The Further Rebirth of Cyberpunk

How a genre was born, proclaimed dead, and renewed in movable and colorful form

IT IS ODD that a genre (or, technically, subgenre) as forward-thinking and predictive as cyberpunk would seem, by the very mention of the word, to be something passé, to be a thing of the past and not of the future. In our minds it conjures up the very best days of 'Net cowboys and cyborgs, a time when the wild, sprawling megacities had yet to be tamed or even explored properly, a time when anything went and frequently did (to our chagrin). And yet, in a world that in some ways has caught up to the original cyberpunk predictions of it, these stories and the genre itself have sometimes been relegated to the same status as fairy tales: Classic stories, yes, but clichéd and a bit old-fashioned; stories to nod at and be thankful for, but nothing any sane publisher would keep an eye out for.

PICTURED: Still from Mamoru Oshii's *Ghost in the Shell* (1995; copyright Masamune Shirow/Kodansha Ltd./ Bandai Visual Co., Ltd./Manga Entertainment)
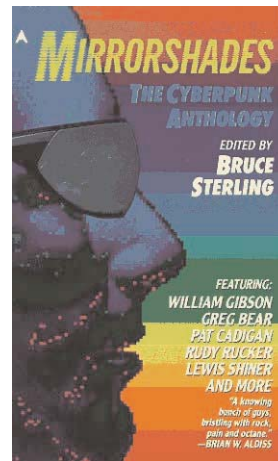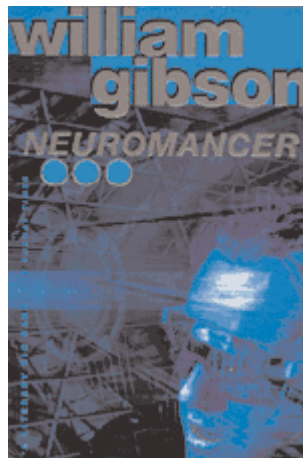
What a horrid state of affairs! And how illusory! For with the success of films like *The Matrix* (1999) (a cyberpunk story if ever there was one), surely we can see how the genre continues, how cyberpunk thrives and is vibrant and well, thank you, in a world that threatens to keep pace with it (and for that very reason needs it). Academics might argue, of course, that the current cyberpunk as exemplified by *The Matrix* et al is not cyberpunk at all but is instead post-cyberpunk (brought to us by the same strange jargon that brings us "modern"

[meaning barely 20th century], "post-modern," and "post-post-modern"), as cyberpunk itself is dead and buried somewhere out beyond Boot Hill and, thus, anything resembling it must either be a figment of our imagination or a different animal altogether, as academia does not allow for resurrection; as we shall see here, however, the genre never really went away, it merely dropped below the radar of those looking for the Hottest New Thing.

And no, we're not doing it by some goofy sleight-of-hand like using Bruce Sterling's (flippant?) remark that anything written by a cyberpunk author is cyberpunk, and thus since William Gibson etc have been writing right along cyberpunk never really went away; nor are we of the opinion that, as Andrew Butler (2000) implies in *The Pocket Essential Cyberpunk*, once the original group has stopped writing in a genre, it has disappeared. To do so would be like first claiming that, even if all sf (science fiction, that is) authors in the 1930s stopped writing sf and started writing gardening books, that those gardening books would somehow be sf; and then claiming that, once those writers stopped writing even gardening books, that any new writers coming along and writing sf wouldn't be writing sf at all. So no genre survives beyond the first group of writers? This absurdly generational viewpoint will not be further explored.

