of the mind, clusters and constellations of data. Like city lights, receding . . . (51)

Michael Benedikt opens his discussion in "Cyberspace: First Steps" by providing nine different definitions of the word. Three of these definitions that describe the concept in familiar terms include

> Cyberspace: A new universe, a parallel universe created
> and sustained by the world's computers and
> communication lines. A world in which the global traffic
> of knowledge, secrets, measurements, indicators,
> entertainments, and alter-human agency takes on form:
> sights, sounds, presences never seen on the surface of the
> earth blossoming in a vast electronic night.
> Cyberspace: Accessed through any computer linked into
> the system; a place, one place, limitless; entered equally
> from a basement in Vancouver, a boat in Port-au-Prince, a
> cab in New York, a garage in Texas City, an apartment in
> Rome, an office in Hong Kong, a bar in Kyoto, a café in
> Kinshasa, a laboratory on the Moon.
> Cyberspace: The tablet become a page become a screen
> become a world, a virtual world. Everywhere and nowhere,
> a place where nothing is forgotten and yet everything
> changes . . . (29)

Ultimately, however, Benedikt is forced to acknowledge that "Cyberspace as just

described does not exist" (30) and goes on to comment:

> But this states a truth too simply. Like Shangri-la, like
> mathematics, like every story ever told or sung, a mental
> geography of sorts has existed in the living mind of every
> culture, a collective memory or hallucination, an agreed-
> upon territory of mythical figures, symbols, rules, and
> truths, owned and traversable by all who learned its ways,
> and yet free of the bounds of physical space and time.
> What is so galvanizing today is that technologically
> advanced cultures – such as those of Japan, Western
> Europe and North America – stand at the threshold of
> making that ancient space both uniquely visible and the
> object of interactive democracy. (30)

Thus, like Croissant's discussion of the cyborg folklore, cyberspace, as Benedikt

conceptualizes, can be viewed as a construct to which humans have had a long

relationship. Only that relationship has recently changed to incorporate computer

technology in a way that makes it visually tangible.

Prior to the popular realization of cyberspace, the cyberpunk authors envisioned its possibilities. People could be "jacked into a custom cyberspace deck that projected [their] disembodied consciousness into the consensual hallucination that was the matrix" (Gibson *Neuromancer* 5). And this ability to travel through data, freed from one's body, was the ultimate experience. Case, Gibson's protagonist in *Neuromancer*, is notorious for his talents as a "cyberspace cowboy" and prefers the experience of being "in the matrix" to the constraints of his physicality. When his employers discovered his thieving, they punished him by damaging his nervous system, preventing him from ever jacking in again. Gibson writes, "For Case, who'd lived for the bodiless exultation of cyberspace, it was the Fall. In the bars he'd frequented as a cowboy hotshot, the elite stance involved a certain relaxed contempt for the flesh. The body was meat. Case fell into the prison of his own flesh" (6). Deborah Lupton, in "The Embodied Computer/User," comments:

> In cyberwriting, the body is often referred to as 'meat', the dead flesh that surrounds the active mind which constitutes the 'authentic' self. The demands of the fleshly body compel computer users to distract themselves from their pursuit to seek nourishment and quell thirst and hunger pangs and, even worse, to absent themselves to carry out such body maintenance activities as washing, expelling bodily wastes and sleeping. The dream of cyberculture is to leave the 'meat' behind and to become distilled in a clean, pure, uncontaminated relationship with computer technology. (100)

Through cyberspace, the computer user is able to leave the "mess" of bodily needs and negotiate experiences based solely on how one chooses to represent oneself. In this way, though cyberpunk generally depicts a dystopian future, the concept of cyberspace offers

readers one utopian escape: an environment where one's physical appearance has become irrelevant.

Since the fictional articulation of these technologies in the cyberpunk writing of the 1980s, a whole industry surrounding cyberspace or Virtual Reality has developed, offering people an experience in this utopian domain. Through specific hardware and software, Robins notes, "The new technology promises to deliver its user from the constraints and defeats of physical reality and the physical body. It provides the opportunity to go back and to explore what might have been, if we had been able to sustain the infantile experience of power and infinite possibility" (139). For Anne Balsamo, the utopia that cyberspace offers is just a new technological manifestation of a much deeper rooted need or aspiration: transcendence. She writes, "These new technologies are implicated in the reproduction of at least one very traditional cultural narrative: the possibility of transcendence, whereby the physical body and is [sic] social meanings can be technologically neutralized" (496).

