Ghost Busting

The Role of Literary Cyberpunk in the Development of Fiction at the End of the Twentieth Century

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Since the exhaustion of postmodernism in the first half of the 1980s, when its production could no longer provide an accurate interpretation of its immediate social reality, a number of literary attempts to deviate from the postmodernist *dictum* have appeared, claiming to be successors. From the perspective of the zeitgeist-based typologies, the rightful successor to postmodernism should already function according to the metaphysical premises of the postmodern epoch. In view of that, the article examines the phenomenon of literary cyberpunk, a movement formed in America at the beginning of the 1980s within the science fiction genre. The investigation of the position of cyberpunk in its original environment of science fiction, the relation between cyberpunk and its mainstream contemporary postmodernism, and the analysis of the specifics of the cyberpunk subject, literary worlds and style reveal the decisive role of cyberpunk in the development of the foundation upon which the Avant-Pop movement of the early 1990s successfully anchored literature within the new epoch.

1. À propos the death of postmodernism

Even though postmodernism has, from the mid-1980s onwards, repeatedly been proclaimed dead, it still seems to be the common denominator of virtually all investigations into the developments in literature over the last twenty-five years. Considering the speed and the range of transformations in the domains of economy, society and culture in recent decades, it is extremely odd that the accompanying literary production should still be discussed in terms of a tradition that peaked roughly thirty-five years ago and which has been continuously recognized as outdated since less than a decade later. Does that mean that literature, put quite plainly, became mired in the never-ending feedback loops of postmodernist auto-
referentiality, thereby mise-en-abîmeing itself *ad nauseam*? No doubt some contemporary literature is solipsistic in its auto-referentiality. However, the share of literary works produced over the last thirty years providing fresh, exciting and artistically accomplished comments on contemporary reality has been steadily on the rise to produce what is now a significant majority.

What might be the reason, then? In this respect, it is certainly noteworthy to mention the confusion in the usage of the terms “postmodernism” and “postmodernity,” which especially Anglophone scholars generally use synonymously, while others separate them as two distinct terms: the first referring to an artistic period, a late twentieth century phase in the development of art, and the second to the epoch succeeding the modern age. The gist of the problem is to a certain extent implicit in the explanation above; however, the most convincing reason for this frequent conflation of terms is, in my opinion, much more complex and further reaching. Before undertaking to provide answers to how postmodernism was dethroned, what happened next, and why its ghost still haunts the theoretical discourse on contemporary literature – all of which are the central concerns of this paper – I shall first briefly outline the basis of what should paint a clearer picture of the development and placement of often confusing literary phenomena of the last decades.

In the case of postmodernism, it took scholars well over a decade to detect foundations differentiating it resolutely from those of all the literary periods preceding it. It is these different foundations that provide postmodernism with the status of an independent and theoretically-justified literary category. After a number of more or less unsuccessful attempts at text-based and empirical approaches,¹ discussion in the early 1980s increasingly focused on the more metaphysical aspects, foregrounding the social, economic and cultural changes accompanying the rise of the postmodernist tradition.² It seems that the most productive answer was offered by the approaches close to the controversial *Geistes-

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¹ I am primarily referring to David Lodge’s, Douwe W. Fokkema’s and Ihab Hassan’s enumerations of formal and thematic characteristics of postmodernist writing, which, due to the decidedly intertextual nature of postmodernist production, can also be found in works pertaining to other traditions. Tomo Virk observes a similar problem with Linda Hutcheon’s concept of historiographic metafiction as a quintessentially postmodernist form, which she, Virk claims, justifies with criteria combining certain formal (metafiction) and thematic (historicity) characteristics without clarifying the essential difference between postmodernist and previous usages of the form (62-63).

² E.g. Brian McHale, Janko Kos, Tomo Virk and Douwe W. Fokkema, who, before concentrating on the empirical analysis of the specifically postmodernist semantic fields and lexemes, identified postmodernism as the last phase of a historical process which started in the Renaissance. A similar approach is also evident in Fredric Jameson’s understanding of postmodernism.
geschichte, which defines literary and historical periods according to the specific ‘spirit of the age’ by analysing the structures and relations of the four basic paradigms – i.e. subject, transcendence, truth and reality – specific to each artistic and historical period. In the case of postmodernism, the examination of the status of the four paradigms reveals that it represents the final phase of metaphysical nihilism and, with that, the definite disintegration of the metaphysical frame specific to the modern age. Its successors should therefore move away from Cartesian metaphysics entirely and abide by a new, postmodern structuring of the world.