Where do we start? Let's get our bearings ... Cyberpunk is ... well, difficult to corner into any single definition. It is a subgenre of sci-
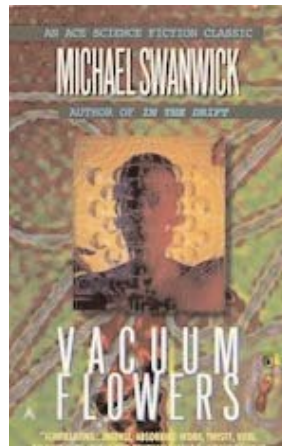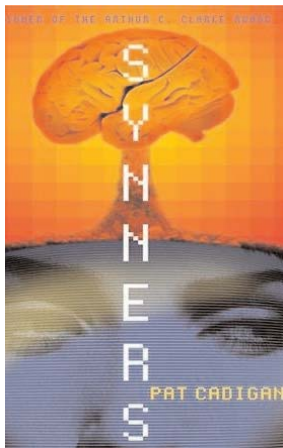
ence fiction. Its worlds are generally near-future Earths in which corporations have more power than governments, and cities have grown so that many have joined into sprawling megacities stretching, for instance, across the eastern seaboard of the US. Computers, the Internet (an advanced version thereof), and AIs (artificial intelligence of some nature, be it robot, cyborg, or mainframe) figure prominently, and often in an "everyday" sort of way (as in, these things are so commonplace, no one thinks them remarkable). And the heroes are often rather low on the social totem pole, people who are nearly on the wrong side of the tracks, or perhaps are. There is generally a distinctly noir-like atmosphere, as though PI Philip Marlowe had found his way into a video game and couldn't get out.

How much of this laundry list has to be in a story to call it cyberpunk? That is up to the individual reviewer to decide, or the author, when authors are given the liberty to make such choices. We'd say the computer/AI/Net element is absolutely necessary, and the near-future, gritty world is also important. The bounty hunter/lowlife/punker characters are next in importance, although a good cyberpunk story can move beyond such stereotypes and still be cyberpunk—*Ghost in the Shell* (1995), for instance, is certainly cyberpunk, but the primary characters are government agents (and primarily cyborgs).

So you want examples? It is generally accepted that the book putting cyberpunk on the literary map publishers consult before setting out on any financial journey was William Gibson's *Neuromancer* (1984), complete with all the elements listed above. Staying with Gibson a moment, we have *Count Zero* (1986) and *Mona Lisa Overdrive* (1988) (sort of sequels to *Neuromancer*), then much later *Virtual Light* (1993), *Idoru* (1996) (our favorite), and *All Tomorrow's Parties* (1999). There is also a book of short stories called *Burning Chrome* (1986), which includes "Johnny Mnemonic" (made into an absolutely terrible film) and "New Rose Hotel" (also made into an absolutely terrible film).

The politics, if you will, of cyberpunk were put forth by Bruce Sterling and others in Sterling's newsletter *Cheap Truth*, of the same time period as *Neuromancer*, which hyped the members of this movement (not yet called cyberpunk) and railed against mainstream sf. Sterling has also contributed to cyberpunk in other ways, not the least of which is *Mirrorshades*, a collection of "cyberpunk" stories that, oddly, contains some very non-cyberpunk stories as well as some definitively cyberpunk ones. (This may not be so odd given Sterling's claims noted above.)

Continuing with books, Pat Cadigan's *Mindplayers* (1987) was well received, and her next two novels (*Synners* [1991] and *Fools* [1992]) each won the Arthur C. Clarke award, making her the only author to have won the award twice. Neil Stephenson's *Snow Crash* (1992) is also highly acclaimed, and Michael Swanwick's *Vacuum Flowers* (1987) is good as well.

Hmmm. Already, if you're looking at the pub-lication dates of the books we've mentioned, it would be hard to say the genre died at some point, wouldn't it?

Perhaps now would be a good time to delve into the history of the genre (before giving you this tremendous list of works, both literary and film, leaving you to wonder how anyone could ever have declared cyberpunk dead ... we'll leave that ultimate sense of wonder for later). For much of the historical information we are indebted to the alt.cyberpunk FAQ, although really most sources agree on the early history of cyberpunk ... it's just later that everyone scatters for their own pet theories (including, we must admit, ourselves).

In the Beginning ...
... was the word. No, really ... the word "cyberpunk" was first the name of a short story by Bruce Bethke (available for free at www.infinityplus.co.uk/stories/cpunk.htm). This story was submitted to *Isaac Asimov's Science Fiction Magazine* in 1980, around the time Gardner Dozois, who was the first person to popularize the term, may have been doing first readings. Dozois was also the editor of *1983 Year's Best SF*, the year Bethke's story was published in Amazing, so it seems likely, in a circumstantial way, that Bethke coined it, and Dozois popularized it.

