

## **CYBERCHRISTS, NEUROMANTICS, AND VIRTUAL MORALITY: CYBERPUNK AND THE NEW MYTH**

*I beat my machine, it's a part of me, it's inside of me.  
I'm stuck in this dream, it's changing me, I am becoming.  
The me that you know had some second thoughts,  
he's covered with scabs, he is broken and sore.  
The me that you know doesn't come around much,  
that part of me isn't here anymore.  
All pain disappears, it's the nature of my circuitry  
drowns out all I hear, there's no escape from this, my new consciousness.  
The me that you know used to have feelings,  
but the blood has stopped pumping and he's left to decay.  
The me that you know is now made up of wires,  
and even when I'm right with you I'm so far away...  
(Reznor, Trent . nine inch nails, "the becoming")*

In 1984, William Gibson's cyberpunk novel Neuromancer became the first novel to win the "Triple Crown" of science fiction literature, capturing the Nebula, Hugo, and Phillip K. Dick awards. Although there were other "cyberpunk" short stories and novels written before Neuromancer was published, 1984 marks the point at which the genre came into its own, and was finally recognized as an entity unto itself. Cyberpunk literature's earliest days, however, were not filled with all praise and glory. From the start, cyberpunk was ridiculed and denounced by many critics who felt that the genre as a whole was little more than a depressing, hopeless view of a godless, technological near-future world. Some critics refused to accept the genre as serious at all, leading Bruce Sterling and others on a self-proclaimed jihad to stand up for the genre they called their own. Quoted in Mondo 2000: A User's Guide to the New Edge, Sterling explains quite openly how many critics felt that cyberpunk writers "did this to be cute". He assures us this is not so, insisting that "[t]hey're wrong, very severely wrong. We meant it" (Rucker 68). Regardless of the opinions of the cyberpunk writers themselves, some critics alleged that cyberpunk literature would mean the end of science-fiction, while others held that the genre would quickly grow unpopular and fade away entirely, leaving science-fiction unaffected.

Their allegations were not entirely without justification, particularly when one looks at the history of literature. In his book Anatomy of Criticism, Northrop Frye alleges that literature has progressed throughout history from stories about the gods and heroes down to the modern anti-hero. It appeared to critics as if cyberpunk literature was mired in the hopeless, depressing world which Friedrich Nietzsche put us in when he declared the death of God. After all, in a world without God, heaven, or morality, can there truly be hope? The critics didn't think so.

I believe there can be.

I intend to demonstrate that cyberpunk novels carry with them something more than nihilism and hopelessness; beyond the black shadows of the city streets and alleyways, there lies a chrome lining, a hope for a better life, a sort of transcendence. Whether that transcendence is accomplished through cybernetic prosthetics, through an escape to an off-planet life, or through a journey into the virtual world of cyberspace, cyberpunk characters do not limit themselves to hopelessness.

Cyberpunk novels do not represent the end of literature. They represent a new beginning, and offer their characters and readers a chance at transcending the limitations of human life. Beyond even the anti-hero, these characters, though they may be lying in the gutters, are definitely reaching for the stars. Faced with the hell that is the future, they reach for heaven, thereby completing the cycle that Northrop Frye suggests to us in Anatomy of Criticism when he declares that "irony [anti-heroic literature] moves steadily towards myth" (42). Cyberpunk strives to create new gods, new divinity, and new myths, and through those new myths, cyberpunk characters are able to escape their ironic, pitiful existences to achieve transcendence and hope.

## DEFINING CYBERPUNK

As cyberpunk "has little patience with borders" (Sterling xiv) and is often misunderstood by critics, it is necessary to first define the origins and boundaries of the genre. To understand exactly what the genre is about, and how it is different from other science fiction, one must look at the word cyberpunk itself. The term, in and of itself, is a fusion of two other words, and this fusion is the key to understanding cyberpunk.

The second half, "punk" is the more obvious of the two terms, and the easier to define. A "punk" is a troublemaker, an "antisocial rebel or hoodlum" (Elmer-Dewitt 59) commonly associated with the loud hard-core rock music that groups such as the Sex Pistols made popular in the 1970's and early 1980's. In terms of literature and social movements, "punk" refers to a "counterculture" and a sort of "street-level anarchy" (Sterling xii), and tends to focus more on attitude and outlook than on music and criminal activity (although both of these are present in many, if not all, cyberpunk works). Punk brings with it the outfit as well as the outlook—punks and cyberpunks alike share the black leather jackets, the affinity for black clothing, and the love of mirrored chrome sunglasses, a "Movement totem since the early days" (Sterling xi).

Defining the term "cyber" is much more difficult. Though the term as used in the word "cyberpunk" is commonly assumed to refer to technology, the actual meaning of the word differs. "Cyber," as used in "cyberpunk," can be traced back to Norbert Wiener, a physicist and mathematician at M.I.T. who became interested in information theory while working on antiaircraft guns for World War II. Wiener, as Time's article on cyberpunk explains, realized that the key to his system, or any system, was a feedback loop that "gives a controller information on the results of its actions" (Elmer-Dewitt 59). In the early 1950's Wiener began intensive studies of control systems, and dubbed the study "cybernetics," from κυβερνέτης, the Greek word for "Steersman". The development of computer technology at this time soon began to be incorporated into Wiener's studies. Almost inevitably, as computers were adapted for use in many control systems throughout the 1960's and 70's, the term that helped create the computer became associated with it.

"Cybernetics" became confused with "computers", and before long, the prefix "cyber" was attached to other ideas. "Cyborgs" (half-men, half-machines), for example, began to appear in comic books and movies in the late 1970's and early 80's (the film Terminator, released in 1984, gave Arnold Schwarzenegger the lead role of a killer cyborg). The publication of Neuromancer at that time, with its mingling of technological and human components, led to a desire among critics to name this new genre of science fiction. The term "cyberpunk" was coined at this time.

The term itself seemingly fits the genre well, and it comes as a shock to many to find that the name was originally meant as an insult. When writers such as Gibson, Shirley, and Sterling were first exploring new areas of science-fiction, critics were quick to dismiss their work as unconventional, unpolished trash at best, and "cyberpunk" was meant to convey a lowlife rebel writer who dabbled with talk about computer technology. It is rumored that Gardner Dozois, once editor for Isaac Asimov's Science-Fiction Magazine, coined the then insulting term in 1982 or 83, borrowing the title of a Bruce Bethke short story named "Cyberpunks" (Schneider). True or not, within two years after critics used the term as an insult (the exact date is not known), Gibson's Neuromancer had already been labeled "cyberpunk," and with the success of his award-winning novel came the success of the movement in general.

It is this idea of a "Cyberpunk Movement" which spurs both my interest and research into the topic as well as a great deal of controversy among critics and writers alike. Bruce Sterling acknowledged that the label has stuck, but admits that the "'typical cyberpunk writer' does not exist" (Sterling ix). For a supposedly organized movement, there seems to be no definitive organization among cyberpunk writers; even from the start, "cyberpunk writers began producing works that defy easy categorization" (McCaffery 13). Seeing echoes of cyberpunk themes in earlier works of fiction, some critics consider Thomas Pynchon and Edgar Rice Burroughs to be cyberpunk writers, even though they wrote well before the term was coined. Though this is not in itself unusual or unique (many writers are considered "ahead of their time"), there are obviously some difficulties in defining the genre. Cyberpunk means many things to many people.

Critics and the media have recently made the term "cyberpunk" into a media buzzword, to the point where some critics are haughty enough to tell renowned cyberpunk writers that they are not "really cyberpunks." Asked what she thought of the label, Pat Cadigan had this to say:

I won't be dictated to by some critic who has decided s/he knows what cyberpunk is all about. It's not the idea of a label so much as the stereotype. Some critics have loftily informed me that I'm not in the cyberpunk club because my work doesn't conform... I avoid and ignore stereotypes. (Interview)

Such disputes over exactly what the term means, and what it includes, are what make defining the limits of cyberpunk difficult. To apply a specific, universal definition to a type of literature is to limit the genre far too much; simply including every piece of literature that happens to have a specific theme is no more helpful. There are, however, several factors that appear to be recurrent throughout cyberpunk literature written to this point. A study of these apparent common factors reveals a lot about cyberpunk, and will help define a place for the genre in the scheme of all literature. With this in mind, I will, with the same hesitation and unease that Bruce Sterling did in his introduction to Mirrorshades, attempt to make "statements about cyberpunk and to establish its identifying traits" because, as Sterling continues, "it's a valid source of insight" (ix). With the notion that cyberpunk's boundaries are certainly not fixed, and a basic idea of the origins of the genre and its label, we can now step boldly into the world of the cyberpunk.

**DESCENT INTO HELL: THE CYBERPUNK WORLD**

What exactly does a typical cyberpunk setting look like? Exactly why are the characters so grim and immoral? Perhaps this description from the Cyberpunk 2.0.2.0 game will give some insight into the setting of the cyberpunk character:

The Cyberpunk environment is almost exclusively urban. Its landscape is a maze of towering skyscrapers, burned out ruins, dingy tenements and dangerous alleyways...Taxis won't stop in the combat zones. There are firefights at the street corner as the local gangs slug it out...And it always rains...The stars never come out. The sun never shines. There are no singing birds, no laughing children...The ozone layer decayed, the greenhouse effect took over, the sky is full of hydrocarbons and the ocean full of sludge. (Moss 176)

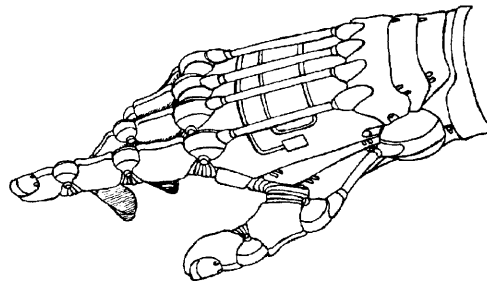
Though the cyberpunk world is dark, grim, and depressing, the actual setting of a cyberpunk novel varies greatly in time and place. Cyberpunk stories have been urban; set in the late 1990's/early 2000's (Virtual Light); set hundreds of years in the future ("Petra"); or set in a post-apocalyptic wasteland (Hardwired). Because of this wide variety, we cannot tie these novels together by place or time. Even the attitude of cyberpunk novels is a bit unstable—at one point, it appeared that all cyberpunk novels were dark and depressing, full of death and despair. There are cases where this does not hold, however—Gibson's recent novel, Virtual Light, ends with a somewhat happy ending, and Pat Cadigan attests to the fact that she thinks "cyberpunk stories can have happy endings" (Interview). The world of the cyberpunk is not, thus, cut and dried, and even the moral of the story changes, depending on the author. Setting, though depressing and grim, is not the dominant unifying factor.

In his introduction to Mirrorshades, Bruce Sterling sets forth a manifesto that suggests two motifs prevalent in cyberpunk novels, motifs that apparently link most, if not all, cyberpunk fiction.

For Sterling, cyberpunk is "An unholy alliance of the technical world and the world of organized dissent" (xii). His statement suggests the two topics that he then discusses very briefly, technology and punk underculture, motifs that have been present in every cyberpunk novel or short story I've yet encountered. As I will suggest a bit later, these two motifs are especially important to "early cyberpunk". Although I realize that the genre has only been around for eleven or twelve years, it is already possible to draw a distinction between early and late cyberpunk. As any literary genre evolves, so does cyberpunk.

**TECHNOLOGY: METAL IS BETTER THAN MEAT**

Technology is perhaps the key aspect of the genre, for without any science in the fiction, cyberpunk stories lack power; they become stories about helpless people trapped in a depressing society. It is the technological aspect of the genre that gives the punks and outcasts of cyberpunk fiction their power, often in very physical ways. One common sight in cyberpunk literature and film is the cybernetic limb, be it an arm, hand, or leg. Often, cyberpunk authors extrapolate from current technological advances in prosthetics in developing "new" technologies. For example, the Myoelectric Institute of Texas has developed some extremely advanced prosthetic plastic and metal arms, able to crush objects with seemingly inhuman strength. Cyberpunk authors sometimes grant these "enhancements" to their characters, even the minor ones. In Gibson's Neuromancer, for instance, we are introduced early in the opening scene of the novel to a bartender with a cybernetic arm, "a Russian military prosthesis, a seven-function force-feedback manipulator, cased in grubby pink plastic" (4). In this case, as in others, cybernetics are prevalent even among minor characters; neither the bartender nor his cybernetic arm are mentioned again in the novel.