And indeed, they did. The problem was, as we shall see, that it was hard to notice and evaluate with the traditional and established tools of literary criticism. Relying, however, on the philosophical, sociological, economic and anthropological characteristics of the epoch succeeding the modern age as charted by the leading theoreticians of postmodernity, the decisive diversions from the existing literary traditions first appear in the production of the 1990s’ Avant-Pop movement. Avant-Pop has not only successfully introduced literature to the computer era but also offered the fully-developed apparatus for significant literary interpretations of and contributions to that era. If postmodernism was essentially destructive, tearing apart the metaphysical foundations and beliefs of modernity, yet failing or even refusing to provide constructive alternatives, Avant-Pop relied upon the metaphysical tenets which were a priori productive. The interesting question is, of course, what happened between postmodernism, essentially still defined by the paradigms governing the modern age, and the already fully postmodern Avant-Pop. Literature has indeed bridged the epochal gap in less than a decade. The answer to this question, the justification of which is also the central purpose of this paper, is: by quietly succumbing to the lure of the frowned-upon outsider science fiction. In other words, what I intend to show is that in the plethora of literary attempts to transcend postmodernism in the 1980s, the sci-fi movement of cyberpunk offered the most productive groundwork for Avant-Pop to successfully carry literature into the postmodern epoch.

2. Pioneers in the desert of the real

The beginnings of the epoch in question coincide with the formation of the postindustrial society after the Second World War. The drastic changes in the fields of trade, economy and finance brought about by the extremely rapid development of especially three industries – advertising,
media and information technology – were soon followed by very noticeable shifts in the domains of society and culture. Theoreticians from various fields of humanistic studies responded promptly. Tracing the changes and establishing their incompatibility with the Cartesian categories, Marshall McLuhan, Jean-François Lyotard, Jean Baudrillard, Fredric Jameson, Gilles Deleuze, Félix Guattari and others have provided a surprisingly compatible array of disparate observations on the governing mechanisms of the postmodern epoch. Using the postmodern Geistesgeschichte model, which will serve as a springboard for the detection of the first major deviations from the postmodernist tradition, I will rely on the terminology developed by Jean Baudrillard, which in my opinion most aptly articulates and encapsulates the observations of his colleagues.

Reality, the postmodern version of which Baudrillard terms “hyperreality,” is a convenient starting point. Hyperreality refers to the reality of the third-order simulacra (cf. Baudrillard 1994: 121-127) conditioned by the shift in production relations which signalled the beginning of the postindustrial stage of capitalism after the Second World War. This is a reality created from copies, models without originals, in which consumption is no longer bound to the functional value of the products as they “assume their meaning in their differential relation to other signs” (Baudrillard 1981: 66) and ultimately function as signifiers. With that, the objects of consumption acquire social meaning and function as a basis of identity creation, which brings us to the category of postmodern subjectivity. The postmodern subject, which Baudrillard refers to as ‘fractal subject’, is therefore, like hyperreality, a network system of differential signs that can be arbitrarily manipulated according to one’s preferences – in a mediagenic society these generally correspond to media-transferred trends. Postmodern subjects are therefore completely fluid, unstable systems of information, and their existence is guaranteed by the constant influx of data from the media, which consequently assume the status of postmodern transcendence. The category of truth, which describes the relation between the subject and transcendence, in postmodern societies anticipates perpetual rhizomatous decentralization, which might as well be metaphorized by “I connect therefore I am.”

My selection of the Avant-Pop movement as the most promising candidate for the first literary representative of writing governed by the Geistesgeschichte framework described above was based on what may seem to be a rather shallow reason: these 1990s authors were the first generation to have thoroughly internalized the hypertextual medium.

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5 For a more detailed discussion see Krevel 2010: 40-47.
6 Baudrillard’s notion of hyperreality coincides, for example, with Jameson’s concept of culturalization of all the aspects of social life within the postmodern situation, Lyotard’s model of the self as a node in an information network, Debord’s theory of society of spectacle, Deleuze’s and Guattari’s concept of rhizome.
Marshall McLuhan’s claim that the nature of media used for communication shapes societies more than the content of the communication does (McLuhan 2001: 8) provides my selection with a much more solid base – the change in medium typically accompanies the changing of epochs. For example, as Bolter observes in relation to the dawning of modernity, “[w]hen the printed word supplanted and marginalized the codex, the writing space took on the qualities of linearity, replicability and fixity” (Bolter 2001: 22).

These qualities lie at the very core of the modern age’s structuring of the world and they establish the notion of the author of the printed text as an authority, a god-like creator of finite worlds, and the ultimate metaphor of the Cartesian subject. Considering the structural logic and the functioning of hypertext,7 we could paraphrase Bolter’s statement as follows: When the hypertext supplanted and marginalized print, the writing space took on the qualities of “flexibility, instability and interactivity” (Bolter 2001: xiii). These clearly echo the defining qualities of Baudrillard’s concept of hyperreality as a network of signs freely manipulated according to one’s desires. As such, the electronic medium carries a double function. On the one hand, it embodies the principles of the social, economic and cultural reality of our everyday existence and provides the perfect medium for commenting on it. On the other hand, its omnipresence and ubiquitous usage further accelerate the logic of its functioning into the social sphere, determining our society in the sense of McLuhan’s claim.

