CONFESSIONS OF AN EX-CYBERPUNK

BY LEWIS SHINER

I'M 39 YEARS OLD. In my early 30s, I wrote *Frontera*, which has appeared on a few lists of formative cyberpunk novels.

Cyberpunk started out as a fashionable subset of science fiction, showing high-technology subverted by opportunists on the margins of society; for profit or just for fun. The paradigm was William Gibson's highly successful novel *Neuromancer*, a near-future thriller about computer hackers, artificial intelligence and corporate warfare.

What cyberpunk had going for it was the idea that technology did not have to be intimidating. Readers in their teens and 20s responded powerfully to it. They were tired of hearing how their home computers were tempting them into crime, how a few hackers would undermine Western civilization. They wanted fiction that could speak to the sense of joy and power that computers gave them.

As one reader told me: "We're the first generation that spent our entire lives around computers and video games. We don't see computers as threats; we see them as toys. Cyberspace [computer-generated reality] is just an enhancement of video games. We can see the future. We can see this happening."

Because *Neuromancer* was not just an isolated phenomenon, because Gibson was part of a perceived group of writers, critics had a hook to work with. Bruce Sterling, Rudy Rucker, John Shirley and I became a "movement." Sterling reinforced this notion, declaring that the "old, stale futures" of science fiction were dead.

In the early 1980s, I felt that we were indeed a movement. Certainly the five of us exchanged a lot of letters and phone calls. We believed that science fiction needed to take its cues from the present—computer technology, corporate power structures, Japanese economic ascendency—rather than the mid-century pipe dreams of World Governments and Galactic Federations. For me, the movement was about global culture, anarchy and high-energy prose.

But by 1987, cyberpunk had become a cliché. Other writers had turned the form into formula: implant wetware (biological computer chips), government by multinational corporations, street-wise, leather-jacketed, amphetamine-loving protagonists and decayed orbital colonies.

These changes led a number of us to declare the movement dead. For us, cyberpunk in its new incarnation had turned technology into an end in itself and lost its original impulse.

Ironically, as the term cyberpunk was losing its meaning for us, it was escaping, virus-like, into the mainstream, where it continues to thrive. Clifford

Stoll used the term in his best-selling book *The Cuckoo's Egg* to describe computer criminals; *Keyboard* magazine applied cyberpunk to avant-garde composers.

I don't see anything dangerous or threatening about cyberpunk in its current incarnation. But its newfound popularity is revealing. It shows our obsession with material goods, and technical, engineered solutions.

Pop culture's fascination with the bleak vision of cyberpunk may be short-lived. There seems to be a national need for spiritual values. New age bookstores are doing a land office business in crystals and self-help manuals. People are joining cults and neo-pagan communes. *Newsweek* recently devoted a cover story to the resurgence of religion among young Americans. How do we keep our families together? How do we deal with addictions to alcohol and drugs and tobacco and sex? What is our place in a chaotic world?

Today's cyberpunk doesn't answer these questions. Instead it offers power fantasies, the same dead-end thrills we get from video games and blockbuster movies like *Rambo* and *Aliens*. It gives Nature up for dead, accepts violence and greed as inevitable, and promotes the cult of the loner.

I find myself waiting—maybe in vain—for a new literature of idealism and compassion that is contemporary not only on the technological level but also the emotional. It would show the price that must be paid for solutions to our problems; it would see the computer neither as enemy nor god but as a tool for human purposes. I believe that this—not cyberpunk—is the attitude we need to get us into the 21st century.