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Funking up the Cyborgs

Alistair Welchman

Flame Wars: The Discourse of Cyberculture

by Mark Dery (ed.)

Durham, NC and London: Duke University Press, 1994

THEORETICAL RESPONSE to technical development tends to come in two overall forms: that technology is either transparent or opaque to society. The transparency thesis lays its cards directly on the table: technology is essentially neutral and has a merely instrumental relation to the social. Technology itself has no effects, it's all a matter of how it's used. The opacity thesis suggests, more sophisticatedly, that technology is *not* essentially neutral, but has effects of its own on social life. This thesis itself subdivides clearly into two: those who denigrate, and those who celebrate the effects of technology. The former category is the one that has been most filled by philosophers and theoretically minded social commentators, and includes, among others, Heidegger's analysis of technology, the Frankfurt School and Max Weber's account of modernity as accelerating rationalization. The latter category is associated primarily with two movements of, to say the least, dubious socio-political sensitivity: futurism and North American techno-libertarians such as Buckminster Fuller and Alvin Toffler, recently infamous again for a somewhat impolitic alliance with Newt Gingrich. Far from contesting the premise of transparency arguments, however, these views still think of technology as instrumental. It's just that instrumentality itself is regarded as a problem by the denigrators; whereas sheer increase in the prosthetic capacity of technology is regarded as a pretty much unmixed blessing by the celebrators.

Rather often theoretical contact is not even made with technology itself, and instead the 'discourse' of technology, or in the case of this collection, the 'discourse of cyberculture' is made into an autonomous object of analysis. This is a formalist move, and therefore has a strong conservative inertia to overcome: there is a tendency always to start out from the

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assumption that whatever else there may be to technology itself, its discourse or representation is grounded in the same cultural or discursive forms as other social phenomena or textual genres, and is, as the case may be, therefore predicated upon the capitalist, patriarchal or racist constitution of Western society or conformable to a canonical theory of literary analysis.

This sort of stance often takes science to task for its imperialist attempt to reduce cultural phenomena in their complexity and relative indeterminacy to a sound scientific base modelled on physics as the queen of the sciences. What is less often remarked upon is that discursive and culturalist analyses betray a similar reductive imperialism in their own attempt to show the rootedness of scientific and technological developments in cultural forms or discursive conditions. One is faced in the case of scientific reductionism with a purely technical solution to social problems (something that has obviously horrific resonance): but one is faced in the case of cultural, social and discursive reductionism with an equally absurd – although not perhaps as politically compromised – result: an account of technology that makes no reference to technology, but only to its representation. This representation has its conditions elsewhere (in the conditions of literary genre for instance) or has a relation merely of mimesis to social or psychic problems that are themselves not specifically technological (the familiar axes of oppression along the lines of race, class or gender). In the latter case one is often presented with a pretended materialism that takes no account of the material nature of science or technology, except insofar as they are symptoms of something else.

As the technology *du jour*, cyberspace is in a particularly difficult position, partly because it presents itself as a medium of communication and partly because the phenomenon itself has peculiarly close relations to a literary genre, cyberpunk. Cyberspace therefore appears to be intractably welded to representation, and a book about the discourse of cyberspace can, with at least some degree of plausibility, claim to be both about the representation of cyberspace and about cyberspace itself, thought *as* representation.

Indeed, cyberculture has added one more step in this cumulatively idealist conception of technology by a curious re-invocation of John Rawls's moral neo-Kantianism. The disembodiment supposedly associated with on-line communication is assimilated in Mark Dery's introduction to a technical instantiation of the veil of ignorance, behind which empirical characteristics of gender, race and class are hidden in such a way as to forestall prejudice (p. 3) and make possible an on-line community that conforms to a new standard of justice. At the limit this tendency, already clearly committed to such atrocities of the Western tradition as transcendental subjectivity, culminates in a full-blown 'cybergnosticism' (the term is Hakim Bey's; and Erik Davies notes the overtly Christian imagery of Vernon Vinge's novels, p. 42) in which the gory messiness of the flesh is transcended in a technologically re-armed version of Christianity. Long live the new software! Needless to say, a number of the other articles contest this reading –

especially Julian Dibbell's, which describes an on-line rape. But they do so only by reverting to other formalisms, bursting the bubble of enthusiasm over the rediscovery of yet another realm uncontaminated by anything empirical only through pointing out how current social and political problems are simply carried over into it. Technology *itself* is not interesting; what's interesting is only that its representation provides metaphors convenient for the expression of *other* problems. Technology is only the object of analysis in so far as it provides a *form of expression*.

In all these cases, the novelty of technical change is effectively crushed: if cyberspace is viewed instrumentally, it becomes just another instrument. And the consequences of cyberspace, as Scott Bukatman's (actually witty and informed but still limited) essay here shows, can be compared point for point with earlier technical developments, they 'are prefigured by a range of earlier discourses surrounding emergent information technologies' (p. 85). Cyberspace? We've seen it all before with the typewriter. Or, in Erik Davies's equally elegant and interesting attempt to pull the future back into the past, with Augustine's mnemonic exercises (pp. 32f).