I based my research of Avant-Pop production on the supposition that artistic works produced within the environment of hyperreality and expressed through the medium of hypertext should correspond to Baudrillard’s concept of the third order simulacra, models which both anticipate and accelerate the (hyper)real world of postmodernity. They should function like media, providing the material – the information – for the structuring of systems of our everyday hyperreality. The analyses of the literary characters, literary worlds and stylistic features of the most representative Avant-Pop works8 reveal that the governing principle indeed predominantly corresponds to Baudrillard’s notion of simulacra of simulation, forming hyperreal systems foreign to the Cartesian dialectics and principles of organicity, hierarchization, and linearity (Krevel 2010: 89-137).

7 I am using the term “hypertext” for all the instances of electronic writing, as they all share the paradigms of flexibility, instability and interactivity (cf. Bolter 2001: xiii, xiv).

8 E.g. Mark America’s The Kafka Chronicles, Ron Sukenick’s Doggy Bag and Mosaic Man, Mark Leyner’s Et tu, Babe and Tooth Imprints on a Corndog, Kathy Acker’s Empire of the Senseless, Douglas Coupland’s Generation X, short stories in the Avant Pop anthology Avant-Pop: Fiction for a Daydream Nation.
The Avant-Pop subject is best described as an open, unstable system of information on the subject, meaning that it is prone to changing completely with the introduction of new data into the system of subjectivity. The validity of these data depends on the stability of the potential systems they might create between themselves and in connection to the systems already confirmed in hyperreality, which present the fluid core of identity. If the clusters of new data entering the system create a more stable structure, the core is replaced or updated. The hypertextual logic of the subject's creation furthermore dissolves – much as is the case on internet pages – the traditional distinction between the author, the reader, and the protagonists.

The existence of such an identity-in-flux is indelibly and crucially connected to the constant supply of data from the environment. In Avant-Pop the environment into which the characters are placed is the defining factor in identity creation. With the introduction of new information into the system of ‘environment’ or ‘story’, identities change. Avant-Pop landscapes are completely fluid systems within which places or locations are no longer the sum total of a finite number of characteristics, but established only with regard to the placing of these characteristics into the system of more or less stable environments. The precondition for their existence is the constant influx of new information, enabling the verification and stability of the environments introduced. The device providing them – in most Avant-Pop works the task is performed by television, print, radio, internet or their derivatives – thus becomes the guarantee of each immediate reality, while its logic assumes the status of truth in the sense of experiencing the world.

The defining feature of Avant-Pop style is the absence of a system of familiar references. Its abundant neologisms have no symbolic correspondents, and they have yet to be actualized in the manner of the third order simulacra in the hyperrealities of individual receivers. In that respect,

9 These involve celebrities, trends, movies and TV-series, commercials, trademarks, etc.
10 For example, the main protagonist of all Mark Leyner's fiction is 'Mark Leyner', so we could assume that the works are autobiographical. The style of narration is accordingly realistic; events provide an impression of a coherent structuring of the world. Yet the literary 'Mark Leyner' constantly moves within the mediagenic reality, arbitrarily choosing elements from it to build (or add to) his existing system of identity. Leyner's 'autobiographical' identity is thus constructed along the way, the reader places individual information on 'Leyner' within systems of information, the stability of which depend on their connectivity. Leyner's existence is thus completely fluid and depends on the reader's capability of connecting information provided into both the already existing 'literary systems' of the story as well as the systems of reader's actual, experienced reality. A similar structuring of the subject is also evident in Ronald Sukenick's Doggy Bag and Mosaic Man, relying primarily on Jewish mythology and popular cults, in Kathy Acker's novels, exploiting the systems of popular philosophy and pornography, Eurydice, relying upon feminism and poststructuralism, etc.
they decisively define the direction of the possibilities for a story and its meaning. Avant-Pop metaphors are probably the best example of how a third order simulacrum attracts and incorporates raw data within its hyperreality. Fulfilling the traditional function of describing the unknown with the familiar, Avant-Pop metaphors rely exclusively upon the artefacts of the mediagenic society – those artefacts which have already become part of our everyday hyperreality. These function much like hypertext links, since the receiver's familiarity with them conditions the creation of the story. The governing principle of Avant-Pop's activity and production, then, corresponds to Baudrillard's notion of simulacra of simulation, forming hyperreal systems foreign to the Cartesian dialectics and principles of organicity, hierarchization and linearity.

3. The missing link and its whereabouts

Such major transformations in literature do not and have never happened overnight. There were numerous attempts throughout the 1980s to move away from the unproductive and increasingly unattractive postmodernist modes, returning to the concrete everyday reality and addressing various contemporary social and economic issues instead. Surprisingly enough, the tendency to focus on the more tangible aspects of (contemporary) existence again was not restricted to the domain of mainstream fiction and neither did it originate from that domain. In their attempt to revolutionise the obsolete modes of science fiction, the founding members of the cyberpunk movement – i.e. William Gibson, Bruce Sterling, Rudy Rucker, John Shirley and Lewis Shiner – turned away from both the psychologising of the New Wave soft sci-fi as well as from traditional hard sci-fi's spaceships, Martians and galaxies far far away, to the “overlapping of worlds that were formerly separate: the realm of high tech, and the modern pop underground” (Sterling 1985: iv). The latter would also be quite an accurate description of the 1980s experiential reality in which, after all, the computer became personal.