This aspect of the freedom of consciousness in cyberspace factors into David Geelan's estimation of Gibson's writing. David, who contacted me through alt.cyberpunk, comments, "I think the 'spiritual' (for want of a better word) element is what sets Gibson apart from both the other cyberpunks and most of the rest of science fiction. The whole conception of the loas [from *Count Zero*, AIs calling themselves after Voodoo gods], and the 'haunting' of cyberspace, adds another dimension to the work" (30 Sept. 2001). Gibson's conception of cyberspace in *Neuromancer,* for example, is populated with the constructs of the consciousnesses of the deceased, like Dixie Flatline

(also known as McCoy Pauley), and AIs (artificial intelligences) striving for their disembodied freedom (like Wintermute).

As significant as the division between the "meat" and the mind is in cyberpunk, its portrayal of cyberspace has had a much more concrete rather than philosophical impact upon popular culture. David goes on to write:

> To me, issues about prediction in science fiction are kind of beside the point, but I really like the fact that Gibson's visions of the future have already been superseded. Sure, [we] don't quite have virtual reality yet, but after Quake 3 and Unreal Tournament, when we do, it's not going to be just primary coloured geometric shapes! And the cyberspace of the Idoru books isn't, it's much more visually rich. Having mentioned game design, I think it is going to increasingly define cyberspace in look and feel, and perhaps even development of pseudo-AI (e.g. game friends and enemies who can interact – the sidekicks in Daikatana just don't quite make it!) (30 Sept. 2001)

Balsamo also sees the close relationship between the science fiction and the construction and marketing of cyberspace and virtual reality technologies. Balsamo comments:

> One of the most publicized computer applications of the last decade has been the construction of 'virtual environments', now more widely know as 'virtual reality'. Since 1987, virtual reality (VR) has further evolved into an industry in itself; it is also at the heart of an emergent (sub)culture that includes computer-generated realities, science fiction, fictional sciences and powerfully evocative new visualization technologies. (489)

Nigel Clark, in "Rear-View Mirrorshades: The Recursive Generation of the Cyberbody," notes that the "'revolution' in computer visualization continues its momentum. Fuelled by cyberfiction and by publicity about existing virtual realities, the notion of fully immersive networks has captured the popular imagination" (124). No longer is the

ability to interact in cyberspace an element of futuristic prediction. As David Geelan commented above, "issues about prediction in science fiction are kind of beside the point, but I really like the fact that Gibson's visions of the future have already been superseded." People today are connected via cyberspace and are members of various virtual communities. As Alias, an alt.cyberpunk poster, reflects (in his on-line grammar), "yet i can still remember when the concept of the internet was difficult to for me to fathom. when a machine that didn't exist as a simple brute fact alone and singular was odd. now if i don't have 24 hour broadband and a comp thats [sic] on all the time i feel naked. exposed . . out of the loop" (1 Oct. 2001).

With the computer and Internet especially becoming commonplace in the homes of the Western world, web design has become a rapidly growing industry. Many cyberpunk fans see web design as one of the most tangible areas in which cyberpunk has been a large popular influence. As Jason L. has commented, "The more hip, chic web designers are active in the rave culture . . . although the web design one I think is the furthest down the line of its [cyberpunk's] offspring" (8 July 1999). Kevin G. also sees a connection. He says, "Cyberpunk also influences a lot of people in internet design and development to try and make the internet experience more like the thrill ride that's described in cyberpunk" (5 July 1999). Kevin provides much commentary on this connection. He says:

> Most cyberpunk was written by people who idealized
> computers and really liked, liked the concept of them, but it
> was also written at a time where [it] tended to be pretty
> much before the internet, where they were envisioning that
> sort of a system. But they really did, they really didn't
> have anything to build on and it was all in their

imaginations, so they built some really wild constructs that inspired a lot of people who are involved in internet now. (5 July 1999)

He continues:

I'm not so sure if it's a resurgence in interest [in cyberpunk], but, it's becoming that the internet is something that, that exists, so it's no longer necessarily the realm of fiction. Although I can see the movie Hackers where they, they took a lot of the internet concepts for "the Net" type of construct out of Gibson. The Matrix – and made their visuals for the movie out of that. 'Cause seeing someone hacking on raw TCP/IP with streams, with streams of hex or pure text on a terminal would not look exciting for a movie. So that's, it's been an influence, but it's entering the point were a lot of the concepts in it aren't so much fiction anymore. (5 July 1999)

As Kevin observes, the cyberpunk models of cyberspace have been adopted by cinema for dramatic effect and this conceptualization then influences the general public who come to expect the Internet and hacking to be wild and exciting. More and more, the Internet and virtual reality experiences are becoming reflective of the cinematic expectations of the public.