*A cybernetic hand, common in CP fiction*

Sometimes the cybernetic enhancements are within one's limbs, making them even more deadly and devious. The Cyberpunk 2.0.2.0 game has "catalogues" that sell things such as rocket launchers, laser pointers, detachable fingertips, and finger blades ranging from surgical and carpentry tools to the tools of a different trade. Take, for example, the character of Molly Millions, who appears throughout Gibson's Sprawl trilogy under different guises, adopting different names



in each book. An acknowledged assassin and mercenary, the cybernetic tools that Molly uses in Neuromancer are for killing:

"...My name's Molly...nobody wants to hurt you."

"That's good."

"Cept I do hurt people sometimes, Case. I guess it's just the way I'm wired..."

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. (25)

Although William Gibson may have introduced these ideas to the genre, they are not limited to his writings alone. Indeed, it seems that as the genre develops, writers seek new ways to incorporate technology into the human body, and these developments seem to get stranger, more powerful, and even more devious. They become almost one with the body they are attached to, metal bonding with flesh, becoming "visceral" (Sterling xiii). Guns and knives get smaller, eventually fusing with the hand and arm; contact lenses become one with the eyes, and eventually replace them; portable computers and stereo walkmans become fused with their users.

In Walter Jon Williams' Hardwired, for instance, one of the main characters lacks razor sharp fingers, but has a far more deadly tool. This "cybersnake" is a half-meter long robotic snake, hiding deep inside her chest, lashing out when she needs to assassinate someone:

Her tongue retracts into Weasel's implastic housing, and the cybersnake's head closes over it. She rolls Danica entirely under her...feeling the flutter of the girl's tongue, and then Weasel strikes, telescoping from its hiding place in Sarah's throat and chest...Sarah's fingers clamp on her wrists, and Princess gives a birth- strangled cry as Weasel's head forces its way down her throat. (37)

Other cybernetic enhancements take us very far away from what the Six Million Dollar Man once was—examples from various novels and stories, to list only a very few, include artificial eyes (one of Gibson's favorite ideas, appearing throughout his novels); cybernetically-enhanced hearing; adrenaline boosters; neural computer processors, built into one's own brain; video cameras linked to one's optical nerves; armor plating over the skin and underneath it; metal wings; etc. Such a list could seemingly go on forever—the point of this is that in all cyberpunk novels, technology is introduced and then fused with the characters in the story, eventually becoming one with them. Many of these characters embrace the changes, seeing them as enhancements to the human form. For these characters, "metal" (a cyberslang term for "cybernetics") is better than "meat," another slang term for the human body. In the end, the differences between man and machine are entirely lost, the line between flesh and chrome wiped entirely away.

That same indistinction is carried over into the virtual world of cyberspace, a world present in virtually (pun intended) all cyberpunk novels. The term, coined by Gibson in Neuromancer, was originally described as

A consensual hallucination experienced daily by billions of legitimate operators, in every nation... 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...transparent 3D chessboard extending to infinity. (51-2)

Although the term used to describe "cyberspace" varies, at times being called the "Matrix," the "Net," "Metaverse," "Cyberia," or even being compared to today's Internet, the appearance of the virtual landscape is always similar: a three-dimensional grid of neon lines marking distances and boundaries, with colored blocks and structures marking virtual "buildings" and domains. People who enter cyberspace normally do so by means of a link, essentially little more than an audio/video wire. One end is connected to a cyberdeck, a cross between a computer and a video game that

generates the images and allows the user to actually travel around in cyberspace. The other end is plugged into the person's head by means of an electronic link in that person's brain—often this is called a "Neural jack," and the process is called "jacking in" or "facing into the net".

The idea of actually plugging yourself into a computer is intriguing, and it is not entirely a work of science fiction and the imagination. Wearable computers, virtual reality video games, and widespread use of the Internet today are all leading to the beginnings of a very real "cyberspace". This blurring of the distinction between fiction and reality mirrors the same blurring we get in cyberpunk fiction, where often the physical world is made to seem as technical as the virtual world of cyberspace. The opening sentence of Gibson's *Neuromancer*, "The sky above the port was the color of television, tuned to a dead channel" (3) is oft-quoted for more than one reason. The main reason, it seems, is that the differences between the natural world and the technical world are constantly compared with each other in cyberpunk fiction. Expressing the natural world in technical terms "blurs the distinctions between the organic and the artificial" (Hollinger 205). It is this blurring of "real" and "virtual" which demonstrates the nature of technology in cyberpunk fiction.

**PUNK: HIGH-TECH AND LOW-LIFE**

The combination of technology and a punk underworld may seem strange, but one need only look at the younger generation around us to see what cyberpunk is about. Video games; virtual reality headsets; music on compact disks; computer-generated rock music: these all demonstrate the use of incredibly sophisticated technology for less-than-epic pursuits. In cyberpunk fiction, there are no more rocket ships traveling to foreign star systems; characters such as those in Gene Roddenbery's Star Trek, seeking out "new life and new civilizations", are not present in the cyberpunk world. Cyberpunk characters use technology to turn in towards the self, not outwards into space. There is no new civilization for the cyberpunk, merely the remnants of an old, decayed society gilded with technology. There is no new life out in space for the cyberpunk either; his life is full of pain and all-too human suffering, and his hope lies inward, towards the nerves, rather than out into space. This self-centeredness is rooted in punk ideals and punk music.



*Punk musicians exemplify the cyberpunk attitude.*

"Punk" defies definition by its very nature, seeking to escape the confines of society altogether. Rooted in the hard-edged, loud, discordant music of the late seventies and early eighties, punk music has always appealed to the "lowlifes": the people of the street; the outcasts; the

criminals; the computer hackers; the drug-addicts. Punks adopt a variety of looks as well as lifestyles: the black leather and mirrorshades commonly associated with early cyberpunk; the mohawk hairdo, often painted strange colors; long unkempt hair; multiple body-piercings and tattoos; etc. Punk has a lot more to do with attitude, however, than with what someone is called or what they wear.

Punks are by definition anarchists, desiring nothing more than to live without the rules imposed by society. In cyberpunk fiction, those "rules" are represented by the "machine," and while these cyberpunk characters strive to use machines and technology, they seek to destroy the "machine" that runs everyone's lives. This attitude is, perhaps, a bit ambivalent at first glance. The paradox is erased when one realizes the nature of the technologies used, and the ways in which they are used. Razor blades can hide under ones' fingers; surgically implanted prostheses can be used to kill with awesome force; metal snakes can leap from a character's throat: any technology can be used subversively.

Sterling tells us, quoting William Gibson, that "'the street finds its own use for things.' Rolling, irrepressible street graffiti from that classic industrial artifact, the spray can. The subversive potential of the home printer and the photocopier..." (Sterling xiv). No matter what the technology, the punk strives to use it for his or her own means, even if that involves misuse, crime, or disobeying authority. "A cyber-person is one who pilots his/her own life" (Leary 258), one who questions authority and does not merely submit to decisions made by others. Here one cannot help but be reminded of the opening scenes of Blade Runner, in which an urban scene is dominated by enormous blimps shining lights into people's homes, erasing any notion of privacy. The main characters in cyberpunk fiction are punks because they react against this intrusion. They represent freedom; good or bad, the characters all think for themselves, whether that leads to criminal activities or saving the world.

In Stephenson's Snow Crash, the main character does the latter, saving cyberspace and the entire world by destroying a deadly computer virus. Hiro Protagonist (an intentional pun) seizes the opportunity to promote his business by using the same deadly computer program, now inert:

The screens are blank at first, but finally the same image snaps into existence on all four of them at once...*"If this were a virus, you would be dead now. Fortunately, it's not. The Metaverse is a dangerous place; how's your security? Call Hiro Protagonist Security Associates for a free initial consultation."* (457)

Rather than walking off into a sunset as a selfless hero, Hiro acknowledges that he's saved everyone's lives, and then uses it as an opportunity for financial gain. This is the punk attitude at its finest. As the Cyberpunk 2.0.2.0 game tells us, in cyberpunk "The traditional concepts of good and evil are replaced by the values of expedience—you do what you have to to survive" (Moss 3).

In Walter Jon Williams' Hardwired, one of the main characters, Cowboy, seeks to destroy an "evil" corporation by flying his own plane into the side of one of theirs, destroying the company financially. This is not at all a selfless, heroic action, though it may seem to be at first glance:

But somewhere in Cowboy's mind there is a realization that this is the necessary and correct conclusion to his legend, to use himself and his matte-black body [his plane] as the last missile against the Orbital shuttle and win for himself a slice of immortality, a place in the mind of every panzerboy, every jock... (326)

One of the other pilots, a friend of Cowboy's, beats him to the punch, crashing into the jet before him and saving the day. Cowboy is not relieved or upset; rather, "[a]nger rises in his mind at the thought of his fate being stolen" (328). He may be out saving lives, but Cowboy's concern is still selfish. Unlike a more legendary "hero", such as Beowulf, Cowboy's selfish concern for his honor replaces concern for others. It may be somehow heroic to want to die in battle, becoming a legend, but Cowboy carries this belief to the point where the death of a friend brings not despair or sadness, but anger and jealousy. It is this turning inward that best demonstrates the punk attitude as present in cyberpunk fiction.

**BEYOND MORALITY**

The punk attitude and its relation to technology inevitably raise many important moral and philosophical questions. In earlier cyberpunk works, moral questions were usually ignored and left unanswered. Part of the reason for this is the fact that in cyberpunk fiction "advanced technology erases human morality" (Easterbrook 383). Cyberpunks, Easterbrook says, are "all characters with working class or underclass backgrounds, characters who exploit threshold technologies to escape from the dead-end despair of tenements and the mind-numbing boredom of television" (329).

In Hardwired, for instance, the main characters, Cowboy and Sarah, are criminals seeking to escape to a better life "off-planet". In order to achieve their goals, they must first amass a great amount of money. They accomplish this throughout the novel by assassination, bribery, and through the destruction of a large corporation and a shipment of vaccinations; by destroying the vaccinations, they effectively kill the millions of people who needed that drug. Their actions are never questioned in the novel, and they are not presented as evil. Their morality is ignored, perhaps left up to readers to decide; they are above right and wrong, and "beyond good and evil".

Another example of this lack of morality is in Gibson's Neuromancer. The main character, Case, is a computer hacker who specializes in computer crimes. He is hired by an unknown person to commit other crimes, and finally discovers that the person he works for is an AI (artificial intelligence). Paid for his crimes, he spends the money on "a new Ono-Sendai," a cyberspace deck (270). The purpose for the purchase is, undoubtedly, so he can continue his criminal activities in cyberspace on his own, and yet his actions go unquestioned by the narrator as well as his fellow companions.

Part of the reason for this noticeable lack of morality is that cyberpunk characters are traditionally seen as mired in a "godless" world, the world Nietzsche left them in when he declared that "God is dead." Throughout cyberpunk fiction, we see the notion that organized religion is fragmenting and becoming unimportant, leaving no organized morality. The religion that does remain is a twisted version of an earlier faith.

In Gibson's Virtual Light, the Christian faith remains, but it is broken into cults: "Aryan Nazarenes," for example, or a cult that believes that God speaks to them through television shows, and that "virtual reality's a medium of Satan, 'cause you don't watch enough tv after you start doing it" (312). Williams' Hardwired has "Ethical Nihilists" (150), who believe that you've only lived a moral life if you manage to die in a ball of flame, taking hundreds of others with you. Characters may call out "Jesus" or "Christ," but when they do it is only as an exclamation, not a prayer. There is no prayer in cyberpunk fiction because there is no real faith. Drawing from examples in "a society that has lost all connection to God" (Ostling 46), it is no wonder that cyberpunk fiction presents no God for its characters to worship. The few characters who do claim some faith are content to worship their televisions, it seems.



## CYBERCHRIST AND THE GOD IN THE MACHINE

This notion becomes more valid when one considers the possibility that the cyberpunk "creates for himself a new religion of a rational and technical order" (Ellul 324). In the absence of faith in a higher power, the characters in cyberpunk fiction tend to place their beliefs in the machines around them, deifying them. Even Norbert Wiener, in God and Golem, makes technology a god when he says to "render unto the computer the things which are the computer's" (73). Paraphrasing a passage from the bible (Matthew 22: 21), Wiener's statement replaces the word "God" with the word computer. Cyberpunk characters would, I feel, take this statement much more seriously than we might. For them, the computer is a new divinity of sorts.