In what follows I will explain why I consider cyberpunk to be the most productive 'missing link' between the unstable and unreliable realities of postmodernism, and the productive hyperrealities of Avant-Pop. I will

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11 To illustrate: “He felt intact but worthless, like a chocolate rabbit selling for 75 percent off the month after Easter” (Coupland 2000: 53).

12 I am referring, for example, to the authors associated with neo- or post-realism (e.g. Raymond Carver, Ann Beattie, Richard Ford, Toni Morrison, Amy Tan), revivals of the 1960s new-journalism (e.g. Tom Wolfe's Bonfire of the Vanities, Ted Conover's Coyotes: A Journey Through the Secret World of America's Illegal Aliens, books by William Finnegan, Leon Dash, Jane Kramer), the production of the so-called blank generation (e.g. Richard Hell, Kathy Acker, Bruce Benderson, Joel Rose), 'brat-pack' literature (e.g. Bret Easton Ellis, Jay McInerney, Tama Janowitz), etc.
show why literary cyberpunk seems to offer the most accurate rendering of the 1980s culmination of the postindustrial phase of capitalism, instrumental in the formation of a fully functioning postmodern society.

Regardless of whether the idea to connect the nascent computer technology to the images and the aesthetics of pop culture was a stroke of luck, bare necessity, or a cunning marketing move, it enabled cyberpunk to treat contemporary reality with the very instruments governing that reality – something its mainstream contemporaries, for the most part, failed to do. The fact that this was done in the domain of science fiction and its demands considerably speeded up the disentangling of the unproductive postmodernist loops of autoreferentiality, which explains why literature was able to accommodate epochal changes in less than a decade.

The Movement, as it was called until Gardner Dozois offered the catchier “cyberpunk” in his 1984 article “Sci-Fi in the Eighties” (Krevel 2001: 28), had never questioned its science fiction status. Still, in Bruce Sterling’s cyberpunk manifesto, the aim of which was to establish the Movement as the next step in the development of science fiction, the fresh blood that would revitalise the genre, there is a statement which makes both the placement of cyberpunk within science fiction as well as the existence of the genre itself highly problematic: “The cyberpunks are perhaps the first SF generation to grow up not only within the literary tradition of science fiction but in a truly science-fictional world” (Sterling 1986: ix).

The terminal impact of this statement becomes clear when we observe the relation between the development of science fiction and mainstream literary production. After its ‘declaration of independence’ from the mainstream production in 1926, science fiction has rapidly achieved the status of a self-contained subculture, developing independently from the mainstream. From the existing theoretizations on the specifics of the genre in relation to the mainstream one can deduce two major reasons for their separation. As science fiction is primarily about the research of alternative worlds, the questions it addresses are essentially ontological, while the mainstream with its observations about the experiential world is concerned with issues which are essentially epistemological. At the

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13 In his editorial to the first issue of the Amasing Stories journal, published April 5 1926, Hugo Gernsback defined the new literary genre of ‘scientification’ as fiction in which scientific facts combine with the foretelling of future in the manner of Jules Verne, H.G. Wells and E.A. Poe. The definition on the one hand reflects the lineage with the tradition of fantasy writing, on the other hand, it also implies the complete incompatibility of such writing with the modernist tendencies governing the then mainstream fiction.

14 For a more detailed discussion see Krevel 2001: 16-23.

15 I am relying upon the terminology introduced by Brian McHale (1992: 247f.) as it will, over the following pages, facilitate my explanation of the relation between cyberpunk and postmodernism.
same time, owing to its connection to the tradition of fantastic literature, science fiction relies for its effect on providing the element of the fantastic, which is achieved by forcing the reader to doubt the existing ontological order.

Knowing that, it is not hard to see why science fiction as an independent genre might encounter a serious identity crisis when entering the social, cultural and economic reality of the 1980s. With postmodernism as its mainstream contemporary, the most important defining feature of science fiction – that of addressing ontological issues – was rendered irrelevant, as postmodernism was doing exactly the same thing.\(^\text{16}\) Furthermore, despite the seeming incompatibility, the genre and the mainstream have kept each other in check since at least the 1960s. At that time, as Brian McHale shows in *Constructing Postmodernism*, a feedback loop of influences was established between the two, with mainstream writers borrowing themes, motifs and materials from science fiction, while science fiction authors drew from mainstream poetics (McHale 1992: 227-236). What is interesting is that the two initially absorbed the models with a certain delay, that is, each drew on the previous phase of the other’s development. Throughout the years, however, the delay began to decrease until, with cyberpunk, it disappeared. McHale describes the situation as follows: “Cyberpunk SF can thus be seen, in this systemic perspective, as SF which derives certain of its elements from postmodernist mainstream fiction which itself has, in its turn, already been ‘science-fictionized’ to some greater or lesser degree” (McHale 1992: 229). With cyberpunk, in other words, science fiction and mainstream fiction found themselves within the same aesthetic frame, dealing with similar themes and motifs and using similar writing strategies. With that, keeping them separate thereafter seems to be more a matter of cosmetics than an actual, theoretically-justified necessity.