It is interesting to see that, while the ideas of cyborgs and cyberspace are not necessarily part of everyday discourse for the general public (although through cinema it is becoming more so the case), fans of cyberpunk, familiar with these concepts, recognize the intimate connection that people and their bodies have with these technologies in their daily lives and the impact the vision of the cyberpunk authors has had on our popular culture. Questions surrounding the nature of humanness and evolution are being considered and a cultural awareness of these issues is being established. Jennifer González maintains:

> The image of the cyborg has historically recurred at moments of radical social and cultural change. From bestial monstrosities, to unlikely montages of body and machine parts, to electronic implants, imaginary representations of cyborgs take over when traditional bodies fail. In other words, when the current ontological model of human being does not fit a new paradigm, a hybrid model of existence is required to encompass a new, complex and contradictory lived experience. (542)

These cyberpunk conceptualizations of the human-machine hybrid or the "jacked in" computer user, represent a changing understanding of the nature or existence of the human body in the age of computer technology.

6. Global Integration and Conflict

This fourth theme of the cyberpunk cultural ethic, global integration and conflict, is a natural progression from and combination of the previous three. That marginalization is one aspect of the cultural ethic implies that there is a consideration of class conflict, at the very least, in terms of a system of social stratification. The second theme of the cultural ethic, the creation of identity and image, encourages the code of TFYQA (Think For Yourself, Question Authority). Cyberpunks question the status quo and individuals empower themselves through finding their own uses for things. The third theme centres on technological developments and the impact of these on the human body and mind. In cyberpunk, there is an emphasis on the fusion of human and machine and one of the constructs in which this is explored is cyberspace. Cyberspace brings us to consider the interconnectedness of people on a global scale through the development of virtual communities, as well as the need for the marginalized hacker who can negotiate travel through a digitalized landscape to challenge the hegemonic forces that continue to exert power and control. This challenge comes in the form of the struggle of the individual (hacker) for freedom of knowledge against global forces of information control (governments and transnational corporations). Cyberpunk provides fans with a model for theorizing about the impact of these global issues on the local individual.

That fans would be sensitive to global issues is not surprising considering that, as Sterling notes, "Global awareness is more than an article of faith with cyberpunks, it is a deliberate pursuit" (*Mirrorshades* xiv). Throughout the literature and film, the action

occurs on a global scale and the technologies and power structures that facilitate this global integration figure significantly in the aesthetic. Sterling writes:

> William Gibson's *Neuromancer* . . . is set in Tokyo, Istanbul, Paris. Lewis Shiner's *Frontera* features scenes in Russia and Mexico—as well as the surface of Mars. John Shirley's *Eclipse* describes Western Europe in turmoil. Greg Bear's *Blood Music* is global, even cosmic in scope.
> The tools of global integration—the satellite media net, the multinational corporation—fascinate the cyberpunks and figure constantly in their work. (*Mirrorshades* xiv).

The globalization of culture in the cyberpunk future is evidently the result of media and transnationals. For example, in an opening scene from Ridley Scott's *Blade Runner* (1982), the screen is crowded with this imagery: neon lights, advertisements, and television images all projecting a fusion of Eastern and Western commercial products.

On one hand, this global cultural exchange and the accessibility of world wide communication have enabled people far flung from one another to share common interests and form communities. This has been true of the cyberpunk fan base. Where once fans connected only locally through meetings and early computer Bulletin Board Services (BBSs), today people join newsgroups, on-line RPGs, or visit websites that have an international membership. Through cyberspace, fans from Alberta, Northern Ontario, the United States, Australia and Sweden, were able to contribute their thoughts for this research. David Geelan reflects:

> The two usenet newsgroups that I read pretty much every day, though, are alt.cyberpunk and alt.2600, the hacker group. I regard myself as a hacker in the sense that hackers do – not as someone who breaks into systems, but as someone who loves computers, knows something about them and wants to learn more. I have quite a large on-line life – probably too large for my health really – including

the fact that, although I'm in Canada, I'm teaching an on-
line course for an Australian university, which is being
taken by a Canadian living in Brunei, an Australian living
in the US and a Welsh woman living in Malaysia, among
others. You can see why novels about the breaking down
of geographical barriers mean something for me! (30 Sept.
2001)

Sherry Turkle comments, "Many of the institutions that used to bring people together . . .

no longer work as before" (178). In spite of this, because we are social beings, the

impetus to remain connected is there. Turkle goes on to note that, in the need to stay

connected, "the computer is playing a central role. We correspond with each other

through electronic mail and contribute to electronic bulletin boards and mailing lists; we

join interest groups whose participants include people from all over the world" (178). In

this way, though people may not feel the same physical sense of community in their

neighbourhoods and towns, isolation is kept at bay as connections are made on-line and

relationships forged on an international scale.

Cyberspace, however, does not solely represent a venue for the formation of

communities and the sharing of information. It is also a site of conflict at which the

hacker is at the centre. As David indicates above, there is a sinister sense of the word

hacker, though he does not self-identify with that conceptualization. As Pekka Himanen

explains in the Preface to *The Hacker Ethic and the Spirit of the Information Age*,

originally, "a group of MIT's passionate programmers started calling themselves hackers

in the early sixties" (vii-viii). As an aside, Himanen continues:

Later, in the mid-eighties [the time when cyberpunk fiction
gained prominence], the media started applying the term to
computer criminals. In order to avoid the confusion with
virus writers and intruders into information systems,

hackers began calling these destructive computer users
crackers (viii, emphasis in original)

Keeping in mind this distinction, Turkle describes the hacker subculture that flourished in the 1970s:

> The hacker subculture was made up of programmer-
> virtuosos who were interested in taking large, complex
> computer systems and pushing them to their limits.
> Hackers could revel in the imperfectly understood. As they
> programmed, things did not always get clearer, but they
> became workable, at least for the master hacker with the
> "right stuff." Hacking offered a certain thrill-seeking, a
> certain danger. It provided the sense, as one hacker put it,
> "of walking on the edge of a cliff." He explained further,
> "You could never really know that your next little 'local
> fix' wouldn't send the whole system crashing down on
> you." The hacker style made an art form of navigating the
> complexity of opaque computer microworlds. (31-32)

In his discussion of the hacker work ethic, Himanen states that "hackers program because programming challenges are of intrinsic *interest* to them. Problems related to programming arouse genuine curiosity in the hacker and make him eager to learn more" (3-4, emphasis in original). It was with this approach to programming that "hacking, as a free-form research activity, has been responsible for many of the most progressive developments in software development" (Ross 255).

There are three other elements to the hacker ethic that Himanen groups together as the "nethic" or network ethic (85). These aspects concern the hackers' relationship with media and communication networks. As Himanen writes, "in addition to the ideas of freedom of expression and privacy, hackers value the individual's own activity" (106). He goes on to provide more details concerning the three elements of the nethic:

> Freedom of expression is a means toward being a publicly
> active member of society, receiving and articulating various
> views. Privacy secures one's activity in creating a personal
> lifestyle, because surveillance is used in order to persuade
> people to live in certain ways or to deny legitimacy to
> lifestyles that deviate from the ruling norms. Self-activity
> emphasizes the realization of a person's passion instead of
> encouraging a person to be just a passive receiver in life.
> (106)

It is these aspects of the hacker ethic that resonate with many cyberpunk fans. Jason L.

comments that hackers are concerned with the idea that "information should be free" (8

July 1999) and Jillian admires the skill and ability portrayed by Acid Burn, the female

hacker protagonist in the film *Hackers* (7 Oct. 2001). For Kevin G., he has been able to

attain credibility with his local 2600 members with his technical knowledge of obsolete

electronics because this shows how long he has been involved with computers (5 July

1999). It is the idea that the technical know-how of the hacker is equated with status and

empowerment. Andrew Ross in his article, "Hacking Away at the Counter Culture,"

comments that the hacker ethic is "a principled attempt . . . to challenge the tendency to

use technology to form information elites" (256).

