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What and Why was Postcyberpunk?
Greg Egan and Bruce Sterling in the 1990s

In 1998, Lawrence Person coined the term postcyberpunk to describe a form of science fiction writing that had appeared in the previous decade.[1] That cyberpunk is largely associated with the 1980s is convenient for historians of the genre, as the distinction between it and postcyberpunk has to do with shifts in decades, the change from one generation of writers and readers to another. Yet there is more to generic transitions than the passage of time. They can also be explained historically and, in the case of science fiction, explained as an effect of the history of technology. If in the 1980s such terms as the virtual and cyberspace looked to a future that had not yet come about, by the 1990s these words had acquired a certain materiality. It is amidst this materialisation of the future that postcyberpunk intervenes, its historical and technological conditions of production those that cyberpunk foresaw to some extent. If the early cyberpunk novels were composed on typewriters and imagined a future dominated by computers, by the 1990s computing had become an everyday technology. Not only digital but biological technology had become a marketable reality in the 1990s, and it is with these in mind that I want to look at the postcyberpunk novels of Bruce Sterling and Greg Egan, in order to

take Person's claims for a new kind of fiction seriously, and to supplement his observations with the techno-historical specificity of the 1990s.

In his short essay, Person calls science fiction author Bruce Sterling "Chairman Bruce," alluding to the role he has played as a spokesperson for the cyberpunk movement. Sterling's skills in articulating its ideas are on show in the Preface to the defining *Mirrorshades* collection, where he identifies the post-human and "tools of global integration" as two pre-eminent concerns of its authors.[2] In his postcyberpunk article, Person further argues that the hero of cyberpunk is "cold, detached and alienated." It is this abstract quality of cyberpunk characters, their reflection of corporate computing technology, that is disappointing for some readers of the subgenre. In an interview with postcyberpunk writer Greg Egan, Marisa O'Keefe voices her disappointment with a cyberpunk that promised emancipation for the subject but whose heroes never really broke with those masculine stereotypes that make up the patriarchal structures of so much narrative. O'Keefe reveals that her dissatisfactions with cyberpunk are grounded in more than boredom with an outdated mode of literary production, phrasing her disappointment in political terms: she says that while cyberpunk once had the potential to create "a good space for people to go crazy in and invent new possibilities for human interaction," it never delivered on these promises.[3] Instead, an older narrative heroism remained the template for cyberpunk, as men moved through corporate and military hierarchies that had been re-established in digital renditions of space.

The heroes of postcyberpunk are different: instead, having jobs. Person writes that they are "integral members of society," from "the middle class," with "families, sometimes even children." The postcyberpunk hero negotiates new technological

developments with the responsibilities and anxieties that come with bourgeois life. While it was possible for Sterling to describe cyberpunk as "radical Hard SF," insofar as its novels are more interested in technology than people, postcyberpunk represents a shift across the generic dyad to social SF.[4] As Person explains of these novels, "their social landscape is often as detailed and nuanced as the technological one." If the generic identity of cyberpunk lies in its dense and thriller-like interest in the aesthetics and pyrotechnics of near-future technologies, postcyberpunk is innovative on the level of cognition, as it wants to answer the questions posed by technology to subjectivity.

The transition from cyberpunk to postcyberpunk is most clearly traced in the work of Sterling himself, from the earliest novels, *Involution Ocean* (1977), *The Artificial Kid* (1980) and *Schismatrix* (1985), to *Islands in the Net* (1988), *Holy Fire* (1996), *Heavy Weather* (1994), *Distraction* (1998), *Zeitgeist* (2000) and *The Zenith Angle* (2004).[5] It is hardly possible to work through all of these novels here, except to make a few helpful comparisons. *The Artificial Kid* and *Distraction* both have heroes wanting to succeed in public life. The cyberpunk hero, The Artificial Kid, is a media star, living amongst other media stars in a real-time studio where fights and ongoing adventures determine their popularity for an audience that remains invisible in the novel. Cameras follow the Artificial Kid wherever he goes, in a life of extravagant celebrity and violence. The hero of *Distraction* is, instead—consistent with Person's ideas about postcyberpunk—a professional media campaigner. The reader meets Oscar as the publicity manager for a US senator, before he becomes the leader of a rogue scientific research station, and is finally employed by the US president in a mission to reunify a country that is fragmented amidst radical technological and social change. His success in each of these ventures