On the other hand, the rise of the information society and culture defined by technology contributed to the waning of the other defining feature: the element of the fantastic. A techno-culture defined reader can no longer doubt the unity of the ontological order as that order has been ruined for quite some time. In a world where the real is constructed according to one’s preferences and desires (by changing TV channels, using a walkman, playing video or computer games, not to mention the possibilities offered by the internet), concepts like ‘impossible’, ‘unreal’ or ‘fantastic’ lose their traditional meanings – especially when science is

\(^{16}\) According to Brian McHale, modernism and preceding literary traditions rely upon the epistemological dominant and address epistemological issues, while the dominant of postmodernism is ontological (McHale 1999: 6-11). Similarly, Janko Kos and Tomo Virk define postmodernism as the concluding stage in the development of modern age literature, as postmodernism disqualifies the last remaining tenet of modernity – the concept of a reliable single reality, guaranteeing the subject’s existence (Kos 1995: 47-54).
involved. For a contemporary individual, that which is grounded in science and probability can in principle no longer be fantastic.

From the perspective of science fiction, cyberpunk therefore merges the genre with the mainstream by bringing technology to the core of literary creation. However, to fully understand its role in the development of literature after postmodernism, we must also clarify the relation between cyberpunk and its mainstream contemporary. Let us ground this clarification in the most obvious difference between the two: cyberpunk novels read, on the whole, like detective fiction, while postmodernist novels are as a rule rather difficult to read in terms of traditional, linear narrative. As simplistic as this observation may be, it is operative in explaining the relation between the two.

The environment that produced the literature of postmodernism predicted the postmodern situation on a theoretical and philosophical level. It is therefore understandable that in postmodernist works the problems of the indefinability of a subject, reality, or a higher, transcendental truth are reflected merely on the level of form, showing through metafictional practices, mixing of genres, quotations, and so on. In cyberpunk, however, these elements move into the story, or in the words of Brian McHale, cyberpunk “translates or transcodes postmodernist motifs from the level of form (the verbal continuum, narrative strategies) to the level of content” (McHale 1992: 246). As I will show in the following section, cyberpunk heroes have no individual identity since the traditional concept of 'identity' is crucially linked to selecting among traditional binary oppositions of the type I/Other, natural/artificial, spirit/body, alive/dead, man/machine, male/female, and so on. In the age defined by technology such binaries disappear and identification in the traditional sense is rendered impossible. Literary personae in cyberpunk novels remain on the level of types, which is the closest they can get to the idea of subjectivity. As such they are a reflection of individuals in the information age.

Furthermore, in postmodernist literature the formation of multiple realities was achieved through the juxtaposing of different literary discourses and thus remained implicit. In cyberpunk, the existence of multiple realities is no longer a subject of speculation but a proven fact and it can therefore enter the story. Individuals conditioned by the information society and techno-culture no longer ask themselves questions of an epistemological nature but rather ontological ones: Which of the worlds am I in? How do I differentiate between different worlds? In which of the worlds is my decision correct? These are the questions cyberpunk heroes ask themselves as they travel through the virtual landscapes of the Net, as they are wired on a 'simstim' unit, as they move through the islands of wealth, poverty, and war.

What, then, is the relation between cyberpunk literature and mainstream postmodernist fiction? Taking into account what has been said,
we can agree with Brian McHale’s theory that cyberpunk materializes postmodernist stylistic practices. Since the latter quintessentially define postmodernism, the claim that cyberpunk literature enhances and upgrades postmodernism in the sense that it fully realizes its possibilities seems the most convincing. But does it, unlike postmodernism, offer any productive alternatives?

4. Cyberpunk @ postmodernity

Cyberpunk writing was, of course, not yet affected by the actual hyper-text medium, as most of the texts – even in William Gibson’s exemplary Neuromancer – were written on a typewriter at the time when the internet was still a more or less clandestine national security project. The categories of author, reader, and literary reality are therefore still completely traditional. However, its main thematic concern was a technology the functioning of which corresponded to the modus operandi of the society in which the movement emerged. As such, cyberpunk offered an accurate reflection of the zeitgeist, which was closer to the modes traditional mainstream fiction had been employing in the rendering of reality than to the specifics of traditional science fiction. Also, in a society governed by hyperreality, the Movement’s popularity and thematic ‘coolness’ provided it with the reality-forming potential of other, already postmodernized, media.

The usage of traditional science fiction techniques, especially extrapolation and speculation, on the materials crucially connected to the principles governing the 1980s society contributed to the formation of the foundation which served as a springboard for the emergence of the fully postmodern literary phenomena in the following decade. In order to illustrate this, I will analyze three areas of cyberpunk, areas which in my opinion also represent crucial points in the epochal changes – the structures of the subject, literary worlds, and style. These will be examined in the light of their correspondence to the concept of Baudrillard’s third order simulacra as the organizing principle of postmodern reality creation and, if possible, compared to their Avant-Pop counterparts.