I cannot help but be reminded of an anecdote, popular among self-proclaimed cyberpunks on the Internet, about a visit President Truman paid to a computer laboratory. Truman asks the computer if there is a God. After a few minutes of whirring and calculating, the computer spits out the answer—**Now There Is**. The suggestion, obviously, is that the computer itself is now God. Such a meeting might be entirely fictional. However, cyberpunk fiction takes this notion of faith in a machine and raises it to a far greater degree, to the point where machines and computers eventually become new divinities. The greatest of these "higher powers" are probably the AI's, or artificial intelligences. Constructed in the real world by scientists to test cognitive theories, AI's become something much more than mere tools in cyberpunk fiction. Any computer scientist will tell you that artificial intelligence of the sort seen in Star Trek, for instance, is decades away. To create an intelligent creature like Data, an android in that series, is impossible using current technology. Today's AI's are, to put it bluntly, dumb. The AI's of cyberpunk fiction, however, are quite intelligent.

Gibson's character Wintermute, for example, is an AI who goes far beyond the limits of a mere tool, being a "hive mind, decision maker, effecting change in the world outside..." (Neuromancer 269). This AI is able to transform itself at the end of Neuromancer and become

even more powerful, more godlike. Here, in the closing moments of Gibson's novel, Wintermute speaks to Case:

"I'm not Wintermute now...I'm the matrix, Case...Nowhere. Everywhere. I'm the sum total of the works, the whole show..."

"So what's the score? How are things different? You running the world now? You God?" (269-70)

Wintermute becomes one with all of cyberspace by joining with several other AI's in the system. Cyberspace becomes a virtual heaven, and this union becomes the cyberpunk version of godhood. What we are presented with, in essence, is a dual race for transcendence, for even "...as Case tries to transcend his human limits, so too the machine intelligences strive to pass beyond their material restrictions and develop human qualities of consciousness and personality" (Easterbrook 383). In the end, the machines go beyond that step, moving beyond the realm of consciousness into the realm of pure transcendence and union with the universe. In the concluding novel of his sprawl trilogy, Mona Lisa Overdrive, Gibson expands on his idea of the "god in the net" through a conversation between Mona and her computer:

"The mythform is usually encountered in one of two modes. One mode assumes that the cyberspace is inhabited, or perhaps visited, by entities whose characteristics correspond with the primary mythform of a 'hidden people'. The other involves assumptions of omniscience, omnipotence, and incomprehensibility on the part of the matrix itself."

"Then the matrix is God?" (107)

This relation between matrix and God descends to the "human" world as well. These AI's are commonly seen as using human agents to do their wills: Gibson's "legba," mythical figures

incarnated in the matrix, typically "ride" their human subjects, taking possession of this "priesthood" (Count Zero 78); Williams gives one of his AI's named Reno the ability to attack an enemy through a cyberspace deck and "write himself over" their minds (Hardwired 343); the lead character in The Lawnmower Man can even operate machinery and dial phones from cyberspace.

This last example is different from the others, but hardly unique; in the film, the main character, named Job, has his consciousness thrust into cyberspace. To begin with, however, he is merely human, and after being introduced to the world of cyberspace, he becomes addicted to it, and worships its power. The electronic world he is shown gives him powers he did not have in the "real" world, and he goes so far as to destroy his body and exist solely as an AI in the 'net. Bukatman suggests that "The disembodied fusion with the fields and arrays of electronic space [is a] manifestation of...transcendence" (354). Indeed, once there, Job dubs himself "Cyberchrist," declaring his godhood and transcendence over his human form.

Throughout cyberpunk fiction, we see characters engage in a cycle of worshipping technology, using that technology to attain some sort of divinity, and then desiring worship in some form. Walter Jon Williams' Hardwired provides a vivid example of such thinking:

The coming thing, Cowboy thinks. Live forever in a bodily incarnation of the eye-face [cyberspace], not limited to the speed of artificially enhanced neurotransmitters but approaching the speed of light, extending the limits of the interface, the universe. Brain contained in a perfect liquid-crystal analog. Nerves like the strings of a steel guitar. Heart a spinning turbopump. The Steel Cowboy, his body a screaming monochrome flicker, dispensing justice and righting wrongs. Who was that masked AI?...

To Cowboy, it sounds pretty good. (130)

To transcend the limits of his human body, Cowboy desires to become an AI, to achieve a sort of godhood and immortality. It is interesting that this line of thinking almost directly coincides with

the philosophy of Friedrich Nietzsche. Compare the following, taken from The Gay Science, with the previous quote from Hardwired:

God is dead. God remains dead. And we have killed him. How shall we, the murderers of all murderers, comfort ourselves?... Is not the greatness of this deed too great for us? Must not we ourselves become gods simply to seem worthy of it? There has never been a greater deed; and whoever will be born after us—for the sake of this deed he will be a part of a higher history than all history... (95-6)

With God dead in the cyberpunk world, some characters take it upon themselves to use technology as a means to achieve divinity for themselves. In some cases, as in *Cowboy's*, this is a more spiritual or mental godhood, achieved in electronic form in the "I-face", Hardwired's version of cyberspace. This "godhood" need not be achieved through cyberspace, however—in some cases, the union is quite physical. It always involves a union with man and machine, however, as in Russo's Destroying Angel:

Wings of shining feathers lifted and spread out behind him. He wore no clothes, and as far as Sookie could see he didn't need any. Both legs were metal, up to his waist, and there was nothing between them. Sexless. His body was a crisscross of metal and flesh...

"I am...Destroying Angel," he said. The wings flexed...

"This is the future...Man's future. The fusion of metal to flesh, flesh to metal. The organic with the inorganic. Man with Machine." (204)

Moving beyond the mere use of cybernetics to enhance the human body, this character and others in cyberpunk fiction use the enhancements as an opportunity to achieve a sort of godhood,

becoming "cyberchrists" or, in the case of the evil Destroying Angel, a sort of "silicon Satan," who sees himself as divine and righteous even as he commits base atrocities.

The idea of self-created divinities in cyberpunk fiction makes one wonder about the nature of this "godhood". Some characters, as in Destroying Angel, may actually consider themselves godlike—characters who use cybernetics often see themselves as superhuman, transcending the human form. More recent cyberpunk works take this quest for godhood to a greater degree; they often try to achieve actual divinity through the use of this technology, complete with worshippers (as seen in The Lawnmower Man). Filled with electronic gods, cyberspace becomes a virtual "heaven," a world of organized lines and lights where the gods, the AI's, dwell in their virtual palaces. In Gibson's Count Zero, for example, a character known as "the Wig" had

...become convinced that God lived in cyberspace, or perhaps that cyberspace was God, or some new manifestation of the same...To the man's credit, the Finn said, he never actually claimed to have met God, although he did maintain that he had on several occasions sensed His presence moving upon the face of the grid. (122)

"The Wig," a minor character, is but one of the people who believes that cyberspace is a path towards heaven. The Wig even decides that he must "get up the gravity well, [because] God's up there" (122). Though the Wig is assumed to be crazy, he obviously isn't the only one of Gibson's characters to have thought of cyberspace as heaven, and of AI's as gods, as I've shown earlier.

If we accept that cyberspace is an approximation of heaven, then where exactly are the cyberpunk characters standing as they reach for heaven? The Wig tells us that God is "everywhere but there's too much static down here, it obscures his face" (122); God is distant. If God is in heaven above, it should not surprise us to find the cyberpunk characters in hell. The real world, as I've shown earlier, is a very real hell, full of degradation, sin, and crime. This dichotomy between the physical world of hell and the heavenly world of cyberspace is present throughout cyberpunk fiction; cyberpunk characters all desire entry into cyberspace, or an escape off-planet, out of a

hellish, fiery landscape. Trapped in a physical hell, is it any wonder that a cyberpunk character should try to escape from hell, or to at least make his condition more tolerable? It is easy to say that a world is a hellish place, or that "war is hell," but such things are usually meant to be taken figuratively. In cyberpunk fiction, I feel that the word "hell" is a quite literal concept, when one views it from the proper perspective. Consider the words of Satan in Milton's Paradise Lost:

The mind is its own place, and in itself  
Can make a Heav'n of Hell, a Hell of Heav'n.  
What matter where, if I be still the same...  
To reign is worth ambition though in Hell:  
Better to reign in Hell, than serve in Heav'n. (PL I:254-263)

This statement is, of course, paradoxical: Satan would "reign in hell", but that hell is in his "mind"; does he really rule anything? For Satan, perhaps not; Milton didn't know about cyberspace, after all. Is not the cyberspace of science fiction a way of making a place in the mind, a way of creating a virtual heaven in the wake of a very real hell? Is it not better to be more powerful in the cyberpunk world, where one can be a leader, rather than to serve useless gods and corporations? Both ideas are present in cyberpunk fiction, and both can exist without paradox, since the cyberpunk world has both a physical hell and a virtual cyberspace heaven. Cyberpunks can create a heaven in their own minds while also living in the hell that is the real world, thus echoing Satan's words in each of their actions (though they may not even realize it). Cyberpunks can become gods of cyberspace in a godless world, reigning over their hells. They use cybernetics to become more physically powerful, achieving a superhuman status that aids them in their reign. They construct their own artificial "heav'n" in cyberspace, often compared to a "parallel myth world" (McHale 156). Given a nihilistic world populated with lowlives, and bereft of both morals and gods, cyberpunk characters strive to create something new for themselves rather than settling for hopelessness and godlessness.

## CYBERPUNK AND FRYE'S THEORY OF LITERATURE

Exactly what is it that the characters in cyberpunk literature create? In order to propose what might now be happening, we must look at the history of literature itself to see what has been done. One of the most definitive ways for looking at the progression of literary types through history is the model set forth by Northrop Frye in Anatomy of Criticism. One focus of Frye's theory is the presence and movement away from myth in various types of literature. Frye looks at the major character (usually, but not always the "hero") in these various types of literary categories, naming them as he goes along. The character "types" are then described according to their varying degrees of power and capability. Since myth is what we are seeking out in cyberpunk, we should see exactly what sort of a myth, and what sort of a character, we are dealing with in cyberpunk literature.

What if we were to discover that according to Frye's theories, a cyberpunk protagonist is an "anti-hero," and that the mythology we see in cyberpunk literature is a part of the "ironic" phase? If this were the case, then cyberpunk would represent little more than isolation and despair in a world of dead gods; this is precisely what many critics have said, and precisely what I disagree with. To prove that cyberpunk leads to a "new myth," one must first show exactly what cyberpunk is not. The framework of literature that Frye lays out in Anatomy of Criticism will demonstrate this very explicitly.

Before dividing literature into categories, Frye first differentiates between comedic and tragic fictional types. This differentiation is key to placing cyberpunk fiction in the scheme of things. The tragic type for Frye represents a sort of literature where "the hero becomes isolated from his society" (35), as opposed to the comedic type, where the hero is incorporated into a society. Derived from Aristotle's Poetics (to which all modern definitions of "tragedy" are inevitably compared), this is not a universally accepted definition of tragedy. Some define tragedy in terms of "suffering or death," and speak of a "tragic flaw" or "hubris" on the part of the major character (McArthur 1049). Still others focus on the "sense that human beings are inevitably

doomed" (Holman 505), and leave the rest of the definition very open-ended. I believe we can accept that death, pride, suffering, and the threat of doom all lead to an isolation, of one sort or another, from other human beings. This being the case, all of these definitions point to isolation, a central idea in tragedy and in cyberpunk literature.



Frye's differentiates between "Comedy" and "Tragedy"; cyberpunk is tragedy.

Frye's definition of tragedy works, for it fits the cyberpunk world well. Most cyberpunk fiction is not "comedic"; that is, it does not deal with characters that are incorporated into society. It is true in some more recent cyberpunk fiction that there is some sort of a hint at communion of this sort, particularly in Gibson's Virtual Light and Stephenson's Snow Crash. For the most part, however, cyberpunk fiction deals, as stated before, with one or more marginalized, underclass characters (the punks) that either shun or are shunned by society at large. This movement away from society places the majority of cyberpunk fiction in the realm of the tragedy.

Within tragedy, Frye believes that literature has developed, over time, through a number of various stages. In order that we might place cyberpunk fiction into one of these stages, we must look at each in turn. With that said, let us look at the first of Frye's stages—the divine.