The idea that information is a commodity is a product of, as Neil Postman has

named it, our cultural state of Technopoly. In this environment where technology is

deified, information control becomes crucial for the economic survival of those who

promote this cultural state that is also referred to as technotopia by Arthur Kroker and

Michael A. Weinstein. Kroker and Weinstein label this group as the virtual class. They

write:

> Against democratic discourse, the virtual class institutes
> anew the authoritarian mind, projecting its class interests

onto cyberspace from which vantage-point it crushes any and all dissent to the prevailing orthodoxies of technotopia. For the virtual class, politics is about absolute control over intellectual property by means of war-like strategies of communication, control, and command. Against social solidarity, the virtual class promotes a grisly form of raw social materialism, whereby social experience is reduced to its prosthetic after-effects: the body becomes a passive archive to be processed, entertained, and stockpiled by the seduction-aparatures of the virtual reality complex. (5-6)

They go on to note that "The economic base of the virtual class is the entire communications industry—everywhere it reaches. As a whole, this industry processes ideological hype for capitalist ends" (Kroker and Weinstein 15). The hacker ideal of cyberspace as a construct where information is part of a free exchange is in conflict with a global economic drive to regulate and commodify its existence.

In December 2000, The Platonist, on alt.cyberpunk, posted a reply to "mission: Cyberpunk re-genisis [sic] (well, it would be nice)." It very articulately describes this sense of loss of power felt by cyberpunks and proposes a continued fight against the commodification of cyberspace. The Platonist writes:

Cyberpunk as we know it, has become passe in the general consensus of civilization. Should we just let it go? No.

Instead let us not be confined by the name which society has contextualized into an ineffectual group of fringers. Cyberpunk was based on an idea, one idea above all others; [sic] Information is Power.

Think on this very carefully, because without a correct understanding of this single notion, everything that the Cyberpunk movement was (and for the few of us, is) based on, becomes moot. I will say it once again; [sic] Information is Power.

If my understanding of cyberpunk is correct, the goal was to make information readily accessable [sic] to everyone,

thus empowering those who would otherwise be preyed upon by the mighty.

Thus arose the problem. We, the denizens of the net who were here first, failed. The government, the corporations, we were all racing for the same piece of the pie. We had it first, but it was the moneymakers that ultimately grabbed up the pie. What we would have turned into the greatest library/museum in the history of the world, they turned into a shopping mall.

So what can we do? Somebody else chose the fate of our domain for us, without our consent, and without our support. It is a war of sorts, but we do not need to win the war, after all we are a bunching [sic] of aging dreamers now, no the war must be won by those who will follow our example. What we need to do is win one, decisive battle for the cause. A high profile, highly visible corner of the web where those who seek to hold on to power cannot, and dare not, tread.

… Put aside the fancy effects and the fantastical story and listen to the message. There is nothing that the mind of man can conceive that the hand of man cannot create. The People have forgotten that. We, the last of a dying breed, need to give the people an example, show them what is possible, and let fate and history decide our worth. (30 Dec. 2000)

The Platonist believes that the fight for control of cyberspace is not over and that the cyberpunks [the fans] must continue the attempt to regain some power in the virtual world.

Now, in order to curb activities that run counter to the economic benefit of the virtual class, there must be a hegemony that deters such behaviour. One aspect of this deterrence is the vilification of the hacker as a dangerous criminal. Ross, in his discussion of the computer virus attack in November 1988 launched by Robert Morris, recognizes this methodology for social (and economic) control:

There is another story to tell about the emergence of the virus scare as a profitable ideological moment, and it is the

story of how teenage hacking has come to be defined
increasingly as a potential threat to normative educational
ethics and national security alike. The story of the creation
of this 'social menace' is central to the ongoing attempts to
rewrite property law in order to contain the effects of the
new information technologies that, because of their
blindness to the copyrighting of intellectual property, have
transformed the way in which modern power is exercised
and maintained. Consequently, a deviant social class or
group has been defined and categorized as 'enemies of the
state' in order to help rationalize a general law-and-order
clampdown on free and open information exchange. (254)

This conflict over the control of information in cyberspace and of the individual has once

again become prominent since the 11 September 2001 terrorist attacks in the United

States. As David Geelan commented earlier, "The security clamp-down, with poitential

[sic] life imprisonment for hackers, in the wake of Sept 11 seems to me like a perfect

example of the corporations using a human tragedy to get exactly what they want, and to

subjugate the individual further" (30 Sept. 2001). This issue is still a significant one to

the fans of cyberpunk.