4.1 Cyberpunk subject

Cyberpunk emerged at the time of the disintegration of the modern subject and his or her identity, mirrored in an over-all crisis of representation, which is in the centre of both the works of postmodernist authors as well as theoreticians of postmodernity. Joseph Tabbi remarks that the two-dimensionality of literary personae in postmodernist works and cyberpunk is not so much a consequence of cultural narcissism but rather the only possible reaction to the crisis of representation:
The prospect that identity might become wholly informational enables Gibson, like Mailer, Pynchon, and their theorist contemporaries Fredric Jameson and Donna Harraway, to de-realize any notion of an individual and separate subject and thus to make identity itself an abstract representation of the vast and impersonal corporate networks that constitute so much of the contemporary life-world. (Tabbi 1995: 213)

The main problem of postmodernist creation of character and identity lies precisely in the paradigmatic postmodernist equality of discourses, which can never conform to a meaningful hierarchic system. In the works of postmodernist writers, the incompatibility of discourses is reflected in the usage of pastiches, simulacra, intertextuality, and in other metafictional maneuvers. In cyberpunk, however, postmodernist techniques materialize on the level of the story; they are no longer a metaphor for the contemporary world. Quite the opposite, the world becomes a metaphor of the technique, a copy of the simulacrum. Tabbi makes a similar observation:

Indeed, it often seems as if cyberpunk’s characters cannot help but represent to themselves the surrounding structure of mediations, simulacra, and machinic repetitions that have produced, for example, Baudrillard’s simulation culture, Lyotard’s postmodern sublime, or the dream space of Jameson’s political unconscious. (Tabbi 1995: 215)

Cyberpunk characters are therefore representations, and as such best described by the traditional concept of a type. However, cyberpunk ‘types’ – e.g. the console cowboy, the assassin, the merchant, artificial intelligence – are not the classical cross-section of features typical of a certain group of people, they are no longer metaphors but material for metaphorization, just like MTV, Vogue, movies or TV series. As such, they correspond to Baudrillard’s third order simulacra: they are artificial constructs of various segments of reality that have yet to find their place in hyperreality. And they found it indeed in the form of a late 1980s and early 1990s cyberpunk subculture, the image, credo, and activities of which were based upon those of the heroes in cyberpunk novels.

Such a concept of character creation corresponds to the logic of character creation in Avant-Pop. There is, however, an important difference between the two. In cyberpunk, the author does not enter the simulacric process but remains outside the literary reality throughout the meaning-providing entity. The reason for this is simple: cyberpunk authors were still essentially a product of traditional approaches to and understandings of literature, which was, after all, reflected in their stubborn insistence on being considered exclusively in terms of science fiction. Their characters were therefore still created as traditional science fiction second order simulacra, as extrapolated versions of existing people and technologies.

17 For a more detailed explanation see Krevel 2001: 86-104.
However, the technology they based their extrapolating upon functioned according to the principles which not only translated extrapolation into the generation of information but also contributed to its immediate realization. What is more, the same principles also governed the functioning of the environment within which the reception took place, viz. the reality of third order simulacra. Such ‘double’ existence reveals in practice the borderline status of cyberpunk.

4.2 Cyberpunk literary worlds

If we follow McHale’s suggestion that traditional science fiction explores primarily ontology in fiction while postmodernism is largely concerned with the ontology of fiction (McHale 1992: 247), postmodernist science fiction, that is, cyberpunk, should use space for both the exploration of ontology in fiction and at the same time of the ontology of fiction, worlds-as-they-could-be in a world-as-it-could-be. In practice that would mean that space in cyberpunk should be a means for the creation of a multiplicity of worlds which are no longer fictional but complementary to our(s).

In the formation of its worlds, cyberpunk relies upon traditional sci-fi locations (e.g. space colonies, space stations in the orbit, megalopoli), however, with an explicit tendency to provide ‘worldness’ to the alternative worlds. Although millions of miles away, these worlds are like our world, except for some minor technical details. The cyberpunk versions of, for example, space colonies are almost parodic in comparison with their established counterparts, as they are mostly derelict slums, ghettos, or luxury resorts for the rich. Similarly, Gibson’s Sprawl, a massive urban area covering the entire East Coast from Boston to Atlanta, may not (as yet) be our immediate environment; however, as it is constructed from the elements of the existing reality, it functions in the same way as our media-generated notions of existing places we may never have actually visited (those that are frequently featured in the media, for example Beverly Hills, Miami, Iraq, Afghanistan, etc). Sprawl is therefore not perceived as a sci-fi extrapolation of the existing reality but as a simultaneity that is typical of the functioning of hyperreality.