## STAGE I: MYTH

Tragic myths, according to Frye, are "Dionysiac...stories of dying gods" (36). Stories of the Norse Gotterdammerung, or of the death of Greek figures such as Orpheus or Hercules, are examples of such literature. The divine hero, according to Frye, is "superior in kind both to other men and the environment of other men" (33). Such a "hero" is more than a man; he is an actual god or a demi-god, as in the case of Hercules. These characters possess powers and abilities far beyond the range of normal men. Christ's healing powers and resurrection; Hercules' strength; Zeus' thunder bolts; Ares' wrath and power: these demonstrate superiority to the normal world and to normal men. It is no wonder that these stories would be the stuff of myth and religion.

But is cyberpunk to be considered purely mythical? Certainly, there are those who call themselves gods and "Cyberchrists". There are even those who possess the strength of Hercules, as in the massive cyborg who can even rip doors off hinges or "toss a car out of the way" (Moss 82). What differentiates cyberpunks from Frye's definition of "divine" is the fact that for all of their claimed godhood and power, the cyberpunk character is still human in some form, at some point in the story. Gibson's Molly, with her razor-fingernails and artificially quickened nerves, suffers broken bones and partial blindness at the end of Neuromancer. Case, in the same novel, may be zooming around cyberspace like a god through the heavens, but when all is said and done he must still buy himself a new pancreas and liver (270), unable to escape his humanity. In the few cases where an AI acts as an impersonal, godlike being (some examples earlier in this essay come to mind), the AI is not acting as a major character. In these cases, I feel that the impersonality of the AI is merely the result of a character not being "fleshed-out" enough. Often, even these artificial intelligences are trying to act like a human, as in the case of Neuromancer presenting himself to Case as a boy, wearing "ragged, colorless shorts, limbs too thin" (Gibson Neuromancer 243). As we are concerned chiefly with the main characters, who are thoroughly developed, we can safely eliminate the term "divine" as applied to cyberpunk characters. For all their power, they are, after all, "resolutely human" (Sponsler 637).

**STAGE 2: ROMANCE LITERATURE**

Cyberpunk characters, therefore, are human, even though they are superior in some ways to other humans in the story. This would seem to fit the definition of the hero of "romance," which Frye defines as a person who is "superior in degree to other men and to his environment," and who "moves in a world in which the ordinary laws of nature are slightly suspended" (33). Frye gives Beowulf as an example of such a hero; in this epic story, Beowulf swims miles below a lake, slays dragons and monsters, and possesses superhuman strength, marking himself as superior to the others in the story. Cyberpunk characters, too, are markedly superior to others around them.

Indeed, if cyberpunk characters are superior to other men, they need only conquer the environment to act as a romantic hero, according to Frye's definition. The modern-day cities and sprawling malls and factories demonstrate the subjugation of the environment that cyberpunks actively participate in, and cyberspace not only conquers the environment, but transcends it. In a virtual paradise world of computers, the "natural laws" are, indeed, suspended. A character can zoom across the earth like a beam of light, or can even be hacked to pieces, as in Stephenson's Snow Crash, with "no flesh, blood, or organs...visible...[n]othing more than a thin shell of epidermis" (102). In cyberspace, the laws of nature are truly suspended, and so one would suspect that a cyberpunk character might indeed be Frye's sort of romantic hero.

Such a theory is not entirely without its supporters. Cyberpunk characters have been compared to the "wandering adventurer-heroes" of romance (McHale 153), and Gibson's novels are said to have their deepest roots in "late eighteenth and nineteenth century Romanticism," as his heroes "venture anew into the Romantic heartland" (Glazer 156). Themes of transcendence, particularly in Gibson's novels, have been said to point "back to the romantic trappings of [science fiction]" (Hollinger 206). There is, evidently, something of romance in cyberpunk fiction. Cyberpunk characters are not, however, romantic heroes of any sort.

A cyberpunk character is superior in kind to other men, as well as in degree. This is different from the romantic hero, as Frye sees it. To be superior in degree, one must possess

abilities or rank which are greater than normal men. Case's ability to commit crimes in cyberspace is certainly superiority in degree; not all human characters in *Neuromancer* have this ability, giving Case an edge. Superiority in kind is present as well, as I said—consider Molly's razor fingernails in *Neuromancer*. By augmenting the human body, the cyberpunk hero becomes superior in **kind** as well as degree, and thus differentiates him/herself from the romantic hero. Case, since he achieves a certain state of transcendence in cyberspace, either approaches or reaches a different state of being. Does he achieve godhood? I don't believe he does, though he may come rather close. Case is, after all, a human being in the real world. He does not have any cybernetic augmentations like many other cyberpunk characters, and neither do Hiro in *Snow Crash*, or YT in *Virtual Light*, or Cassie in *Clipjoint*, though all of them do rely heavily on technology. Even though the cyberpunk character is usually superior in kind, the key to differentiating cyberpunk literature from romanticism must be found elsewhere. That key lies in the setting.

The romantic hero moves, as Frye says, in a world where the laws of nature are suspended. Frye suggests a pastoral type of setting, naming the "magic forest" specifically, and suggesting that the romantic hero achieves a sort of union with nature, moving "outward," so to speak. Cyberpunk characters lack this externalized union with a natural world; their union is with the world of cyberspace, inside a computer-generated landscape. It would be possible to argue, however, that if we are comparing the natural world of the romantic with the virtual world of cyberspace, the romantic hero's union with nature can be compared to the cyberpunk's union with cyberspace. This would be true, but we cannot leave it at that. As Miriyam Glazer argues, the difference lies in the "qualitative and substantive alterations generated by the technolog[y]" (158). Technology generates a "decaying and peripheral" world of nature, an artificial, immoral, internal world (162). Nature is quite the opposite, as one would expect—it is natural (obviously), normal, full of natural rather than man-made laws (even if these laws are slightly suspended), and external.

Therein lies the difference. In cyberpunk fiction, the bonding and union is internalized and reversed from the state of things in romanticism. Where a romantic hero once bonded with nature and journeyed through a natural world of fairies, enchanted forests, and elves, the cyberpunk hero

now travels in the world of his own mind. Romance, for the cyberpunk hero, becomes a "case of nerves" (Csicery-Ronay 193), and the seeming "superiority" over the natural laws of the environment becomes ironic, particularly when one considers that the realm in which one is superior is a virtual one. Can one truly be superior over a virtual world built in the universe of the computer, a world that does not really exist? To say such thinking is ironic would be an understatement. To be sure, one can be superior in cyberspace; Stephenson's Snow Crash, for example, has a protagonist who is a warrior in cyberspace and an unemployed pizza deliverer in the real world. Superiority does exist, but cyberspace is, ultimately, very different from the real world.

**STAGE 3: HIGH MIMETIC LITERATURE**

If cyberpunks fall short of being true romantic heroes then, perhaps they fit into the category of "epic hero," the next of Frye's stages. The epic hero, according to Frye, belongs to a class of literature he calls the "high mimetic". The term is derived from the word "mimesis," which is, essentially, "art and literature seek[ing] to imitate and represent life" (McArthur 661). "High," then, refers to the rank and social status of the character/hero. Frye's high mimetic heroes are princes and kings, atop the social ladder. They are superior in degree to other men, but are not superior in kind, being not gods, but men. They are not superior to nature either, and must bow before "the supremacy of natural law" (37).

In tragedy, which is our focus, Frye points to the "fall of a leader...the only way in which a leader can be isolated" (37). Because of this fall from grace and power, the high mimetic hero's morality is often questioned, and the reader must place some sort of moral judgment on the character. Frye suggests that Shakespeare's plays involving nobility are the most exemplary of this stage of literature. Macbeth and Hamlet, for example, both feature a main character of nobility whom the audience respects; each then becomes a victim of his own flaws and "falls from grace". Oedipus Rex, too, is a story of a king fallen from grace, and would surely fit in this stage of literature.

Does cyberpunk fit here? After all, some critics, and even some cyberpunk writers, have dubbed cyberpunk characters "heroes". McHale, as I said earlier, talks about cyberpunk's "adventurer-heroes" (153), and Claire Sponsler talks about "the heroes of Gibson's novels" (634) and then later specifically about his "male 'heroes'" (637), although in this latter comment she justifies the word by placing tentative quotation marks around it. This tendency to qualify the term "hero" when applied to cyberpunk characters is more prevalent than in discussion of the hero in other types of literature. Csicsery-Ronay tells us that cyberpunks act "**as if** they are...heroic adventurers" (192), using the term hero comparatively; according to him, cyberpunks must not be heroes, although they may act like them occasionally. Perhaps this is because cyberpunks, like

"Gibson's heroes[,] have been 'numb a long time, years'" (Glazer 160, quoting Neuromancer), to the point where they have become "mocked, diminished, lost, feeling...rage, lust, self-loathing, [and] hate" (160). Indeed, they have been altered by their society to the point where we can no longer use the term hero when speaking of them.

Why, then, are critics so insistent upon using that word? If it is because of the "greatness of degree" of a cyberpunk character, we must remember that this "higher degree" is one of ability, not rank. High mimetic characters have higher degree because of their rank, not their abilities. Perhaps critics tend to assume that the protagonist of a story is always a hero. The term "hero" is often "applied to the characters who are the focus of the readers' or the spectators' interest, often without reference to...moral qualities" (Holman 234). I disagree with this tactic; I feel that Frye has more than demonstrated that different terms are necessary for different stages of literature. Even a glance at the first three stages alone shows three vastly different types of "heroes," deserving of different names. As Timothy Leary points out, "[e]very stage of history has produced a name...for the strong, stubborn, creative individual [ie. the "hero"] who explores some future frontier..." (245, emphasis mine). Despite tendencies by some to use the term "hero," I believe we can dismiss the term as critics use it. In cyberpunk the term "hero" is used quite often, but it is always used ironically, dismissing the application of the term to cyberpunk characters. At one point in Baird's Crashcourse, for example, the characters get ready for a "night on the town":

"Ten minutes. Get some clothes on, Moke, it's going to be cold. How late's your friend likely to be, Cassie?"

"He's not. When Sword says half an hour he means thirty minutes."

"Sure, he can fly," Dosh growled. He began to toss over his wardrobe for hero clothes. "This do?"

"Darker and heavier." (103)

Not only is a joke cracked in this passage about another character's alleged ability "fly," a sarcastic reference to flying superheroes, but the characters are not called heroes; rather, they wear "hero clothes." Even these won't do, and they must put on less heroic, "darker" clothing so they can perform their mission well. After all, when cyberpunks venture into the nighttime city to perform criminal acts, the clothes they wear tend to be black and dark gray, not the red, white, and blue of the traditional "superheroes", such as Superman or Captain America. You can be sure that a cyberpunk will never swoop from the air to save a kitten from a tree; cyberpunk characters are more concerned with keeping themselves alive.

In Clipjoint, the sequel to Crashcourse, Cassie meets up with a mercenary named Wings after a seek-and-destroy mission in the countryside. After running the mission, she tells us that she "sat on the grass several eons more", waiting for Wings to return. When he finally comes back, she calls him her "hero" (70). The term hero might apply here, if Cassie had not told us throughout the first novel, and only a few paragraphs before this encounter, that "Wings and [she] suffer from hate on sight" (69). Her use of the word "hero" here is obviously ironic, as she hates this person. Earlier in the same novel, Cassie meets a man named MacLaren DeLorn, who tells her that he used to be "a war hero, an overrated occupation" (41), and when she asks what "branch of heroism" he majored in, he responds "[g]etting shot" (42). Such talk about heroism is reminiscent of the cowardly Falstaff in Shakespeare's Henry IV Part I, who disdains heroism, honor, and courage as useless, "a mere scutcheon" (V:i 140), a view prevalent in many modern war novels. It should not be surprising to find such themes in cyberpunk novels as well, as cyberpunks are almost always involved in conflict of one sort or another involving supposed "heroism" Obviously, Baird's characters are not heroes of any sort, and they abhor the very thought that they might engage in such activity.

Not only Baird thinks this way, although it is especially evident in her writing; the disdain of heroism is found throughout cyberpunk. In Snow Crash, the lead character is sarcastically named "Hiro Protagonist"—he is anything but heroic, being a thief and mercenary. In Willaims' novel

Hardwired, Cowboy longs to be a real "Steel Cowboy" (130), a twisted, internalized version of the classical American hero, but his morals are surely nowhere near as high as those of a real hero:

...There was an ethic in it, clean and pure. It was enough to be a free jock on a free road, doing battle with those who would restrict him...