depends on his ability strategically to manipulate the American public and the players who vie for its attention. Like the Artificial Kid, his body has been modified. While the Kid can withstand superhuman amounts of violent conflict with his opponents, Oscar was grown by a renegade biotechnology corporation into a man with rapid attention capacities who needs very little sleep. His post-human condition enables him to key into events and information pertinent to the *zeitgeist* of a disintegrating America. That he is so successful at foreseeing the consequences of his arrangement of allegiances and scandals may well be due to a certain correspondence between his post-human condition, making him permanently hyperactive and distracted, and this similarly post-human and near future-historical situation.

It is tempting to identify this shift from the Artificial Kid's obsessive concern with appearance to Oscar's conspiratorial multiplicity as that between the televisual and computational, from the mass mediated 1980s to a networked 1990s. The situation of mediation has been appropriately transformed in *Distraction* to one of increasing complexity, a transformation analogous to those changes in the psyche that would seem to be necessary in an increasingly information-rich world. It is my argument here that postcyberpunk represents this change cognitively, in heroes who negotiate the new technological regime with changes made within the mind itself. Oscar's modified consciousness, which is able to out-think the various players on the American political board, is just such a change, as is the transformation he undergoes in the final pages of *Distraction.* Here the passage from one post-human state of consciousness to another is narrated through Oscar's inner monologues, as he inhales a modification to become a bicameral thinker:

> When he closed his eyes, Oscar actually could feel the sensation, somatically. It was as if his overtight skull held a pair of bladders stuffed inside, liquid and squashy, like a pair of nested yin-yangs. One focus of attention was somehow in "the front" and the other in "the back," and when the one to the front revolved into direct consciousness, the other slipped behind it. And the blobs had little living eyes inside them. Eyes that held the nascent core of other streams of consciousness. Like living icons, awaiting a mental touch to launch into full awareness.[6]

In a second knight's move away from the mind of a traditional biology, Oscar finds himself able to carry on two conversations at once, to sing and process mathematical equations at the same time, and to puppeteer American public life even more effectively.

Such narrative moments also represent a transformation in the relationship between cyberpunk's dyad of the post-human and the global. For while these technologies are internalised, in the cognition of the hero, they simultaneously reach out to the rest of the Earth. In the final pages of *Distraction* it turns out that the US president has also been infected with bicameral consciousness. To turn to another Sterling novel, *Holy Fire* (1996), is to find another internal and global representation of transformation, as 94 year-old Mia undergoes a radical rejuvenation treatment that returns her to the state of a twenty year-old. While this is supposed to be a physical reversion, as the flesh is emptied out and replaced from within, its effects are also mental. Mia loses the memory of her personality, comes to experience afresh the complexities of sexuality, naivety and a disdain for the elderly. When she rechristens herself Maya, she makes a definitive break with the gentrocrat population to which she once belonged. The gentrocrats are the aged overlords of a conservative Earth. They embody the post-human and the global, as technologies of life-extension enable them to hold onto power past the generational shift that would normally deprive them of it. Their wealth and obsession with life extension

finally leads to this rejuvenation experiment, which not only extends life, but restores youth. Yet the effects of the treatment will bring the gentrocrats to abandon it as a way forward, as Maya's internal life reverberates with the destiny of the world.

It is the personalisation of such transformations that makes postcyberpunk such a vibrant subgenre. The reader follows both Oscar and Mia through representations of their cognitive transformations, and also through their renewed understandings of life. For the gentrocrats of *Holy Fire*, life is only understood in terms of duration. When Maya untangles herself from the media apparatus and joins a drifting population of contemporary youth, she discovers a much more varied version of life brought into being by biotechnology. Whole cities are edible, crab-like creatures serve drinks on trains, people bathe in pools of cleansing moss, and intelligent dogs host television programmes. From living among the aged gentrocrats, stuffed with biotech and living beyond their sexuality, vitality and capacity to change, Maya discovers the world that is fastidiously avoided by the neurotic conservatism of the older generation. Rather than being obsessed with cleanliness and medical progress, Maya is sexually active, trusting and conscious of her own lack of self-knowledge. She could not be more different from the informed and regular person that she has abandoned, and whose thoughts Sterling narrates in the early part of the novel. Maya initially feels her past life as "nothing but a bundle of old habits," and eventually does not feel it at all.[7] Narrating Maya's transition from one state of mind to another, Sterling breathes personality into the cold reality of technological change.