This sensitivity to the economic motivations behind the subjugation of the rights

of the individual and the control of information has made many fans suspicious of

transnational corporations, particularly because of the manner in which they are portrayed

in cyberpunk fiction: larger and more powerful than government. Dennis Lindström, a

cyberpunk fan from Sweden, comments:

Well if we look at the world today we see rising
increasing violence, the world has gotten colder, tougher.
Look at the street violence and the WTC bombing. We're
getting more of a tribal world with gated communities,
street gangs and religious sects. Democracy are [sic] on the
decline, freedom of speech is cut smaller everyday do [sic]
to censorship. Every new media will get more censorship

then [sic] the previous one. (Newspapers have more
freedom then [sic] TV and the net has become a very
dangerous place to tell your thoughts.) Corporations are
more important to the government then [sic] the people
themselves.

It's all similar to the CP environment, [sic] If this keeps
going we will se [sic] the fall of the world. The
government's [sic] will fade away and the corporate leaders
will rule the world. I read the CP stories from the early
80's and find things in them that have or are becoming a
reality today. This makes me believe that it's very likely
we soon will end up living in the CP world. (1 Oct. 2001)

For Kevin G., the aspect of global corporate power portrayed in the cyberpunk literature

is not very far off from our current situation. He says:

There's a lot in cyberpunk with corporations taking control,
and corporations becoming very powerful and it tends to be
a little bit alarmist in that, that count. But, if you look at it
now, we have trade deals going through now that give
corporations extra territorial power that they can make
unilateral decisions about government. We have trade
agreements that allow a company to tell a government that
their environmental laws are too tight and force them to
import products because it would be unfair to competition
to restrict them. So, we have corporations gaining a great
deal of power. One common thing with cyberpunk is the
idea that mega-corporations are effectively decentralized
and powerful to the extent that if you're part of a group
who's pissed off with the government of Canada, you could
park a van out front of the legislature and blow it up,
y'know? If you're pissed off with the government of IBM,
you can blow up a satellite factory or an office, but it's like,
it's trying to slay the Hydra. There are so many heads that
you won't really have any major effect on them. If you're
pissed off at Coca-Cola, good luck! 'Cause you need to hit,
y'know, fifty places at once before you start slowing down
their supply or even hitting them in the balance sheet,
y'know? (5 July 1999)

Dennis shares Kevin's views on the relation of power between governments and

transnational corporations. He writes, "The government is mostly a [sic] errand-boy for

big corporations that are the center of power in the industrial world" (1 Oct. 2001).
These fans do not see governments as protecting their citizens in this economic
globalization, but as entities at the beck and call of transnational corporations.

The example of terrorism that Kevin uses in his discussion of global corporate
power is a sentiment shared by other fans. The sense that one has to resort to violence in
order to have an impact or be recognized belies a sense of frustration with one's
perceived powerlessness. Jillian demonstrates this similar reaction:

> I think the world is starting to head into the cyberpunk
> world, though I think it won't be so much of the punk and
> dark side of things initially . . . . that will come with time as
> the big corporations take more of a strong hold in the
> world. You know Fight Club? What I'd like to see is the
> credit card companies having their buildings blown up.
> Imagine the chaos that would create . . . . . all credit debts
> gone . . . . . that would be cyberpunk. (26 Sept. 2001)

Despite this emotional reaction to the power of transnational companies, violence and the
technology that can produce it is not accepted whole-heartedly by Jillian. She writes:

> Technology has it [sic] good points and bad points.
> Without technology we couldn't be close to making blind
> people see and paralyzed people use their limbs again. But,
> without technology, we also wouldn't have had events like
> the World Trade Centre tragedy that just happened. I can't
> really say if technology is more of a hinderance [sic] or a
> help to the world, because it covers both sides evenly well.
> With technology at the point it's at now, we've already
> reached George Orwell's "Big Brother" with all the
> cameras watching everything we do, and this is well into a
> CyberPunk world as well. As technology leaps forward, so
> will the mainstream effect of it jump forward, and a true
> CyberPunk world is already well on it's [sic] way . . . I
> mean, the big corporations already pretty much run the
> world and people are lashing back. (7 Oct. 2001)

Dennis clarifies that, for him, it is not technology that is both good and bad, but it is the person employing it that determines its nature. He comments, "Technology is always good it leads to progress. It may be abused but it's not tech itself that are [sic] bad, it's the people abusing it" (1 Oct. 2001). Even so, the reality that violence and conflict accompany technology is a connection that many cyberpunk fans acknowledge in the struggle for power in the realms of global economic production and control of cyberspace.