But of late there has been a suspicion that adherence to the ethic may not be enough. He knows that while it is one thing to be a warrior noble and true, it is another to be a dupe. (67)

Ethics, it seems, and acting heroically, can only get a cyberpunk so far. Then the rules of expedience and personal concern come into play, and one is forced to do "unheroic things". Countless characters in cyberpunk novels are not of high rank or morality: Case, in Neuromancer (hacker/thief); Chevette in Virtual Light (pickpocket); Rydell in Virtual Light (disgraced ex-cop); Sarah and Cowboy in Hardwired (thieves and murderers); all of the main characters in Baird's novels (thieves, assassins, etc.). In each case, the character is from a lower class origin, or else associates with lower-class people, often criminals. This alone refutes the possibility of cyberpunks being high mimetic heroes. Simply put, cyberpunks are not of nobility, and high mimetic heroes are.



## STAGE 4: LOW MIMETIC LITERATURE

We cannot yet throw out the possibility of the name "hero", because Frye's next category also concerns itself with heroes. The "low mimetic" [modern] hero is a normal man, "superior neither to other men nor to his environment" (Frye 34). Within tragedy, Frye uses the term "pathos", describing a type of story which tends to appeal to our sympathies because of our closeness with the character's own humanity. These characters, Frye says, are usually excluded from a "social group to which [they] are trying to belong" (39), and from this comes pity on the part of the reader. These are what critics tend to call the "modern hero", heroes for whom the battleground is neither a medieval war, nor a duel between princes, but rather a battle for status in modern society.

While it is true that cyberpunk heroes are excluded from society, being criminals and punks by nature, I do not feel that we sense any sort of pity for them. In Virtual Light, Berry Rydell is fired from his job as a police officer, and is thus rejected by society. He goes about his life for a few chapters of the novel, doing what any unemployed modern hero might do—looking for jobs. When he finds a job, however, it is as an assistant to a bounty hunter named Lucius Warbaby (an ominous name), someone working outside the law.

Rather than pity his loss of job, the reader finds that Rydell discovers success at the end of the novel. Because of his criminal activities, he is offered a job working as an actor on a popular television show, along with a chance for money, success, and prestige:

"Berry," Pursley said, "you're in trouble, son. A cop. And an honest one. In trouble. In deep, spectacular, and please, I *have* to say this, clearly *heroic* shit." He clapped Rydell on the shoulder. "*Cops in Trouble* is here for you, boy, and let me assure you, we are all of us going to make out just *fine* on this." (345)

Rydell's activities through the novel, including murder and theft, manage to land his enemies in jail. These activities are what Pursley, an employee of the tv show, calls "heroic shit." Obviously, there is not a great deal of regard given to Rydell's activities; they are only a means by which to make money. Even for a modern hero, Rydell's criminal actions are hardly to be considered heroic.

An even more substantial reason for discarding the term "low mimetic hero" as applied to cyberpunk is the power of the characters. As stated earlier, cyberpunk characters tend to be greater than normal men in kind (by augmentation of their bodies) and in degree (based on their abilities, not rank). According to Frye, a low mimetic hero is simply a normal man, "John or Jane Doe". Simply by comparing the power differential between a normal human and a cyberpunk, with augmented strength and agility, we can tell that cyberpunks simply do not fit in this category.

## STAGE 5: IRONY

The last category that Frye mentions is that of the anti-hero, who is "inferior in power or intelligence to ourselves, so that we have the sense of looking down on a scene of bondage, frustration, or absurdity" (34). The irony, of course, is that even through all of this frustration, the anti-hero is portrayed as somehow heroic. Anti-heroes abound in modern and postmodern literature. One of the better examples is, ironically, not even in a novel—Charles Schulz's cartoon character Charlie Brown. The boy is constantly rejected by his friends, always loses baseball games, is always getting his kite stuck in a tree, etc. In short, Charlie Brown represents exactly the sort of inferiority, bondage, and frustration that Frye is talking about. This is not to say that all anti-heroes are hopeless buffoons; they are, however, usually "graceless, inept, sometimes stupid, sometimes dishonest" (Holman 28). Willy Loman, from Arthur Miller's Death of a Salesman, is another example of an anti-hero. Willy's own name, "Lo-man", or "Low man", suggests to us someone subhuman, absurd, and ironic, as an anti-hero usually is. As Clurman tells us in his essay "Arthur Miller's Later Plays", "Willy Loman is certainly no 'hero'...Willy's suicide is the climax of his own absurdity" (165-6). Loman's life is one of misery and hopelessness, and having lost society and hope, Willy also loses his life. Simply put, the anti-hero "loses" at something, and is generally unsuccessful at life as a whole.

Anti-heroes are, as would seem logical, the opposite of what a hero represents, at least as compared to society. As Frye points out, the anti-hero is someone who is "isolated from his society" (Frye 41). Examples, given by Frye, include the biblical figure of Christ (rejected and crucified, through the supposed fault of not conforming to society's norms), the Greek Prometheus (rejected by the gods for befriending mankind), and even Adam, who "is in a heroic human situation: he is on top of the wheel of fortune". Adam has "the destiny of the gods almost within his reach. He forfeits that destiny... What he does is to exchange a fortune of unlimited freedom for the fate involved in the consequences of the act of exchange..." (212).

Adam is not necessarily wrong in his decision; his choice does, however, cause his downfall. Thus, the anti-hero is not always wrong, and usually is correct in the eyes of the reader. From the view of society, however, the anti-hero is wrong, and deserves to be punished for his faults, whether those faults are real or imagined. An important facet of this genre for Frye, however, is the "suppression of all explicit moral judgments" (40) in the work of literature. That is, we are not told whether the anti-hero or society is in the right; rather, we are objectively shown a situation in which the anti-hero is rejected, and allowed to draw our own opinions. Anti-heroes live in a decidedly amoral world.

The term "anti-hero" is, at first glance, seemingly appropriate for cyberpunks. Anti-heroes are, after all, outside of what is considered "normal society". They are often looked down on or rejected by society, even by those who are seemingly "on their side"; consider the punk music scene once again, in which the musicians are both adored and spit on (literally) by the audience. Cyberpunks also live in a decidedly amoral world, in which the "traditional concepts of good and evil are replaced by the values of expedience" (Moss 3), as I stated earlier. A novel in which the chief characters are thieves, prostitutes, and mercenaries (Hardwired, Neuromancer, and many others) or bounty hunters and pickpockets (Virtual Light, for example) must exist in an amoral world, else we throw the book down in disgust and condemn the characters for their sins. Rather, cyberpunk literature allows its readers to view acts of murder, deception, theft, and even rape, in a world outside the boundaries of morality, "beyond good and evil" as Nietzsche would state the idea.

In Gibson's Virtual Light, the entire plot of the novel is based upon one small incident at a crowded party, in which Chevette, one of the protagonists, finds herself wedged up against a man whom she dislikes. Looking down at his jacket, she "sees something sticking out of a pocket in the tobacco colored leather. Then it's in her hand, down the front of her bike-pants, she's out the door, and the asshole hasn't even noticed" (49). Neither Chevette nor the reader gives any thought to this act of theft, even though the theft of these virtual light sunglasses is the driving force behind the entire novel. It is objectively stated, simply done, and over within two short sentences, bereft of any moral judgment. Because cyberpunk is by its very nature amoral, the murders and acts of thievery

performed in cyberpunk novels might seem to support the notion that cyberpunk novels are anti-heroic. This is not the case.

First of all, anti-heroes have some sort of weakness present in their characters, whether it be a moral flaw, a physical weakness, or an intentional sacrifice. In some way, anti-heroes are "subhuman," somehow weaker than the average man. Cyberpunks are not weak at all. They are, as stated earlier, superior in kind (based on their cybernetic enhancements as well as in degree based on their abilities) to normal men. We do not have the impression, as Frye said of anti-heroes, of looking down at a scene; rather, we look at something, and we neither despise nor pity the cyberpunk protagonist. There is also no sense of bondage or helplessness in cyberpunk literature, something that is present in anti-heroic literature. The anti-hero is trapped by his condition, and is subject to the laws of nature and society; he is helpless. The cyberpunk, on the other hand, is in no way a victim of helplessness and weakness. He may be outside of society, but that is a natural and desirable condition for a punk. There is no bondage in rejection for the cyberpunk, only freedom from the constraints of society. As the alt.cyberpunk FAQ list defines the idea of the cyberpunk character,

...in any cultural system, there are always those who live on its margins, on "the Edge": criminals, outcasts, visionaries, or those who simply want freedom for its own sake. Cyberpunk literature focuses on these people, and often on how they turn the system's technological tools to their own ends. (Schneider)

Cyberpunks are not weak, are not held captive by their status as outcasts, and are superior to the normal man in some form. Cyberpunks are, however, rejected by society, amoral, and portrayed in a very objective fashion. Cyberpunks are, it would appear, "half anti-heroes," somehow possessing about half of the qualities of Frye's "anti-hero," but not quite fitting the definition completely. It seems that critics sense this, as few have used the term anti-hero to refer to cyberpunk characters. When they have, the use of the term is fleeting, often confused with other

terms and ideas. For instance, Sponsler calls them "antiheroes set adrift in a world in which there is no meaning" (627), but she also uses the term hero several times in the same essay, unable to define the cyberpunk with one definite term. Pat Cadigan, when asked about her own cyberpunk characters, seemed unable and unwilling to pin them down with one term as well. In the following excerpt from an on-line computer interview, MikelJr is my screen name:

MikelJr: Some call [cyberpunks] "heroes". Some call them "anti-heroes". Would you attempt a label for them?

Cadigan: Well, that's a loaded question, because when most people describe a cyberpunk character they inevitably go to a stereotype...

MikelJr: Are your characters different? Intentionally so?

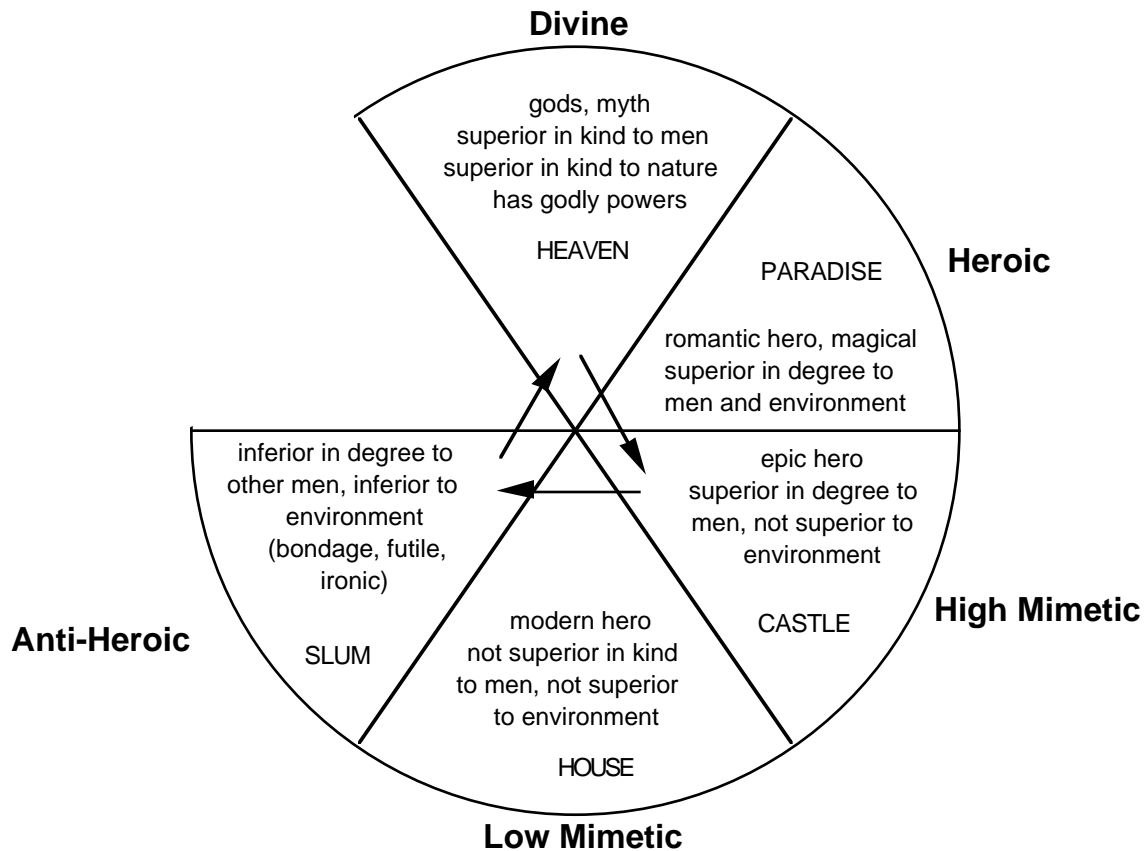
Cadigan: Well, I think they are...I just made them people...Not just black hats

(Interview)

Obviously, there is some confusion here. Pat Cadigan refuses to label her own cyberpunk characters as anything more than "people," and critics are constantly getting confused between calling cyberpunks heroes and anti-heroes, among other things. Cyberpunks are a combination not only of man and machine, but of the anti-hero and something else, something yet undefined.

