

Cyberpunk R.I.P.

I D É E S F O R T E S

A tekkie counterculture is born

By Paul Saffo

Like a sun-grazing comet on a deep-space trajectory, the cyberpunk movement is disappearing as quickly as it arrived just a few years ago. Moreover, the movement was hardly more substantial than a comet's fuzzy tail when it came to numbers – there were never more than 100 hard-core cyberpunks at any time before the term hit the mainstream press.

But don't sell cyberpunks's social impact short, for insubstantial comets have long served as messengers. I suspect that cyberpunks are to the 1990s what the beatniks were to the '60s – harbingers of a mass movement waiting in the wings. Just as the beatniks anticipated the hippies, cyberpunks are setting the stage for a coming digital counterculture that will turn the '90s zeitgeist utterly on its head. This movement in the making has yet to be described, much less named, but eerie parallels between the beatnik and cyberpunk movements offer strong hints of what is to come.

For starters, both movements were given focus by literary fiction. The beatniks took their cue from a handful of "beat writers" (Jack Kerouac, Alan Ginsberg, Gregory Corso, and William S. Burroughs), while cyberpunks found their identity in the cyberpunk science fiction genre defined by writers such as William Gibson, Rudy Rucker, Bruce Sterling, and John Shirley. Moreover, the lead works in both traditions orbited emerging infrastructures: Kerouac's *On the Road* played off the concrete mobility enabled by the Interstate Highway Act, while Gibson's *Neuromancer* portrayed a future world wrapped around vast information highways. Eager readers never realized that neither writer was really one of them: Kerouac disliked driving; Gibson banged out *Neuromancer* on a 1927 Hermes typewriter.

Like the cyberpunks, there were never more than a handful of true beatniks – less than 120 in all before the movement hit the media in the late 1950s, according to essayist George Leonard. Leonard's descriptions of the North Beach beatnik milieu parallel today's cyberpunk culture. Word got out on the grapevine of parties at people's "pads," and, like raves, these happenings quickly evolved into underground quasi-commercial events. Just as cyberpunks carry their network identities into the physical world, the beatniks were fond of pseudonyms. "Everyone had a name, like in a Damon Runyon novel," observes Leonard. Ironically, neither group named its own movement, for just as the cyberpunks were so dubbed by a literary interloper, the term "beatnik" was coined by *San Francisco Chronicle* columnist Herb Caen.

Once labeled, both movements quickly surrendered their visual archetypes to the cultural mainstream. In 1960, youths the world over were aping the goateed, cool-shades beatnik look, while today, PDBs (people dressed in black) affecting electronic lifestyles are more numerous than network nodes. This surrender would send both movements into the black hole of history, but not before they inspired

larger movements to come. Just five years after the beatniks's demise in 1960, the hippies emerged from the Haight-Ashbury to change our cultural landscape forever.

Like cyberpunks, the beatniks were for the most part low-key, slightly mournful loners. Beatnik individualism was a sullen and stubborn reaction to the optimistic company-man materialism of the Eisenhower era, just as the cyberpunks stand in stark contrast to the antiseptic military-industrial orderliness of the Reagan-Bush years.

But Kerouac later concluded that beat also meant beatific – imbued with joy or blessedness – and it was this aspect of the beatniks that became the germ of the hippie movement, according to Leonard. "It was a time of grace," he told me, referring to the early days of the Haight-Ashbury, when it seemed that a new age of cultural consciousness truly was dawning.

Optimism and a sense of community distinguished the hippies from the beatniks, and will also distinguish the cyberpunks from the coming digital counterculture. The cyberpunk world is starkly non-utopian, serving up the same sort of intimate but uneasy accommodation with technology portrayed in the movie *Blade Runner*. I will bet that the digital counterculture will reject this bleak vision of a future in which technology enlarges the human spirit as a new tool for consciousness in much the same way that the hippies appropriated the psychoactive chemical spin-offs of the military-industrial complex. This new movement will be cyberpunk imbued with human warmth, substituting a deep sense of interdependence in place of lone-wolf isolationism. Cyberpunks envision humans as electronic cyber-rats lurking in the interstices of the information mega-machine; the gospel of the post-cyberpunk movement will be one of machines in the service of enlarging our humanity.

It is too early to tell what the digital counterculture will call itself, but the history of the hippies offers a clue. "Hipster" traces its origins to "hipster," slang for a cruel and cynical 1950s subculture that predated the beats. The digital counterculture thus is likely to appropriate an older term for its own, in the same way that the hippies appropriated and turned "hipster" into something entirely new. I'll bet that they call themselves something like "tekkies," consciously adopting the scornful '80s slang for nerds, stripping the word of its industrial coldness and making it synonymous with the human control of technology.

Hippies appeared in 1965, several years after the beatnik movement had gone public. Given this chronology, the tekkies will arrive sometime in the mid-1990s, if not sooner. Watch the skies for a new comet – it will be digital, and its tail is likely to glow in Technicolor swirls. Its arrival will change our lives forever.

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