If your only explicit focus is literary representation, then you get representations of cyberspace in which cyberspace itself plays no role at all. This is a pure representational formalism in which, as Peter Schwenger's article is honest enough to admit: 'specific content is less important than the fact of . . . disappearance' (p. 62). Disappearance here refers to the deconstructionist tenet that the conditions of representation are fugitive to representation. According to this particular canon of literary theory not only is content irrelevant, but form is too (since it just disappears). It is difficult to imagine a less productive approach to technology, one in which change is more comprehensively neutralized into sameness.

Elsewhere in the collection a more constructive formalism is mooted by Mark Laidlaw. He treats virtual reality in a more concrete way, as a useful plot device in science fiction novels; but, aside from paying no attention to the new relations that science fiction composes with both science and fiction, the notion of a 'plot device' as such is still essentially formal. It assumes a coherent set of functional norms to which a work of fiction must correspond, and suggests only that VR performs these functions more compactly than competing devices such as the dream sequence. This has at least the virtue of attending to the detailed mechanics of artistic production, but it's been a commonplace for some time now that artists have no particular privileged insight into their own works. (Indeed today the same is increasingly true of technological products as well.)

Culturalist readings – here three feminist accounts of cyberculture from Vivian Sobchak, Anne Balsamo and Claudia Springer, and one broadly Marxist from Gary Chapman – are markedly more theoretically adroit, but suffer from similar problems. All have a tendency to exploit the proximity of cyberspace and representation (through cyberpunk) so as to read the representation of technology as a symbolic expression of (real) social, political or psychological ills. In contrast to the cases where only the transcendental

conditions of representation or the empirical production of representations count, reality is here at least let in. But the primary focus is still on representations (mostly on cyberpunk literature); and what is represented is treated, for the most part, not strictly as technology, but as a technological figure of psychosocial anxieties.

Thus, the assumption is that ‘to fully investigate the *cultural* formation of what *Mondo 2000* calls “the new edge” would require an investigation of related discursive forms’ (Balsamo, p. 127); an assumption in which it is only the associations of representations of cyberspace that count as possible objects of (academic-theoretical) analysis: one goes from *Mondo 2000* to other discursive media in order to address a phenomenon that is emphatically (in the text) still cultural. Everything happens at the level of representation. The theological motif of disembodiment is, thankfully, subjected to critique; but only insofar as it is subject to a kind of simplistic psychoanalysis demonstrating that it symbolizes a desire to escape from material conditions. This can be deployed in a way that is frankly manipulative:

Writing at a historical moment when the starving or dead bodies of Somali children and the emaciated or dead bodies wrought by Bosnia’s civil warfare fill our TV screens . . . it is both comprehensible and extremely disturbing that *Mondo 2000*’s supposedly utopian celebration of the liberating possibilities of the new electronic frontier promotes an ecstatic dream of disembodiment. (Sobchak, p. 20)

Such deployments reveal profoundly reactive moralism that not only draws attention (yet again) away from technical changes themselves, but also helps to secure their miscomprehension by relegating them, if we ever make contact through the mists of representation, to the status of pure instruments. If political morality is the only reality (underneath all the representations) then technology has no particular reality except insofar as it either makes contact with that reality possible, or is used to escape it. Moralism about social issues is the flip-side of instrumentalism about science and technology. (In this case too, the point is rather badly taken in that the supposed base-line of the real is itself still essentially filtered through media technology, the TV, and conveys a similar sense of disproportion and ethnocentrism – responding to a calculus of Western and US interests – as do the Gen X So-Cal hacker trendies under attack.)

What seems peculiarly curious about this technique of reducing cyberspace to (its) representation – and then seeing even this as essentially expressing something else – is that even the cyberpunk novels that occupy a privileged position in such analyses are made thereby rather boring. What is supposed to be new about the cyberpunk vision is that, in Jameson’s phrase (much referred to in this collection), they have no political unconscious. But if, considered as expressions of contemporary disquiets, they hide so little, why spend so much time saying it? One is reminded of the joke

about *Alice in Wonderland*, that a psychoanalytical account of it would just involve reproducing the text word for word.

There is here, however, behind all this, a strong transcendental agenda, best summarized by Scott Bukatman's comment about Mark Twain's attitude to the typewriter: 'Twain relied on nature for the conceptual metaphors that would render the mechanical susceptible to thought; he reached with eagerness for the inconceivable, but could do so only in terms of the already conceived' (p. 85). The new, which enters society by means of technological change, can only be conceived, represented, in terms of the old. Gary Chapman's intervention, the only explicitly Marxist one in the collection, seems, in spite of itself, to support this hypothesis. By trying to suggest that the computerization of heavy industry in the core nations has led to a definitive alienation of producer from the process of production (and therefore inhibited revolution), one realizes just how little has really changed: first, just that alienation was the fundamental insight of Marxist theory already in the 19th century; and second, computerization in the core has simply exported heavy industry to a periphery hell-bent not on revolution but on becoming core.