It is to Greg Egan that we can turn for a second example of such narratives. His first novel, *Quarantine* (1992), narrates cognitive change from the point of view of Nick, a detective in the near future. In *Quarantine* the world has been transformed by

neurological technology and corporatisation. Nick's brain has been altered by "mods," or neurological modifications, manufactured and sold by megacorporations. Bought over the counter and inhaled through the nose, they enable their users to do everything from telling the time to accessing the internet, playing games to translating foreign languages. Simply plugging into these new technologies can, however, be a recipe for disaster in this Egan novel. The mod "Night Switchboard," for instance, cannot be used while awake for fear of serious disorientation. Knowledge is placed directly into the user's mind, so that one comes to "simply wake, *knowing.*"[8] Users come to the sudden realisation that a message has arrived, without the need for an interface. "Night Switchboard" is useful for communicating confidentially, since it is more difficult to eavesdrop on a knowledge that has not been encoded into language. The trauma associated with "Night Switchboard," however, places a certain distance between the subject and his technological instantiation. This distance is repeated throughout the novel as Nick constantly negotiates with his mods, his relationship with the virtual.

The innovation of the mod recalls George Alec Effinger's Marid Audran novels, published between 1987 and 1991. It is worth pausing on these books to map the transition from cyberpunk to postcyberpunk. In Effinger's *When Gravity Fails* (1987), *A Fire in the Sun* (1989) and *The Exile Kiss* (1991), cognitive changes are wrought by "moddys," which are not just additions to the personality, as in Egan, but take it over entirely. The term "moddy" applies not only to the technology itself but to the person transformed. So a prostitute wearing Brigitte becomes Brigitte, not to be confused with the person who is wearing this seductive personality. The second of these novels, *A Fire in the Sun*, begins to narrate the subject's relationship with cognitive change, the internal

struggle with technologies of the mind. After wearing a moddy that dumbs him down for reasons irrelevant here, the Audran character feels "angry for half an hour."[9] While this internal dialogue is an aside to the gangster narrative of this novel, in Egan it becomes the very motivation for the hero's actions. If the moddy is a convenience or inconvenience for Effinger's characters, in Egan the mod is a narrative device.

The moddy's total takeover of the personality is very different from the fracture that Egan's mods inflict upon cognition. In *Quarantine* Nick accesses mods without becoming them. They enable him to mine remote information databases and evade security systems, but also to induce different states of consciousness and talk to virtual personalities. One of these personalities is a simulation of his dead wife, who like some avatar for the superego scolds him for not being honest with himself. Nick has relationships with his mods, the boundaries between himself and them often more than blurred. He has, for instance, remained wired into one heightened-alert mod since his wife was killed, enabling him to short-circuit the grieving process. His emotional life is neurologically determined, the flow of his feelings twisted into the shape of his needs. The global dimensions of the mod appear when Nick is forcibly implanted with a loyalty mod that ensures he cannot disobey the company that has imposed it upon him. Nick's thoughts convolute as he struggles with the neurological twists and turns of a cognitive corporatisation. Here the globalisation, if not politicisation, of inner life marks out the postcyberpunk narrative, engaging with the technological conditions of global power.

Like any slave Nick is all too aware that he has been co-opted, that his loyalty is being enforced at the neurological level. Not free to be disloyal but free to think about his new circumstances, he internally negotiates with his new mod. While he knows that "my

emotions, my desires, my values, are the most anatomical of things," this anatomy is by no means rational. Nick declares that "I want to serve the Ensemble, more than I've wanted to do anything before. All I have to do is find a way to reconcile this with my sense of who I am."[10] At one point he reasons that he wants to be loyal to the company because he is loyal, just as "*If I was free, I'd want to be free.*"[11] Here a particular cognitive formation is mapped according to the technologies and political conditions that brought it about. The loyalty mod is an indictment of the situation of white-collar workers today, whose corporate employers demand both loyalty and a high degree of false personalisation.[12] The tensions between human and post-human, self and technologically modified self, become symptomatic of the individual's struggle with their own place in the regimes of this global corporate power.