Cyberspace and communications technology offer both social benefits and detriments. Without a global network for communication, fans would not be able to form international communities in which to share their interests or disseminate information. It is through this type of network that hackers continue to strive for the ideals of free access to information, the right to one's privacy, and the relevance of the individual. However, these domains are increasingly coming under corporate and governmental regulation and control, putting in jeopardy the very benefits that the technologies offered. Steven Connor comments on this tension:

> Perhaps the most important and troubling aspect of the new
> systematic placelessness of the postmodern is the rapidly
> increasing development of information technology and, in
> particular, the move towards networked and distributed
> rather than localized systems for the exchange of images
> and information. Optimistic readings of these
> developments suggest that they make it possible to develop
> new and diverse forms of cultural belonging . . . And yet,
> . . . the internet itself the object of a massive attempt at
> commercial colonization and regulation, its very
> heterogeneity making it an irresistible target for
> commodification. (259)

With the sense of loss for individual freedoms and power, there is increasing distrust of government and transnational corporations as they exert their influence in controlling access to information. Cyberpunk fans recognize this system of power distribution from their familiarity with the conventions of the genre. Peter Burkowski comments, "Technology is advancing, governments are untrustworthy, and knowledge is more free than ever. Neural interface software and nanotechnology are being developped [sic], and hard currency is becoming outmoded. Cyberpunk stories have practically blueprinted society's current direction. I think their relevance is now as a cautionary example" (28 Nov. 2004). The fans use this example as a framework for an awareness of the issues surrounding global integration and the conflicts it brings.

7. Conclusion

Throughout this thesis, it has been my goal to articulate the vernacular theory of cyberpunk fandom. For each theme of the cyberpunk cultural ethic, fans have been very forthcoming about their interpretations of their social experiences in terms of their understanding of the relevance and conventions of cyberpunk literature and other media. This thesis contributes to a growing literature in folkloristics concerning popular culture and media. Folklorists are increasingly paying attention to postmodern and globalizing forms within their work. For example, Gary Alan Fine has written on gaming, Peter Narváez, in addition to working on fandom, has edited a collection with Martin Laba that examines the relationship between folklore and popular culture, and John Dorst has studied Internet communities. This work is based on a growing body of folkloristic and ethnographic approaches to the study of fandom, science fiction and postmodernism, though it brings forth a distinctively cyberpunk perspective on these subjects.

Much of the folklore and science fiction literature is actually examinations of the folklore in science fiction. David M. Axler's article, "Some Potential Approaches to the Folkloristic Study of Science Fiction," in an excellent example of how an ethnographic approach can be applied to understanding authors' intentions of the science fiction texts themselves. He writes, "Because we so seldom possess sufficient ethnographic data to deal with such questions in reference to science fiction and fantasy, I would suggest that a more fruitful approach would be to treat such literature as inherently ethnographic, and to assume that what the author presents is valid data for further study" (Axler 8). This approach, he maintains, "allows us to turn to questions of an author's goals and intentions

in his or her use of folklore, to examine the purpose of the material within the fiction, itself, and even to evaluate the relative success or failure of such usages" (Axler 8). He proceeds to analyze various science fiction texts utilizing various sociolinguistic approaches to demonstrate how both the alien cultures described and the structure of the writing can be understood.

Jeannie B. Thomas, in "Out of the Frying Pan and Into the Postmodern: Folklore and Contemporary Literary Theory," though not concerned with science fiction specifically, does examine how folkloristic approaches would benefit postmodern theoretical texts. She notes that folkloristic theories can intersect with postmodern literary theories (107) and create new texts for approaching the analysis of postmodern culture. She comments that "Just as the recognition of folklore and folk behaviors should draw more attention from postmodern theorists, there are theories of the postmodern that should have particular resonance for those of us who study folklore" (Thomas 109). Thomas cites John Dorst's position "that folklore's model of attending to cultural *specificities* – not big-picture attempts to depict the culture historically, common in fields such as anthropology, but rather the focused attention on specific cultural occurrences – is a much-needed augmentation to postmodern discussions" (111, emphasis in original). Most significantly, Thomas sees that "a folkloristic approach can assist the human 'object' of study in achieving a subject position of agency" (118) in postmodern analyses. She further explains:

> This interactive model could be productively employed in the postmodern critiques and discussions of late twentieth-century capitalistic culture. Such theoretical writing could include not only the author's observations of postmodern

culture, but also fieldwork in which we hear the voices of heretofore mostly faceless and nameless American consumers. (Thomas 118)

Thomas McLaughlin, in his chapter "Criticism in the Zines: Vernacular Theory and Popular Culture," notes that there is "a huge and varied fan commentary on popular culture" (52). However, despite his recognition that much of this commentary occurs in informal face-to-face situations, McLaughlin opts to examine this commentary "in a more formal and critical mode in what fans call 'zines,' amateur magazines written and edited and published by the fans themselves" (52), producing exactly the kind of discussion that Thomas criticizes. McLaughlin does provide insightful commentary concerning the zine culture and recognizes that "In the weirdness of this alternative culture is a potential for ideological questioning. When you exist so far outside the corporate-sponsored culture, even if for hedonistic rather than political reasons, you have the opportunity to question its principles, to produce a world of discourse not totally governed by the rules in force" (68). However, his chapter is based solely on his observations and therefore lacks a representation of "a world of discourse" as articulated by the fans themselves.

Following Thomas's model and building on McLaughlin's concept of vernacular theory, methodological and theoretical approaches were developed for this thesis. Since cyberpunk, as a postmodern literary form provides a critique and discussion of capitalistic culture, we can use its framework for analyzing current social trends. This analysis is then complemented with the ethnographic research that was missing in McLaughlin's example in order to ensure there is a voice given to the fans for whom cyberpunk is a relevant postmodern outlook and a framework for theory.

An ethnographic approach has been applied in other studies of science fiction fandom that are much more performance oriented than Axler's or Thomas' works and are concerned with providing an intimate understanding of the cultures of the fan groups. An excellent example of this is Henry Jenkins' *Textual Poachers: Television Fans and Participatory Culture*. In his "Introduction," Jenkins writes, "*Textual Poachers* offers an ethnographic account of a particular group of media fans, its social institutions and cultural practices, and its troubled relationship to the mass media and consumer capitalism" (1). The book examines the ways in which fans select and consume texts and produce new ones through activities such as fan-writing and video-making. A second example is Camille Bacon-Smith's *Enterprising Women: Television Fandom and the Creation of Popular Myth*. Like Jenkins' *Textual Poachers*, Bacon-Smith's study is focussed specifically on fans of television programs and the forms of the fans' textual consumption and production.

Another significant similarity between these two studies of television fandom is the gender focus of the fan groups studied. Bacon-Smith examines women's fan activities and Jenkins also notes that the media fan culture he has based his work on "is largely female, largely white, largely middle class, though it welcomes into its ranks many who would not fit this description. This subculture cuts across traditional geographic and generational boundaries and is defined through its particular styles of consumption and forms of cultural preference" (1).

An examination of cyberpunk fandom offers a very different group dynamic from the one depicted in these studies of television fandom. Though there are, of course,

commonalities in that some of the cyberpunk fans enjoy science fiction in general and participate in fan activities of other science fiction or fantasy sub-genres (for example, Kevin G., Jason L., Scott H., Ronald K., and James L.), cyberpunk fans, generally speaking, are male (of my fifteen informants, one was female). As well, none of the fans who participated in my fieldwork were producers of fan-writing or video-making, though the production of new cyberpunk literature was undertaken by two informants and another is an independent filmmaker. In general terms, cyberpunk fandom appears to be much more centred around the consumption of the texts, the on-line interaction of newsgroups and RPGs, and the face-to-face meetings at local RPG sessions or related groups (such as the hacker society 2600).

This thesis utilizes the theoretical and ethnographic perspectives of a variety of sources that comprise a growing literature on science fiction, postmodernism and fandom, though it focuses on the fans of one particular form of science fiction. In this way, the vernacular theory of cultural studies is augmented with the ethnographic research of a folklorist's approach. As well, this thesis provides an intimate look at a group of fans that are not the typically considered stereotype when one contemplates science fiction fandom. This work has attempted to facilitate an understanding of the social impact a dystopian form of popular culture has had on a group of people in developing their vernacular theory through the words of the fans themselves.

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