The Power and the Glory
When Gibson's *Neuromancer* came along, the genre was well and truly born. After all, it is a collective hallucination, in some ways, that genres exist at all; genre is merely a way of categorizing and organizing works, and for better or worse publishers (and movie moguls) have a significant say in creating new ones. And when *Neuromancer* became a best-seller, when it won the Hugo, Nebula, P. K. Dick, Seiun, and Ditmar awards, something no other SF work has done, publishers gathered around "cyberpunk" like stray cats after a nice fresh bit of haddock. It was in their interest to promote this new genre, the latest new thing, and as long as it remained profitable to do so, they continued to hype cyberpunk as a genre.

This is not to say that cyberpunk is entirely the creation of publishing houses, and that really these books and films and stories are just sf, plain and simple. It is a useful categorization, a useful distinction to separate cyberpunk from the rest of science fiction; it is a distinct type, and a distinct sort of story and worldview. But the publishers' involvement in genre-making is extremely important to note, because it plays a large role in the perceived "death" of the genre—to wax Monty Python-esque, when cyberpunk became a has-been haddock, when

the cats had torn it to shreds and thought that there was not so much to profit from, for the moment, they turned away, looking for the next Big Thing. That's the way publishing works. Heck, that's the way almost everything in US culture works.

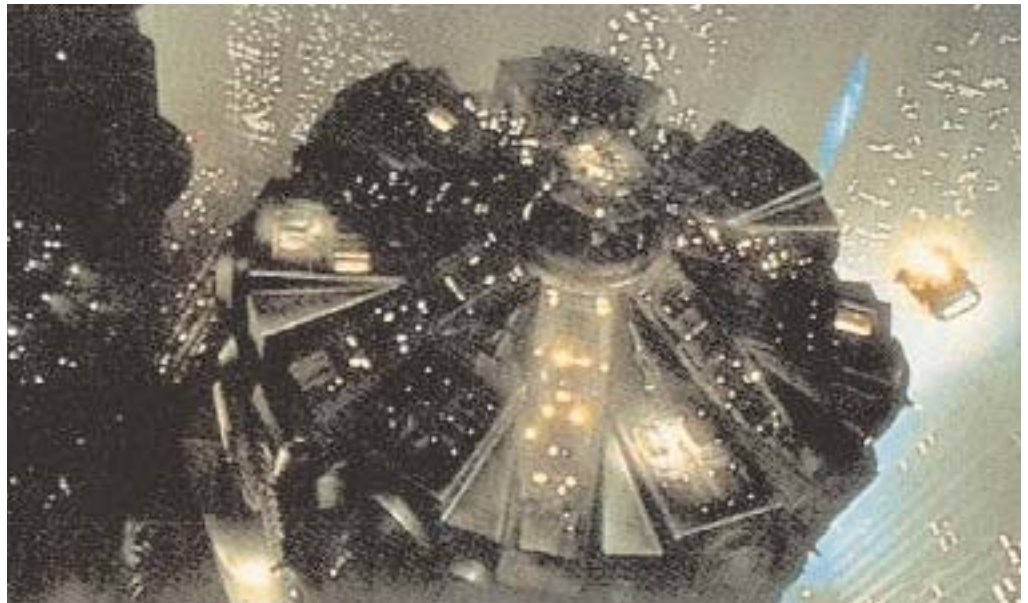But there was more. Perhaps using different media, but certainly more.