FITTING THE CYBERPUNK INTO FRYE'S THEORY

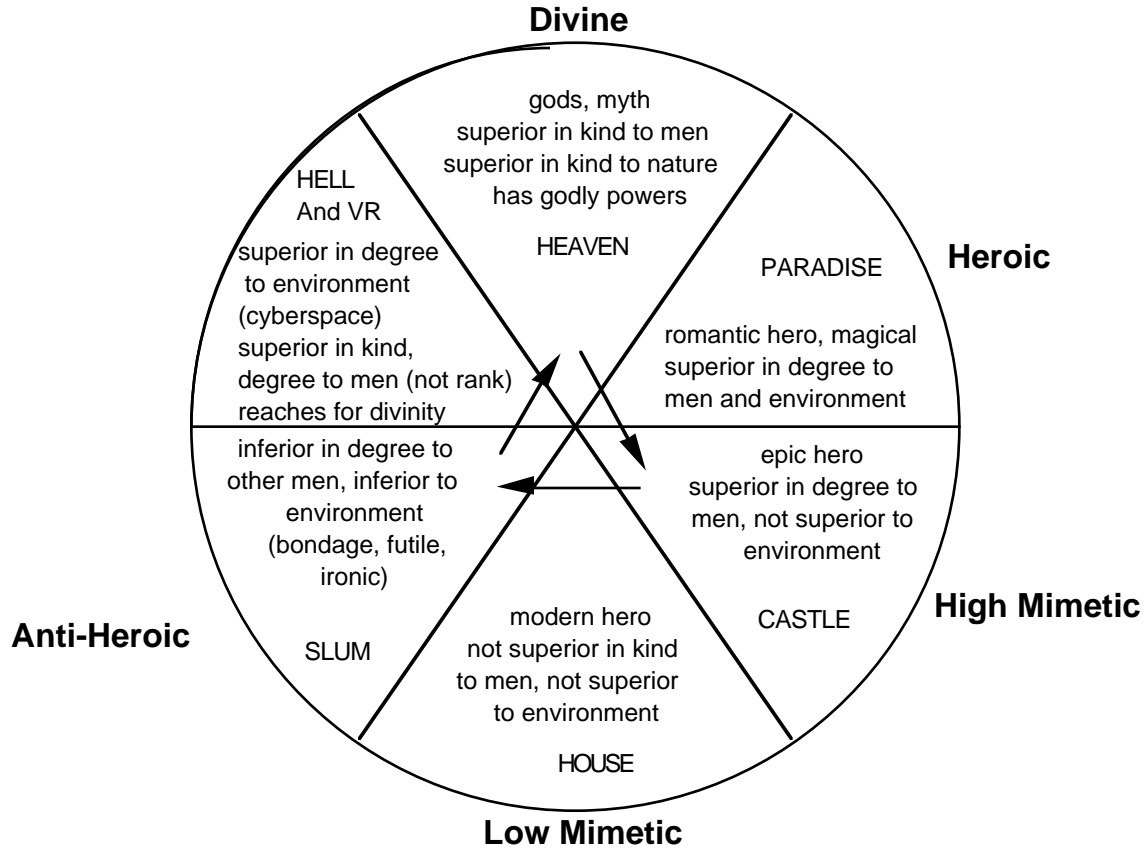
If cyberpunks are "half anti-heroes," what comprises the other half of their being? If cyberpunks don't exactly fit into any of Frye's five categories, then exactly where do they go? The key to this notion is something Frye suggests as he discusses the anti-heroic stage of literature, also named the "ironic mode"; what Frye means by irony is the key to placing the cyberpunk among these other types of literature. Frye tells us that "[i]rony descends from the low mimetic; it begins in realism and dispassionate observation. But as it does so, it moves steadily towards myth, and dim outlines of sacrificial rituals and dying gods begin to reappear in it." Frye then points out that in his theory of literature, the "five modes evidently go around in a circle. This [is a] reappearance of myth in the ironic..." (42). Frye's categories of literature are not linear, but cyclical. Charting these stages around a circle, then, allows us to see the development of literature according to Frye's theory, and the relationships between the characters of each stage:



As the chart indicates, literature (according to Frye) begins with myth and the divine, and descends through the stages of the heroic, high mimetic, low mimetic, and anti-heroic. Listed on the chart are the various qualities of each stage suggested by Frye, which I have discussed above. Also listed, in all capital letters, are the various "settings" which are attributed to the various stages. For instance, the divine character is commonly found in some sort of heaven above the world, whereas the romantic hero is found in a paradise full of fairies, magic, and unicorns. High mimetic characters, being typically noble, are commonly found in castles, and low mimetic heroes, average men, live in quite average houses. The subhuman anti-hero, the last of these, is often the nomad without home, the permanent apartment-dweller, or the man of the street, the slum, and the broken-down home. Outside the chart are the names of the various stages. The last stage, the ironic, suggests a movement back towards myth. It does not represent myth in itself, nor does it directly link with myth; Frye is clear that the movement is only a suggestion, and we only get "hints" and inklings of myth in ironic fiction. It is this notion of a return to myth that explains the inability to place cyberpunks on this chart. Cyberpunks simply don't fit on the chart as depicted above (this is not surprising, considering that cyberpunk fiction is so recent). Rather, they need a new "slice" for themselves.

In order to show where they fit and why, we must look at the characteristics of the cyberpunk character, and the relationship of those characteristics with the other types of characters Frye talks about. Cyberpunks, as I've already demonstrated, do have some definite characteristics that can be defined using Frye's terms, even if we cannot fit them into his "timeline" of literature. Cyberpunks are superior to other men in kind because of their augmentation of the human body. They are superior in degree because of their heightened abilities, but are decidedly inferior when it comes to rank and societal influence. They are superior to their environment, as their destruction of the environment and their creation of a virtual reality cyberspace will attest to. It would be possible to label cyberpunks divine: they are superior to men and the environment, it seems. Yet we know that cyberpunks are not gods; they are human, greater than anti-heroes and less than gods. It is easy to fill in the "missing" piece in Frye's circle. The chart appears on the next page:





As the cycle nears completion, we can see that the setting or residence of the character decreases in attractiveness. The divine gods live in heaven, and the anti-hero lives without a home, as in the case of the wandering nomad or outcast, or within a run-down house, something subhuman. The cyberpunk character, it would seem, must reside in a setting even less appealing than that of the anti-hero, and yet at the same time nearing the realm of the divine. The divine realm, as represented in cyberpunk fiction, is fairly easy to pin down—this is the realm of cyberspace, the virtual heaven that the cyberpunks create for themselves. In cyberspace, a console cowboy can approach god, and can even approximate god, but can never wholly become a god; this is, it seems, an approach to some sort of heaven. The setting of a cyberpunk novel, in a godless world blasted by fire and pollution, is as close an approximation of hell as one might desire. We have thus named the qualities of the cyberpunk, and we've shown where he lives and where he fits into Frye's timeline of literature, but one thing yet remains. Our cyberpunk needs a name.

## NAMING THE CYBERPUNK: THE NEUROMANTIC

Having dismissed "anti-hero," "hero," and each of Frye's categories in turn, it is essential that we find some way of naming the cyberpunk character. Discovery of an appropriate name makes the placement of the cyberpunk on the chart more valid. Fortunately, more than one critic has suggested such a name, although the term has never been "officially" accepted. The term is derived, appropriately enough, from the title of the definitive cyberpunk novel: Gibson's Neuromancer.

The title of "Neuromantic" is appropriate for more than one reason, not the least of which is the use of the term by many critics. For example, Bruce Sterling tells us in his preface to Mirrorshades that the term "Neuromantic" was one of the original labels for the first cyberpunk writers on the scene in the early 1980's (ix). Miryam Glazer hails Gibson as a "postmodern New-Wave Romanticist" (155), and speaks of Gibson's "Neuromantic vision" (163). Glazer's assertion is that cyberpunk is, essentially, the opposite of true romance. Though Glazer's romance is based on the Romantic writers of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, and not in the fairy tales that Frye suggests, her point is well taken. Romantics, Glazer says,

culled their visions of a rejuvenated humanity participating fully and joyously...life is turned inside-out in Gibson's world, and, in the process, becomes...ironic.

In Gibson's world, this Romantic faith in the inner life and, with it, the human imagination, as wellsprings of positive human and social transformation, have all but disappeared...In the end, his "Neuromanticism—a "New Romanticism" of the nerves, "the silver paths"—is also a "Necromanticism," a "lane to the land of the dead." (157-8, quoting Neuromancer 243)

As I said earlier, cyberpunk literature tends to turn inwards, to the nerves and cyberspace, whereas romance tends to look outwards, to the land of imagination and spiritual fulfillment. This

difference is the "key to understanding the nature of the change from the optimism of Romanticism to the resignation of Neuromanticism" (Glazer 158). The "Necromanticism" Glazer speaks of also attests to this lack of optimism in Neuromanticism; by traveling through cyberspace into the nerves and synapses of the body, one engages in a sort of magical journey. The cyberpunk's journey into the heaven of cyberspace is not just electronic. Obviously, when one can become a god inside cyberspace, existing in pure electronic form, we are dealing with something beyond the physical realm, something akin to a spiritual journey, as in the voyage of the soul to the underworld in Greek myth, or the journey of a soul into heaven in the Christian Bible.

**MORALITY, DIVINITY, WEALTH: THE AXES ON FRYE'S CHART**

There are, however, even more substantial reasons for the placement of cyberpunk between the "Ironic" and the "Divine" on Frye's scale. Looking at the chart as having six equal pieces, we can derive from them 3 lines, or axes, which divide the circle in that fashion. For example, a horizontal line would divide the circle into an upper half containing the "Cyberpunk" (hereafter "Neuromantic"), "Divine," and "Heroic, or Romantic Hero" and a lower half with "Anti-hero," "Low Mimetic," and "High Mimetic". Interestingly, there are characteristics shared by the types that fall within each half of the circle. These similarities lend validity to such an axis being drawn.

For example, each of the categories above the horizontal axis contains a protagonist who is, in some way, superior to his environment. We have: the Romantic hero, who uses magic and enchanted swords, and has superhuman abilities; the God, who is well beyond the limitations of the environment and who, in fact, lives well above it; and the Neuromantic, who has subjugated and polluted the natural environment, and who has actually created a new one—cyberspace. Frye also tells us that one of the organizing ideas of romance is "magic" (153), the ability to control the environment through one's own will. Certainly gods have something like this ability, for they create the environment. The Neuromantic, too, possesses a sort of magical power: the title Neuromancer not only alludes to romance, but is also a play on the word "necromancer," a type of sorcerer or a person who can speak magically with the dead. Indeed, Gibson's main character in that novel, Case, has been called "the magician who knows which spells will open the crypt and keep the electronic 'curses' at bay" (Grant 44).

Below this axis, we see three types who are not superior to their environments, and who in fact appear to be victims of it. Though neither the Romantic hero nor the Neuromantic are truly, wholly divine, I believe that we can label this axis the "Divinity axis," allowing that the categories above somehow approach divinity or are divine, based on their ability to subjugate and control the environment. This subjugation, as I have demonstrated, is usually through some form of magic or secret ability resembling magic: Arthur C. Clarke is oft quoted as saying "The technology of any

sufficiently advanced society is indistinguishable from magic". Such technology certainly applies to cyberpunk fiction.