If physical spaces can to some extent still be related to those in classical science fiction and even postmodernist production, the introduction of the concept of cyberspace separates cyberpunk from both the canon of traditional science fiction as well as from postmodernist metanarrative experiments. Cyberspace is the ultimate example of ‘reality before real-

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18 Freeside, where the residence of the Tessier-Ashpool clan in Gibson’s Neuromancer is located, is a luxury Vegas-like resort for the wealthy, while Rucker’s habitat on the Moon in Wetware is based on ghettos like Harlem and the slum areas surrounding Asian megalopoli.
ity'. Like Sprawl, it is a product of Gibson's imagination, an integration of existing entities of reality (video games) into a concept which did not yet exist per se. It was not until a decade later that the internet, functioning very similarly to Gibson's cyberspace, became a household utility. The world of cyberpunk is therefore no longer a postmodernist simulation of the one we live in; quite the opposite, the world we live in is a simulation of the cyberpunk world.

The structure of cyberpunk spaces, especially the notion of cyberspace, is therefore very similar to the concept of creation of Avant-Pop media landscapes from our media conditioned ideas of places. The main difference between the two is the already discussed double status of cyberpunk. Its places start functioning as third order simulacra within the social and economic reality of their reception, while in Avant-Pop, the mediageniety is the defining factor from the get-go.

4.3 Cyberpunk style

The most important cyberpunk innovations in comparison to preceding and parallel literary (genre and mainstream) production are to be found in its characteristic style. Cyberpunk literature comes closest to the aesthetics of contemporary media: reading a cyberpunk novel could be compared to the MTV bombardment with images, while the rhythm of narration is so fast that it is often rather difficult to follow the story. Revolutionary as such 'MTV-style' narration may seem, its function is predominantly cosmetic. The most radical innovations are, in fact, to be found in the formation of neologisms and metaphors.

Gibson's technological neologisms, for example, seem strangely familiar at first: we understand individual parts, but not their combinations. Their matter-of-fact usage in the text echoes the way in which technological innovations and concepts enter our everyday reality. Consequently, when we come across a cyberpunk technology-based neologism, we do what we usually do with new technological words – we ascribe an image to it which we form according to our existing knowledge and experience. With that, we typically accelerate our everyday models, and the simulacric wheel comes full circle: we do exactly what Gibson was doing, borrowing the components for his neologisms from computer handbooks. Thus, the main characteristic of words that provide cyberpunk style with its specifics is that they do not have symbolic counterparts. But unlike the poststructuralist never-ending chains of signifiers, pointing to the instability of reality created through words, cyberpunk neologisms function as third order simulacra, they create their hyperreal 'signifieds' such as 'cyberspace', for example.

To understand the specifics of cyberpunk metaphorics, we must first clarify the difference between a literary and a scientific metaphor. According to Ruth Curl, the main difference between them is that in litera-
ture, a metaphor triggers an explosion of meanings which we can never fully comprehend in their entirety. Science, on the other hand, selects the right meaning from a finite group of meanings ascribable to a certain word, thus undermining the full semantic potential of the metaphor. The literary metaphor is therefore a means for the exploration of ontology, while the main aim of using metaphor is predominantly epistemological, viz. to clarify (unfamiliar) technological and scientific facts by means of (familiar) natural processes (Curl 1992: 233).

What happens, when science and technology are more familiar to us than nature and when they define and support our existence in and comprehension of the world more than nature? The natural is described by the technological, of course. And this is precisely the case with cyberpunk metaphors, and perhaps the most important novelty that the movement contributed to the late twentieth century development of literature. From a plethora of metaphors which contribute to the specifics of the cyberpunk style, the most effective are those which describe unfamiliar natural phenomena with more familiar technological concepts. In *Neuromancer*, the colour of the sky is described as that of a “television, tuned to a blank channel” (Gibson 1995: 9), while Molly explains her aggression by being “wired” (Gibson 1995: 37) that way.

In cyberpunk, the characteristics of literary and scientific metaphors merge, which is best illustrated by the central cyberpunk metaphor: the computer. This often-used sci-fi motif thus appears in a double function in cyberpunk. On the one hand, it retains the characteristics of the traditional sci-fi Frankenstein’s monster metaphor, which is essentially scientific; on the other hand, it also becomes a metaphor for the creator of Frankenstein’s monster. Consequently, the computer becomes a genuinely ontological metaphor, a generator of an infinite number of meanings, ranging from connotations referring to transcendence and mythologies (as is the case especially in the *Neuromancer* sequel *Count Zero*) to allusions to motherhood and creation in general.