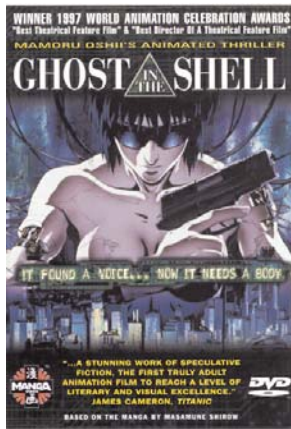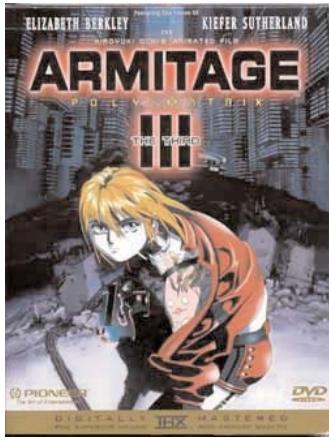### What Are These Here Moving Pictures?

Cyberpunk in film really must begin before the genre was named ... so in this sense we must revise our origin story. *Blade Runner* (1982) is universally acclaimed as a cyberpunk film; it is complete with gritty city, bounty-hunter protagonist, AIs that are "more human than human," large dominating corporations (well, one, anyway), and noirish overtones (especially in the original theatrical release, which included Harrison Ford's voice-over). However, at the time of its release it was not called cyberpunk, so it is not officially the beginning of the genre.

Yeah, right.

But soon after *Neuromancer* had reached heights of acclaim, we saw a spate of films and TV series of a cyberpunk turn of mind. The best of these survive to this day in reruns or on cable TV: *Max Headroom* (1985), for instance. Actually, some of the worst survive as well, given cable and satellite television's endless appetite: *Lawnmower Man* (1992), as an example, was not exactly an award-winning effort. And then, strangely (if you subscribe to the idea that cyberpunk died in the late eighties), there is more and more cyberpunk in the visual arts. *Strange Days* (1995) and *Johnny*

PICTURED: *(this page)* Covers for the DVD versions of *Armitage III* and *Ghost in the Shell*, image from promotional material for *Serial Experiments: Lain*; *(opposite page)* detail from poster for the film B*lade Runner*

Mnemonic (1995) both did fairly well in theatres (some would say despite themselves, although we liked *Strange Days … Johnny Mnemonic* was, as mentioned earlier, awful), and both still make the rounds of cable television. Films like *Ghost in the Shell*, which did extremely well in Japan, its country of origin, and very well even in the US, for an animated non-Disney non-Dreamworks film (and did all the more remarkably well given that US audiences have been trained to see anything animated as "something for kids"), brought cyberpunk back into public view, and this continued with everything from TV series like *Reboot* (1994-2001), which really is an animated program aimed at kids (well, and adults), and *Serial Experiments: Lain* (1998) (definitely NOT aimed at kids) to films including, ultimately, *The Matrix*, which not only kept cyberpunk in the public view but thrust it into the very forefront of the public imagination, if there is such a thing.

Thus it would seem to us, with very little room for argument, that cyberpunk is certainly still a viable genre. *The Matrix* came out only four years ago and was one of the most successful films of the year. Two more films in the series are due out in 2003; if these are also successful they will create a market (or a perception that a market exists) for live-action cyberpunk in the US. *Ghost in the Shell* has spawned both a television series (*Ghost in the Shell: Stand Alone Complex*), already running on Japanese TV and due out in the US sometime soon, and a second *Ghost in the Shell* film (*Innocence*) that is in production. And Mamoru Oshii, director of the *Ghost in the Shell* films, recently completed a live action film called *Avalon*, which came out in 2001. Regardless of the success of these, the Japanese enthusiasm for things cyberpunk will continue unabated, and thus the followers of anime and manga in other

Swanwick, Michael
    Vacuum Flowers (1987)
Williams, Walter Jon
    Hardwired (1986)
    Voice of the Whirlwind (1987)

Films/TV
Armitage III (1994)
Avalon (2001)
Blade Runner (1982)
Bubblegum Crisis (1987) (and Bubblegum Crash [1991], Bubblegum Crisis 2040 [1998])
Ghost in the Shell (1995) (and GitS: Stand Alone Complex [2002-2003], Innocence: Ghost in the Shell [2004])
The Matrix (1999) (and The Matrix: Reloaded [2003], The Matrix: Evolutions [2003])
Max Headroom (1985)
Reboot (1994-2001; a sort of "cyberpunk for kids")
Serial Experiments: Lain (1998)
Strange Days (1995)