Quarantine was the first of Egan's novels, following which *Permutation City* (1994) also reproduced internal struggles brought about by technological interventions into consciousness. The beginning of *Permutation City* establishes anxieties to do with technology and the mind by introducing the reader to a character that has awoken for the first time in virtual reality.[13] The anxiety here is not produced by the artifice of his surroundings, but by the realisation that he himself is a virtual entity, reconstructed from a scan made in the material world. His original self and his Copy talk through the interface between virtual and actual, the Copy demanding to be discontinued to relieve himself of the sensation of being buried alive. The next Egan novel, *Distress* (1995), opens with a similar demand for death from a character resuscitated by technology.[14] Danny is a murder victim lying dead in hospital. By pumping his body full of chemicals that would be toxic to the living, an investigator can bring him back to life for a couple of

minutes in order to ask him the identity of the murderer. The process backfires, as Daniel realises what is happening to him and screams in pain and terror. The tension in both cases, between the characters' expectations of their place in life and their post-human actuality, drives Egan's narratives.

Each of these novels, from Sterling's *Distraction* and *Holy Fire* to Egan's *Distress*, personalise post-human and global technologies. They narrate the ontological situation of characters caught up in changes to their own cognitive condition. Their situations are also historical, as these technologies are produced by a world that is in transition. It was not only the development of computing and biological technologies that influenced this writing, however. Global politics can also be found in each of these novels. Quarantine was published in 1992, just after the communist USSR and Eastern Europe made a sudden transition from monopolistic communist economies to monopolistic capitalist ones, and while China was beginning to open itself to foreign investment. These two events catalysed the economic globalisation we live amidst today, and to which postcyberpunk was an early witness.

The shift from cyberpunk to postcyberpunk was, as we have seen, one that described the cognitive changes that accompanied the internalisation of certain technologies, the virtual as it encroached further and further into the mind. That this internal colonisation is an effect of the fall of alternatives to capitalism in the external world may seem at first a stretch of the imagination, yet the appearance of these internal cognitive struggles does coincide historically with the unprecedented expansion of capitalism into the external world. The ontologies of postcyberpunk can be thought of as a kind of working through of this new situation for the subject. We can turn to two

examples from the 1990s that showcased the new roles of virtual technologies and biotechnologies in aligning the global with the cognitive. The first was the 1991 Gulf War, in which the US military showcased its armoury of remote, visually mediated destruction. The second was the development of genetic biotechnologies, which in this period came to demonstrate how easily the boundaries between capital and nature could dissolve, suddenly making science fiction scenarios of global biological transformation less fictional. These technologies were also caught up in an expanding regime of military and corporate power.

The 1991 Gulf War resituated the cyberpunk imagination into a fully articulated military campaign, as soldiers wired into interactive technologies carried out a campaign of destruction. That which O'Keefe once thought held "new possibilities for human interaction" quickly turned into a way of expanding US power in the world.[15] After this war the cyberpunk hero resembled less the protégé of a new technological era than the pilots of this wartime offensive. Yet cyberpunk was never a utopian subgenre. In its most famous novel, William Gibson's *Neuromancer* (1984), the spatialisation of the virtual takes place in a cyberspace that the military in fact invented. Gibson describes its origins: "Cold blue military footage burned through lab animals wired into test systems, helmets feeding into fire control circuits of tanks and war planes."[16] In *Neuromancer* this technology has mutated into a networked grid of three-dimensional graphics, virtualisation having taken on the scale of a corporate world-within-a-world.