But what of the other two axes? If we draw a diagonal line from upper left to lower right, we divide the circle into one half of "Divine," "Heroic," and "High Mimetic," and another half containing "Neuromantic," "Anti-hero," and "Low Mimetic". Here, the distinction is between the settings of the characters. To the right of this axis, the settings include "Heaven," "Paradise," and "Castle". To the left, settings include "House," "Slum," and "Hell". The words may be strong, but the notion is obvious: this axis evidently divides according to wealth or status. Each of the "Divine," "Heroic," and "High Mimetic" characters live in pleasure and opulence, whether that be due to the glories of heaven, the pastoral beauty of Paradise, or the sheer luxury afforded by being of noble rank. On the other hand, the Low Mimetic hero, the common man, lacks the social standing and wealth of the others, and the anti-hero lacks yet more than he. Is it any wonder that we should find the outcast punk representing the Neuromantic, without a definite home or sense of security, living by the credo "The future is disposable" (Moss 48) from day-to-day and moment-to-moment? "Think rootless and mobile," the Cyberpunk 2.0.2.0 game advises would-be cyberpunks as they equip themselves. "You don't know where you're sleeping tonight, and you don't care" (Moss 48).

The final axis, a line drawn from lower left to upper right, divides according to something less tangible: Morality. On the left hand side of this axis we have the Neuromantic, the anti-hero, and the Divine. To the right are the Heroic, the High Mimetic, and the Low Mimetic. Those characters that fall into one of the left hand categories are all in some way above or beyond morality. The anti-hero, for example, is portrayed by Frye as existing in an amoral world, in which the writer suppresses all "explicit moral judgments" (40). Morality is, quite simply, not a part of ironic fiction for the main character, according to Frye. The Neuromantic, as has been stated before, exists in a world where expedience has replaced morality; in the cyberpunk world, God is dead. Without a God, there can be no religion or morality. For the Divine hero, who is at least half-god, there is no need for morality either. Here the stories of the Greek gods raping women and drinking

wine all day attests to the debauchery and amorality of these characters. Certainly, when one is a god, and is responsible for creating moral rules for the humans on earth below, one is by nature above morality. This is not to say that all divine characters are absolutely immoral; rather, they are all in some way above morality, and the restrictions that would be necessary in a moral world are not present.

On the right hand side of the axis, there are three types of characters who are, indeed, subject to morality in some way. The Romantic hero exists in a world of magic and witchcraft, and deals with the conflicts between good and evil. In works such as Morte d'Arthur, The Song of Roland, and Beowulf, we get a great dichotomy between the good, shining hero and the evil monster/black knight/dragon figure. These knights and heroes live in a world full of moral choices, and cannot escape them.

The High Mimetic hero, too, lives in a world full of moral decisions; kings and princes are not immune to the limitations of moral choices. Shakespeare is a good source of examples: Macbeth knows he will be doing wrong to kill the king in his story, despite his decision to go through with it; Hamlet, too, knows that killing someone at the "wrong time" has a different moral consequence than killing them at the "right time". Here, he has seen his uncle, the new king, praying in a chapel. Having been instructed by the ghost of his father, the king, to avenge his (the king's) murder, Hamlet watches his uncle pray in a chapel in the castle, and wonders whether or not the time is right to kill him.

Now might I do it pat, now 'a is a-praying;  
And now I'll do't—and so 'a goes to heaven,  
And so am I reveng'd. That would be scann'd:  
A villain kills my father, and for that  
I, his sole son, do this same villain send  
to heaven... (Hamlet III:III, 73-78)

If Hamlet kills his uncle as he is praying, then his uncle's soul will go to heaven; this is not what he wants. He continues his soliloquy, and comes to the conclusion that by waiting until his uncle is guilty of sin, he can be assured that his uncle will go to hell instead of heaven:

Up, sword, and know thou a more horrid hent:  
When he is drunk asleep, or in his rage,...  
Then trip him, that his heels may kick at heaven,  
And that his soul may be damn'd and black  
As hell, whereto it goes. (Hamlet III:III, 91-95)

Hamlet obviously associates a certain moral result from his actions, be they for good or evil. The linking of the act of killing with moral consequences is totally absent in the world of the Neuromantic, replaced by expedience and survival of the fittest: the distinction from the above example is obvious.

Like the High Mimetic character, the Low Mimetic hero lives in a world of moral choices and decisions. He, too, is a normal man or woman, and it should not surprise us that these characters go to church, worship God, and hold base activities as immoral, "contrasted with some kind of delicate virtue"(Frye 39). Undoubtedly, they have to deal with the "impact of inflexible morality on experience" (Frye 39). Again, this is not to imply that all of these characters are morally upright; rather, they simply live in a moral world, and have to deal with its influences. The stories of Charles Dickens, for example, are filled with moral choices and consequences: A Christmas Carol, with Scrooge's sins and the three visiting ghosts forcing his repentance, or Oliver Twist's adventures and dealings with various thieves, prostitutes, and murderers portray this moral landscape explicitly.

## CYBERPUNK: A RETURN TO MYTH

With these axes in place, it seems even more logical to place the Neuromantic character between the Ironic and the Divine. The strongest argument for such a placement is Frye's own suggestion that irony returns in a cyclical fashion to myth. I have suggested such a position, and shown where it might fit; it is now essential to show how cyberpunk accomplishes this return to myth. Cyberpunk suggests a lot more than hints and inklings of myth; mythic elements are prevalent in cyberpunk, and demonstrate an entirely new mythology. The presence of scientific elements might confuse the issue: as James Prothero says, "somehow we have assumed that our scientific civilization has put us beyond having or needing a mythology" (32). This is not at all the case. Rather than destroying myth, "science and technology have become our defining teleology" (F7), says Georgy in a newspaper article. Frye tells us in Anatomy of Criticism that science fiction has an "inherent tendency to myth" (49). Prothero agrees with such a belief, stating that "science fiction and fantasy are present-day forms of mythology" (33). Even Jacques Ellul predicted such a phenomenon in 1954:

Nothing belongs any longer to the realm of the gods or the supernatural. The individual who lives in the technical milieu knows very well that there is nothing spiritual anywhere. But man cannot live without the sacred. He therefore transfers his sense of the sacred to the very thing which destroyed its former object: to technique [technology] itself...there is no question of a technical religion. (143-45)

Ellul's words speak of a very real technological religion; they apply equally well to a technological genre of fiction, particularly one that is as based in reality as cyberpunk is. While Ellul predicted such a technical religion with many misgivings, and with much apprehension, the mythology afforded by cyberpunk fiction is not feared by cyberpunks. It is much better than a



society without mythology, as Bill Moyers and Joseph Campbell talked about in The Power of Myth:

Moyers: What happens when a society no longer embraces a powerful mythology?

Campbell: What we've got on our hands. If you want to find out what it means to have a society without any rituals, read the *New York Times*.

Moyers: And you'd find?

Campbell: The news of the day, including destructive and violent acts by young people who don't know how to behave in a civilized society. (Campbell 8)

This hopelessness and godlessness is what many fear cyberpunk fiction represents. It is not godlessness that cyberpunk brings, however, but a new hopeful mythology. Through the science aspect of cyberpunk, the punks of the world are given a new myth, a new hope, as Pat Cadigan said in our interview:

MikelJr: Do you think that we've lost our myths in the wake of science?

Cadigan: Oh, good heavens no. Our myths are like the flip side of science.

Science is what differentiates us from the animals. Myths—and other kinds of art—are how we reach for the divine. (Interview)

Cyberpunk affords us that opportunity to reach for the divine because it does offer us a new mythology. Easterbrook speaks of a "Cyberpunk mythos" (379), and quotes William Gibson as speaking of a "mythology of computers" in an interview (380). Easterbrook continues to speak of Gibson's "celebrated conjectures about technological change," saying that they are the product "of open mythologizing," creating something which he then describes as "a mythos of surface" (381).

I spoke earlier of the presence of the artificial intelligences of cyberspace, and of the fact that these artificial intelligences were viewed by cyberpunk characters as very real divinities. This isn't merely a case of mistaken identity. When we look at cyberpunk through the eyes of

mythology, and place cyberpunk literature in Frye's scheme of things, Easterbrook's words ring truer than ever. Cyberpunk really does begin to resemble a new mythological world. Technology does not erase the world of myth and magic; it alters it. We have all of the key elements of a new myth: there are the gods in the heaven of "cyberspace," represented by the AI's; the agents of the gods, akin to priests and prophets, such as Case in Neuromancer, who are necessary in order for the AI's to perform their duties in the realms below; the monsters of voodoo and other mythologies resurfacing as "ghosts," and "zombies," (McHale 170); "dead manifest[ing] themselves to the living" (McHale 171) as deceased characters find new life in cyberspace; a means of "transcendence," a way to travel to the heavens and join the gods, escaping hell; even a new "virtual morality," based in the belief that if you do the right things for/to the right people, success is yours. These last two are, I believe, the keys to the new mythology that cyberpunk literature suggests. Throughout cyberpunk, as I've mentioned earlier, a theme of transcendence almost always appears. Characters in cyberpunk fiction constantly try to escape from their human bodies,



*Neuromantics transcend their bodies in cyberspace*

and this escape comprises one of the "benefits" of the new mythology. The escape is via a computer link to their brains, allowing cyberpunk characters to transcend the body. Just as Buddhist monks try to achieve Nirvana by transcending the self, so do some Neuromantics try to escape; it is a religious experience for them, a chance to achieve union with the universe and achieve

immortality. Whether roaming cyberspace as a bodiless, ethereal entity, or adding on the newest prosthetic limbs, Neuromantics want to become a part of the mythology around them. After all, "[their] technology might have a greater potentiality for transcendence than [they] do" (Grant 47), and so they eagerly hook themselves up to cyberdecks and cyberlimbs, looking for transcendence and hope. This bears some attention—if the Neuromantic's religion has failed and God is dead, what is left for the cyberpunk character, if anything? Is there a glimmer of hope in what the critics have called a hopeless world?

Greg Bear's "Petra" is a story about what's left after the great death of God, the "Mortdieu". In this post-apocalyptic world, the remnants of what was once human society live in shattered churches and cathedrals. Here, the main character, himself a fusion of man-carved stone and flesh, speaks with what is left of God:

He shook His head slowly. "You seem a wise enough creature. You know about Mortdieu."

"Yes."

"Then you should know that I barely have enough power to keep myself together, to heal myself, much less to minister to those out there." He gestured beyond the walls...

I was stunned. I sat down hard on the stone floor, and the Christ patted me on my head as He walked by. "Go back to your hiding place; live as well as you can," He said. "Our time is over." (121)

Living in a world where Nietzsche has disproved the supposed illusion of God's existence, the cyberpunk character's ideas about morality and faith disappear, becoming illusory, intangible, and worthless. Where can the Neuromantic find his hope in a world, such as Greg Bear's, where even Christ is unable to do anything? As Joseph Campbell says, speaking of the impact of science on myth:

With the loss of them [myths] there follows uncertainty, and with uncertainty, disequilibrium, since life, as both Nietzsche and Ibsen knew, requires life-supporting illusions; and where these have been dispelled, there is nothing secure to hold on to, no moral law, nothing firm. (Myths 10)

The only means for transcendence left is through the new god, technology. And look at what technology can do for cyberpunk characters: they can extend life; replace hearts and lungs with artificial ones; destroy diseases; communicate instantly with anyone, anywhere on or off the planet, via cyberspace; travel at thousands of miles per hour through the solar system in spacecraft. Neuromantics even have the power, should they so choose, to destroy creation with an atomic bomb or worse weapons. What cyberpunk represents is the transfer of this massive power to the punks, the people without myth.