Cyberpunk neologisms and metaphors seem to be elements which already fully agree with the *modus operandi* of postmodernity both in the manner of their conception as well as their reception. Their structuring and functioning are generally comparable to those of Avant-Pop. However, the main difference between the cyberpunk technological neo-

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19 The usage of metaphors in science is purely functional: a hypothetical metaphorical connection is established between the concept that is the subject of scientific research and a familiar natural or social concept. The connection is than tested and analysed against data and either the ‘correct’ meaning is selected, or, if the ‘correct’ meaning cannot be found, the metaphor is discarded (the kinetic theory of gases was, for example, established upon the comparison of gases to large swarms of infinitely small particles). A scientific metaphor is therefore primarily “a tool for expanding the boundaries of the quantitative” (Curl 1992: 233), and not a means to explore the qualitative like its literary counterpart.
logisms without symbolic correspondents, which provides their simulacric status, and the style in Avant-Pop works is that in cyberpunk all systems eventually conform to a single, closed system of a linear story with a distinct beginning and end. The absence of such a system of 'familiar references', enabling the unknown to lean upon the familiar and thus contributing to the creation of a clear, linear story is what seems to be the defining feature of Avant-Pop style. If cyberpunk neologisms predominantly serve as stylistic devices spicing up the manifestation of an undisputed cover story, Avant-Pop neologisms define the direction of the possibilities for a story and its meaning.20

Similarly, Avant-Pop develops the potential of cyberpunk technological metaphors, in which notions from the fields of information and general technology are used to describe natural phenomena. Their simulacric status is provided by the fact that technological concepts in themselves function as copies without the original and that their meaning is generally ascribed to them through verification in reality. In the media-governed society that fully came into effect with the spread of the internet to the social reality of individuals at the end of the 1980s, each event, or for that matter each individual, is essentially technological, that is, enabled by technology. The borderline between nature and technology is not just blurred; only technology in fact guarantees nature's existence as our conceptions of nature and of the natural, like everything else, are media-generated. And only within such completely technologized, medialogic reality, could Avant-Pop practice broaden cyberpunk's strictly technological metaphors across the entire spectrum of media phenomena, forming the basis for the creation and understanding of the more complex segments of everyday hyperreality.

5. In conclusion

It would be inaccurate to claim that cyberpunk was the only factor in Avant-Pop's successful breakthrough to the terrain of postmodernity.21 The Avant-Pop manifesto, after all, offers a comprehensive range of literary influences, dating back to the historical avant-garde movements and even to symbolism. The common denominator of the very diverse array of sources upon which Avant-Pop founded its production and philosophy

20 The functioning of Avant-Pop neologisms is best illustrated and even thematized by Coupland's system of footnotes in Generation X, which provide more or less random explanations of trendy terms and neologisms (Krevel 2010: 127-128).

21 At this point I would like to emphasise that the Avant-Pop movement existed and has remained at the very margin of contemporary American literary production. A major breakthrough to the mainstream scene would, after all, disqualify their fundamental avant-garde stance. Nevertheless, from the perspective of literary history the production of its authors seems to be the first to thoroughly reflect the postmodern condition in (and of) literature.
is their tendency to offer productive alternatives to literary traditions after they had lost their ability to adequately reflect the social and cultural concerns of their time. Cyberpunk, however, was the last in line, and the attempts of its authors to revolutionize science fiction by abandoning the obsolete modes it had rested upon coincided with the increasing inability of the mainstream postmodernist production to offer relevant comments on the developing information and media society.

Postmodernist disqualification of reality as a source of certainty for the subject’s existence in the Cartesian world reflected the actual disappearance of the metaphysical bases upon which modern age societies functioned. The world was moving into a new epoch and postmodernists, with their obsolete literary tools of the Great Tradition, could do little but endlessly reflect upon how they can reflect no more. Cyberpunk, on the other hand, had the advantage of its genre origins not to care particularly about its metaphysical grounding. Its sole intention was to make science fiction exciting, cool and attractive to pop-cultural audiences. By linking their production to a (then) still largely primitive computer technology and the possibilities it implied, they managed, on the one hand, to embody, on the level of the story, what was only implicit in postmodernist decisively formal attempts to render the disappearance of the Cartesian notion of reality. On the other hand, by submitting their narrative to the central theme of technology, the functioning of which metaphorizes the functioning of the new world order, cyberpunk authors offered literary interpretations of experiences to which readers of the 1980s could relate.

The analyses of the structures of cyberpunk protagonists and literary worlds showed that they correspond to the structuring of Baudrillard’s postmodern subjects and hyperreality. Even though conceived as second order simulacra, with the author clearly separated from the literary reality, they were received in society as third order simulacra and they further functioned as such, accelerating into the fully postmodernized subjects and landscapes of Avant-Pop. The examination of cyberpunk technology-based neologisms and metaphors, which are the trademarks of its style, determined their full status of third order simulacra both on the levels of production and reception.

Cyberpunk may therefore be considered the ultimate realization of the possibilities offered by postmodernism, and at the same time also the movement which brought literature into the immediate vicinity of its postmodern incarnations. Furthermore, the innovations it introduces already signal what became painfully obvious with the rise of Avant-Pop: the inability of the established apparatus of literary criticism to provide an accurate theoretical response to contemporary literary phenomena. And until the theory finds its own approximation of cyberpunk to take it into the new epoch, the ghost of postmodernism will haunt its discourse, forcing it to theorise itself rather than its subject, as it has done for at least the last twenty-five years.
References


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