The 1991 Gulf War made visible, in a worldwide television broadcast, the degree to which the US military had gone virtual. As the war showed off US military supremacy, it also occasioned the rise of CNN in a "successful convergence of the media and the

interests of the state."[17] CNN had near-exclusive broadcast rights from the US military, and subsequently a near-monopoly of the world's news broadcasts, in a globalisation of the militarised virtual. "We are no longer in a logic of the passage from virtual to actual," wrote Jean Baudrillard at the time, "but in a hyperrealist logic of the deterrence of the real by the virtual."[18] The conflation of the military-industrial complex with new technologies and a monopolistic American media appeared to overwhelm the possibilities of difference that O'Keefe once found in the virtual. Cyberpunk's interest in post-human technologies and the global was now in a politically dubious position. The situation was not without precedent for a genre interested in expensive technologies. After the moon landing, astro-futurist novels were associated with US manned space travel and all its propagandistic patriotisms and anthropocentrisms. Like the 1991 Gulf War, the moon landing also attracted record television audiences for a US technological achievement. If it was going to be innovative, space fiction after 1969 had to distance itself from these sentiments. So too postcyberpunk fiction, written in the 1990s, needed to put into place a certain distance between itself and this colonization of the virtual by the US military.

If the 1991 Gulf War opens an epoch of global virtuality, the development of genetic technologies throughout the 1980s and 1990s marks a new era in biotechnology. The ongoing mapping of the human genome, the manufacturing of cloned animals, and advances in genetic engineering, all represent epochal advances in the potential for technologies of life. These technologies made a large-scale appearance in the fields of both health and agriculture, after US courts ruled in 1982 that genetic life-forms could be patented. This ruling opened the door for companies to develop new immunisations and

to sell altered seeds on a global market. When in *Holy Fire* Maya catches a train across Europe, she looks out upon a changed landscape:

> The giant fungi weren't plants. They'd been designed to transmute air, water, and light into fats, carbohydrates, and protein, with a bioengineered efficiency previously unknown to the world of nature. A field of engineered gasketfungus could feed a small town. The fungi were two stories tall: dense, green, leafless, square edged, and as riddled as a sponge. Once you got used to the monsters, they were rather pretty. And it was nice that they were pretty, because they covered most of rural Europe.[19]

The kinds of changes that Maya's body represents are replicated in these vast fields of gasketfungus, their distorted formulations of the natural mirroring Maya's revitalised youth. These transitions, between technological developments and post-natural states, work through anxieties about new technologies and their globalisation. The spread of the gasketfungus over "most of rural Europe" parallels the ambitions of contemporary companies such as Monsanto, who continue to campaign for the adoption of genetically engineered crops all over the world.[20]

The global reach of both virtual and genetic technologies, the sense in which they have radically reconfigured the state of things, is embedded in postcyberpunk as a tension between the subject and this world that has been transformed by technology. Of cyberpunk, Fredric Jameson has argued that it is "fully as much an expression of transnational corporate realities as it is of global paranoia itself."[21] If this serves as a strategic definition of cyberpunk, postcyberpunk may be seen as the maturing of this paranoia, as the heroes of these novels come actively to engage with their global situation, constructing and reconstructing themselves accordingly. The post-human is symptomatic of a set of changes taking place not only in the technological world, but in

the historical one. It is with this sense of working through the implications of certain kinds of technologies in a certain kind of world that postcyberpunk offers a meditation on the historical circumstances within which it is written. It weds these technologies to their lived contexts, describing their experience and thus integrating the global with the personal, the abstract with the embodied.

A later novel by Egan is of interest for its departure from this dialectic of the global and the virtual. *Diaspora* (1997) is set almost entirely in virtuality, its disembodied characters roaming the interior of an orbiting supercomputer like children in an infinitely altering maze.[22] Yet even in this celebration of the virtual, in a novel devoted to exploring its most obscure possibilities, the global concerns of postcyberpunk rear their head like a monkey from some forgotten branch of the tree of generic development. For left behind on the Earth are the "fleshers" who have not been tempted to upload themselves into the high technologies that have been offered them. Their attachment to embodiment comes with its own problems, however, as the temptations of different kinds of genetic configurations have led to an array of human forms, from the zombie-like dream monkeys to ocean-going peoples sprouting gills and fins. It is here that the triangulation of postcyberpunk appears, in the form of the "bridgers" who are on an inter-generational mission to reunite the disparate genetic tribes. They are altering themselves and their future generations, in order to create a population who can keep the communication lines open across this world that has been abandoned by the virtual characters who occupy centre-stage in this novel.