And these punks are literally "eating it up," making it a part of themselves. With the potential to become an *übermensch*, moving beyond the limits of the human body on to something greater, why would any one of these punks refuse the chance? After all, if "you don't control technology, it will control you" (Elmer-Dewitt 65), and it is better to take control of the machine than to become controlled by it; an example is the film Terminator, in which "the computers are now the master and humanity the slave" (Rushing 70). The punks in cyberpunk fiction want to be a "machine," but it is a personal, freethinking machine, not a part of a government bureaucratic "machine." Take Marc Laidlaw's story, "400 Boys," for example, in which a gang speaks of an encounter with a more technologically advanced gang. One gang member refers to the enemy as "boys"; another disagrees, saying they were "Gods" (59). With technology, even boys can be seen as gods, something beyond human. Rucker tells us, comparing cyberpunk ideas to the real world, that "We're becoming cyborgs. Our tech is getting smaller, closer to us, and it will soon merge with us" (66). Donna Haraway says that "[b]y the late twentieth century, our time, a mythic time, we are all chimeras, theorized and fabricated hybrids of machine and organism; in short, we are cyborgs"

(Haraway 150). Being a cyborg isn't just about having a better body though; it's about becoming part of a myth. And, as Ellul tells us,

The tool of our day enables man to conquer...The victory of our day belongs to the tool...The individual obeys and no longer has victory which is his own. He cannot have access to his apparent triumphs except by becoming himself the object of technique and the offspring of the mating of man and machine. (146)

## DEFINING THE NEW MYTH

If cyberpunks would be a part of this new myth, whether that be in reality or in cyberpunk fiction, exactly what would they be a part of? What is a myth, and how does it afford him transcendence? Myths are, basically, "stories of how things came to be" (McArthur 675), or "stories...as a means of interpreting natural events in an effort to make concrete and particular a special perception of human beings or a cosmic view" (Holman 317). Frye differentiates myths as dealing with gods, and romance as "displac[ing] myth in a human direction" (137). For cyberpunk literature, or Neuromance, the displacement would be in the opposite direction, towards the divine world found in cyberspace and away from the pure human realm. Cyberpunk is a story not of how things came to be, but of what they are becoming (a theme seen in the quote opening this thesis). It is a story of man becoming divine through his interactions with the machines. If, as Frye says, myth literature tells stories about gods, and progresses away from myth to romantic stories about humans (188), then Neuromantic literature is about humans moving back towards myth. Cyberpunk is a new myth-in-transition, about a fusion and twisting of the difference between god, man, and machine. In Pat Cadigan's "Rock On," the main character can link herself up to a computer, playing music through her own mind. Here, she does exactly that:

In the beginning, I thought, and the echo was stupendous. *In the beginning...the beginning...the beginning...*

In the beginning, the sinner was not human...

It was a crime, but all I could do was take them and shake them. Rock gods in the hands of an angry sinner. (38)

Cadigan's character uses a fusion with musical instruments and computers to blur the distinctions between man, machine, and god, and by the end of the story one is not sure if the main character is a "sinner", a "synner" (a pun on the word "synthesizer"), or a god. Neuromantics find their power

through this fusion with the machine; it takes them on a journey towards Godhood. It enables their myths to be born, and to evolve. "Why should our bodies end at the skin?" (Haraway 178) is the penultimate cyberpunk declaration. Haraway continues, speaking about the positive erasure of gender and other markings of humanity:

I would suggest that cyborgs have more to do with regeneration...We have all been injured, profoundly. We require regeneration, not rebirth, and the possibilities for our reconstitution include the utopian dream of the hope for a monstrous world without gender...I would rather be a cyborg than a goddess. (181)

Though Haraway does not seek godhood through a cyborg nature, the key to this statement, (and, indeed, her entire "Manifesto for Cyborgs"), is the fact that being a cyborg, being a god, and being human are different. Cyberpunk is, after all, a path towards godhood, not godhood in itself. Haraway does seem to suggest the possibility of godhood, even if she herself refuses it. Cyberpunk literature offers a chance at transcending the human form through "regeneration" through technology rather than a purely spiritual "rebirth," and that transcendence is a major part of the myth that it is becoming. Frye places Adam "on top of the wheel of fortune, with the destiny of the gods almost within his reach" (212). Whereas Adam failed to reach godhood, and fell, the Neuromantic of cyberpunk fiction does not fail; he can actually become god.

## VIRTUAL MORALITY

But what of morality? If we will have new gods in cyberpunk fiction, should we not expect a new morality, and a new set of rules, as well? Even if human morality is erased by technology, a new form of morality forms itself in the wake of the old, a "virtual morality" based upon the premise that you should do what makes you stronger. Expedience is not the most popular view, particularly when it involves hurting others to get what you want, but it does appear to be the new morality in cyberpunk fiction and society. Nike ads on the cyberpunkish MTV tell us to "Just do it," saying nothing of who we're doing it to. Questions of punishment for sins are thrown out the window with God, and as new gods form, so do individual egos and personalities, each with their own morality. These examples from our own society provide a vivid glimpse at what cyberpunk is talking about. As Campbell says of myth among youths in today's society in his Power of Myth interview:

They make them up for themselves. This is why we have graffiti all over the city. These kids have their own gangs and their own initiations and their own morality, and they're doing the best they can. But they're dangerous because their own laws are not those of the city. (8)

For better or worse, the message preached by cyberpunk literature is one of individual morality. Cyberpunk writer Rudy Rucker complains that Gibson's newest cyberpunk work, Virtual Light, contains "groovy goodygoody" characters who are "presented as moral"; he doesn't trust them because he sees them as openly advocating some sort of morality. Rucker doesn't trust people who talk about morality, preferring people to simply "be moral" for themselves (E-mail). Indeed, can we even trust the moral decisions of a pickpocket and a murdering mercenary, the main characters in that novel? Such talk of an immoral, selfish morality would seem to support the earlier



notion that I mentioned, the thought that cyberpunk literature is hopeless and depressing. I certainly do not support such a belief.

Good and evil are a matter of traditional moralities, and cyberpunk exists in a realm beyond traditional morality, beyond good and evil itself. Nietzsche's philosophy in Beyond Good and Evil is certainly appropriate here:

Here is the place for that famous opposition of "good and "evil": into evil one's feelings project power and dangerousness, a certain terribleness, subtlety, and strength...according to slave morality, those who are "evil" thus inspire fear; according to master morality it is precisely those who are "good" that inspire, and wish to inspire, fear... (207)

Here Nietzsche talks of two ways of looking at good and evil: master morality and slave morality, and many assume that he supports master morality. This is not the case, as the title of the book states quite clearly. Nietzsche, and the cyberpunks, believe in moving beyond the realm of traditional morality, and thus beyond the distinctions of "good" and "evil". To be certain, it is a frightening prospect when one looks at how people such as Hitler can misinterpret this philosophy, striving to wipe out "inferior" races. While cyberpunk literature deals with such topics, it does not support genocide. Beyond good and evil does not mean beyond kindness; after all, Nietzsche also tells us that "whatever is done from love always occurs beyond good and evil" (Nietzsche Beyond 90). Cyberpunk literature supports the belief that through the machine, human beings have the opportunity to escape the world of morality. It suggests that through that escape into a more subjective, personal, virtual morality, cyberpunk characters can become gods. Part of the reason for the fear of this belief has to do with the fact that we are repulsed and attracted by the possibilities of becoming cyborgs at the same time. The best example of such a paradox is evident in Frankenstein: A Modern Prometheus by Shelley. In the novel, cited by some as among the major influences on cyberpunk theory and writing, Dr. Frankenstein is able to create life through

technological means. The creature, the definitive "technologically-created being" (Rushing 62), is stronger, more intelligent, and in all other ways superior to the man who created him. As Rushing and Frenz explain:

...the Frankenstein complex recapitulates the Greek myth of creation: like Prometheus, Dr. Frankenstein enters forbidden territory to steal knowledge from the gods, participates in overthrowing the old order, becomes a master of technics [technology], and is punished for his transgression...many critics recognize that such dystopian stories are not only based on myth, but have attained the status of myth and archetype themselves... (62)

This description nearly fits archetypal figures, such as Adam and Lucifer, as well as cyberpunk characters; Adam eats the apple, and is punished, and Lucifer desires godhood, and falls from heaven. The difference between these and cyberpunk characters is that in the case of the Neuromantic, there is no punishment for transgression. Cyberpunk may be "fundamentally ambivalent about the breakdown of the distinctions between human and machine" (Csicsery-Ronay 191), but this ambivalent attitude does not stop cyberpunk characters from mingling with technology. They may be aware of dangers, but they ignore them. The moral repercussions for using technology are gone, and so the creator and the user alike in cyberpunk fiction can revel in the outcome; the monster will no longer destroy the creator, and God will no longer punish man for eating from the tree of knowledge. Cyberpunk creations, such as the replicant androids in Ridley Scott's Blade Runner, can feel free to question their own place in the heavens, among the angels and gods (Rushing 67), without fearing moral judgment. With the possibility of transcendence to godhood, and the lack of punishment for any supposed sins, cyberpunks have a clear road to the heavens. This is certainly not the depressing, hopeless view that many critics apply to cyberpunk literature.

**CYBERPUNK: ANYTHING BUT HOPELESS**

Cyberpunk is certainly worthwhile: it deals with very real issues; it fits neatly into Frye's framework of literary history, and even answers a few questions he did not. It suggests a return from the hopeless, ironic world we live in back to a more mythic, hopeful time. What does it tell us, however, about what is to come? At the end of *Myths to Live By*, Joseph Campbell asks "What is—or what is to be—the new mythology?" He answers the question as follows:

It is...the old, everlasting, perennial mythology, in its "subjective sense," poetically renewed in terms neither of a remembered past nor of a projected future, but of now: addressed, that is to say, not to the flattery of "peoples," but to the waking of individuals in the knowledge of themselves...each in his own way at one with all, and with no horizons. (266)

By erasing objective moral biases, and entering a subjective, individual world, the cyberpunk character transcends limiting horizons along with the prejudices that limit humanity. Haraway suggests that erasing the man/woman distinction would be a benefit to all (178); imagine if other distinctions were erased along with notions of good and evil: racial bias, ageism, religious bias, etc. Cyberpunks want nothing more than to get rid of all objective, outdated ideas and limiting morals left over from now dead gods. Sponsler suggests that cyberpunks are

set adrift in a world in which there is no meaning, no security, no affection, and no communal bonds—except for those they themselves tenuously create. [They are a]ntifoundational, skeptical of authority...and fascinated by the way technology and material objects shape consciousness and moderate behavior... (627)

Cyberpunks refuse to give up; rather than accept dead gods and dead moralities, they create new, individual ones. There is a lot to be said about freedom from restriction and bias, even if it does make the cyberpunk world a bit more dangerous. After all, with the technology to deal with the new challenges, the opportunities given to the Neuromantic in cyberpunk fiction far outweigh the dangers. With the hope of a new heaven in the distance, the risks are far more acceptable than a continued existence in a very real hell. Rather than die, they take Nietzsche's advice and evolve into something stronger, the *übermensch*. In her essay "Cybernetic Deconstructions: Cyberpunk and Postmodernism," Veronica Hollinger asserts that "the postmodern condition has required that we revise SF's original trope of technological anxiety—the image of a fallen humanity controlled by a technology run amok...we and our technologies 'interface' to produce what has become a mutual evolution" (218). This is precisely what cyberpunks achieve.

Cyberpunk writers, faced with horrific future visions such as Orwell's 1984, in which freedom is relinquished to the state "machine," revolted. Through their revolt, they offered the technology to those who were most in danger of being subjugated by the system, the punks. The Neuromantic was born from this fusion of technology and punk, and with him, a new hope for humanity. No longer will cyberpunk citizens be content to be slaves; as Lucifer says, "Better to reign in hell, than to serve in Heav'n" (Milton I: 263). They can make hell into a better place, or escape it by creating a new heaven in their minds, making "a Heav'n of Hell" (I:255); certainly there is nothing miserable or depressing about this. Critics were correct to fear the cyberpunk's godless, hopeless world, but what they failed to do was to recognize the cyberpunk character's transcendence through technology. God may be dead in the cyberpunk world, but His death leaves the Neuromantic a path to heaven. As Nietzsche tells us in Thus Spake Zarathustra:

Before God! But now this god has died. You higher men, this was your greatest danger. It is only since he lies in his tomb that you have been resurrected. Only now the great noon comes; only now the higher man becomes—lord...

God died: now we want the *übermensch* to live. (398-9)

In The Machine in the Garden, Leo Marx suggests that "the machine bring[s] myth" (164), and that "machine power is fulfilling an ancient mythic prophecy" (201). Whereas Satan fell from heaven, the Neuromantic flies upwards towards silicon stars and into the new heaven of cyberspace, and thus completes the cycle of literature and history that Frye suggests. Morality and society have failed the cyberpunk character, and with technology and anarchy, he strives to build his own myth and religion; one of freedom, power, and individuality.

*This world rejects me  
This world threw me away  
This world never gave me a chance:  
This world's gonna have to pay.  
Well I don't believe in your institutions  
I did what you wanted me to.  
I'm like the cancer in your system  
I've got a little surprise for you.  
Something inside of me has opened up its eyes.  
Why did you put it there, did you not realize.  
This thing inside of me, it screams the loudest sound.  
Sometimes I think I could...  
I'm gonna burn this whole world down.  
(Reznor, Trent. *nine inch nails*. "Burn")*

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