Works About Cyberpunk
Alt.cyberpunk (newsgroup)
Cyberpunk by Andrew M. Butler (2000)
The Cyberpunk Project (www.project.cyberpunk.ru)

What the Manga?
Books and film aren't the only places to get your fair helping of cyberpunk—manga (Japanese graphic novels, or comics, if you wish) are another very influential direction to follow. You might especially wish to follow the works of Masamune Shirow, who brought us *Ghost in the Shell* (the manga preceded the film) and, more recently (in fact, just beginning to be released in the US), *ManMachine Interface*.
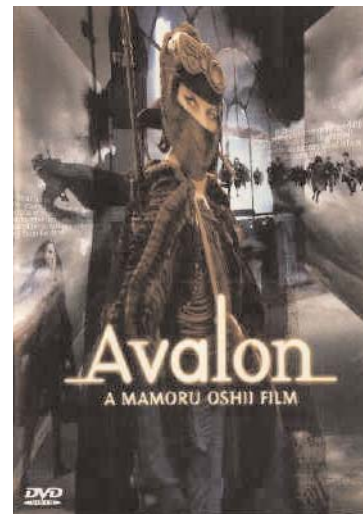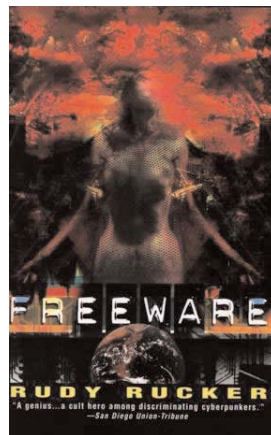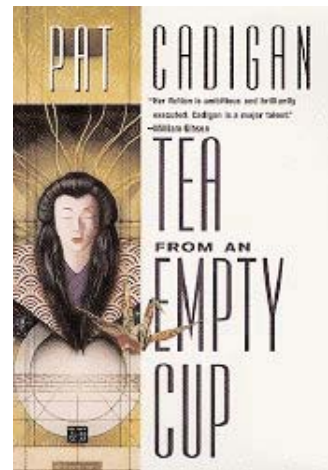
parts of the world will also continue to see cyberpunk material.

Let It Not Be Forgotten

Just to add more fuel to our discussion (argument? But how can it be an argument when we have so soundly defeated any supposed opposition?), cyberpunk is not dead as a written genre, either. Many cyberpunk novels and short stories came out in the 1990s and still do today. As mentioned earlier, Gibson's *Virtual Light*, *Idoru*, and *All Tomorrow's Parties* came out all across that decade. Pat Cadigan's *Tea from an Empty Cup* came out in 1998, Justina Robson's *Silver Screen* in 1999, and Rudy Rucker's *Realware* in 2000. These are not being hailed as great successes a la *Neuromancer*, but then, how many things are? These books are still reaching an audience and certainly still have a place on the shelves, virtual or otherwise, of bookstores.

In Conclusion, the Future Holds ...

What, now we're supposed to go and predict the future of cyberpunk? The future of any genre depends on having visionaries who not only create but create in new and productive ways, who move the genre or, indeed, all of literature forward, however slightly, with each page, with each scene. Rather than write another *Matrix*, move your texts, your philosophies in different ways. If your philosophy is the same as that put forth in existing works, find new ways to show it to your audience; perhaps they'll understand and be moved by your presentation, whereas they weren't by those who came before you. If your aim is

PICTURED: Detail frfom DVD cover for *The Matrix;* covers for Pat Cadigan's *Tea from an Empty Cup, Freeware* by Rudy Rucker; DVD cover for *Avalon*

simply to entertain, then find a way to do it that hasn't been tiresomely re-used by your forebears. As cyberpunk is a relatively young genre, writers in it have the advantage of not treading where thousands have already worn the road into a deep chasm; and as cyberpunk is writing about the vast and infinite possibilities of the future, there is no limit to what you may write, and write convincingly and well. Whether your chosen medium be words or graphic narrative or film, you have the opportunity to change the world.