The concerns of postcyberpunk, this work of bridging the post-human with the global, only appears briefly and very early in the novel, and here only to establish the

vertigo of a sheer virtuality represented by the interstellar, multi-dimensional journey that makes up most of the rest of the novel. The ascension of the virtual in this novel places the concerns of postcyberpunk in its historical place, as belonging to that period in which the virtual's influence—here represented by warfare and biotechnology—was in fact new. Postcyberpunk has in this case been absorbed into the greater concerns of science fiction, mirroring the fate of cyberpunk itself. As such, it no longer appears so much as part of a linear generic development, as a generic discontinuity that is all the more interesting for its distributed nature.[23] It has been rapidly absorbed into the contemporary production of science fiction, appearing within this narrative or that one only to be subsumed within more abiding concerns. This absorption can be thought of as a gauge of a set of anxieties that have been eclipsed along with their historical moment, of virtual and genetic technologies that have become more and more a part of the texture of the world.

NOTES

[1] Lawrence Person, "Notes Toward a Postcyberpunk Manifesto," reprinted in *Slashdot* (9 October 1999). Available at <http://slashdot.org/features/99/10/08/2123255.shtml> accessed 5 January 2007. Subsequent in-text references to Person are to this text.
[2] Bruce Sterling, "Preface," in Sterling, ed., *Mirrorshades: The Cyberpunk Anthology* (London: HarperCollins, 1986, vii-xiv), xii.
[3] Marisa O'Keefe in Greg Egan, "Interview with Marisa O'Keefe," *Noise!* (January 1998). Available at <http://gregegan.customer.netspace.net.au/INTERVIEWS/Interviews.html#noise> accessed 5 January 2007.
[4] Sterling, "Preface," vii.
[5] For the sake of brevity, I have excluded considering the short stories and non-fiction of both Sterling and Egan here. I have also left aside Sterling's collaboration with William Gibson, *The Difference Engine* (1990), which is more appropriately classified as steam punk or alternative history.
[6] Bruce Sterling, *Distraction* (New York: Bantam, 1998), 496-497.
[7] Bruce Sterling, *Holy Fire: a Novel* (New York: Bantam, 1997), 77.
[8] Greg Egan, *Quarantine* (London: Millennium, 1992), 3.
[9] George Alec Effinger, *A Fire in the Sun* (New York: Doubleday, 1989), 7.
[10] Egan, *Quarantine*, 84.

[11] Ibid., 136.
[12] For a description of false personalisation, see David Riesman, *The Lonely Crowd: A Study of the Changing American Character* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1961), 271.
[13] Greg Egan, *Permutation City* (London: Orion, 1994), 1-12.
[14] Greg Egan, *Distress* (London: Orion, 1995), 3-9.
[15] O'Keefe in Egan, "Interview."
[16] William Gibson, *Neuromancer* (New York: Ace, 1984), 51.
[17] Paul Smith, *Millennial Dreams: Contemporary Culture and Capital in the North* (London: Verso, 1997), 193. Smith gives statistics demonstrating just how much of the world was watching CNN at the time, and shows how they placed their footage with other channels such as ABC. Their project of broadcast domination was extended in the latest Gulf War.
[18] Jean Baudrillard, *The Gulf War Did Not Take Place*, trans. Paul Patton (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995), 27.
[19] Sterling, *Holy Fire*, 137.
[20] See Monsanto's homepage for details, especially <http://www.monsanto.com/monsanto/layout/our_pledge/facing_challenges/poverty.asp> accessed 5 January 2007.
[21] Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism* (London: Verso, 1991), 38.
[22] Greg Egan, *Diaspora* (London: Orion, 1997).
[23] Generic discontinuity is a term coined by Fredric Jameson in "Generic Dicontinuities in SF: Brian Aldiss's Starship," reprinted in Jameson, *Archaeologies of the Future: The Desire Called Utopia and Other Science Fictions* (London: Verso, 2005), 254-266.