But if Chapman's essay ends up showing how difficult and perhaps dangerous it is to think technical novelty without relapsing into anachronistic concepts, the other culturalist essays seem to take it as (transcendentally) axiomatic that we cannot access novelty at all. Claudia Springer's analysis of Jim Starlin and Diana Graziunas's novel *Lady El* concludes with the following words: '*Lady El* regards the possibility of life as a computer with the simultaneous fear and hope that *after all, nothing will change*' (p. 175). She hopes that nothing will change so that she will still be recognizably human; but fears stasis because it would perpetuate the patriarchy under which she suffers. This is a slogan that could just as well apply to the academic-culturalist contributions to this collection as a whole: a hope that nothing will change, and that their theories will still apply; co-mixed with a fear that this will be the case, not because the future is to be feared, but because the present is. It is important to recognize that this fear is not itself of the future: the future has been already effectively, transcendently neutralized by being made into an expression of the present; and the novelty that comes from the future rendered inaccessible.

It is also possible to offer a diagnosis of the limitations of these essays: they use theory as a tool that pre-exists its application, thus embodying as well as presupposing a mistaken understanding of technology as instrumental. I should add that these are nevertheless important contributions to an understanding of technology: it is always important to take apart the kooky and naive celebrations of technology that ignore unthinking masculinism and the conditions of capital that are the prerequisites of technical development. However, reductionist projects are always constraining: technology is not reducible to tools: cyberspace is not reducible to representation; and, in general, the future is not reducible to the present. If current concepts box the new up into the old, then what is needed is not

transcendental arguments that dwell on the absolute necessity of this, but new concepts (and maybe even philosophy as creator of new concepts).

Although such creativity is not unknown within the academy, it must be said that it is with the less academic articles – from an assortment of journalists, sci-fi practitioners, subcultural artists and even the odd academician – that the volume really begins to pick up speed. It is ironic that what many of the academic theorists take merely as objects for the application of their theories – the 'zines, novels and lo-tek hacker writings – are in fact producing much more on-stream theory than many of the professional theorists themselves.

At the heart of the book are three interviews conducted by the editor, Mark Dery, with Sam Delany, an SF novelist, Greg Tate of the *Village Voice* and Tricia Rose at NYU. In these interviews each participant tosses off lightly and conversationally a comment that severely contests the theoretical structure of the academic part of the book. Delany talks about laying the ground for 'a science-fictional critique of psychoanalysis' (p. 199). Greg Tate suggests that the most salient feature of science fiction writing is that 'SF eschews the psychological dimension in terms of character portrayal for a more all-encompassing look at the impact of the various institutions that govern behaviour and the transmission of knowledge' (p.211). And Tricia Rose, explaining the importance of hip-hop and its relation to the German band Kraftwerk, explains how we could have missed the truth that machines can 'be funky' (or how 'funk has been cyborged'): 'If we take a kind of Frankfurt School/fascist/industrial regimentation/lack of creativity as our model for the machine, then of course funky cyborgs would seem like an utter contradiction' (p. 213).

These are really important insights: if SF has eradicated psychology from its novels, then it has stopped being *about* human beings at all; it is not a literary genre like others (susceptible of the same formalist analyses), and it is especially not merely the expression of psychosocial fears or (more naively still) hopes. Similarly, if Kraftwerk could get all funky up, if machines could get directly intermeshed with desire and rhythm, then they are not (and never really were) merely instruments either to be used neutrally or conforming to a form of instrumentality that is corrupting the soul of humanity.

Of course, SF novels still often have characters of a more or less recognizably human variety. But this is more a matter of convenience or camouflage or just a residue. And if you want to focus on the extent to which SF is continuous with literary tradition, you can still do that (since the continuity arguments are transcendental, anything can be made to fit with them if you really want); however, the very residual nature of the humanist-psychosocial element will make the analyses particularly uninteresting. (Although this very boredom can become an object of interest again to persistent enough theorists; thus the 'no political unconscious' thesis.) Science fiction novels do not, above all, *represent*; they *create*. Most famously, William Gibson's coinage of the term 'cyberspace' produced a new concept that was at once

recognizable, and made possible the cognition of a whole new arena of the real that had already been constructed unconsciously by an array of convergent information-processing technologies. As Erik Davies acknowledges here ‘cyberspace . . . [is a] highly mobile concept, far more penetrating than mere “fantasy”’ (p. 30).

If one can get for a minute beyond discourse analysis, then the thesis that machines are instrumental becomes extremely important (it is, as suggested earlier, the crux of traditional philosophical and sociological accounts of technology). It is wholly possible to argue that technology has never been instrumental; but it is increasingly otiose because the current trajectory of technical development is clearly and explicitly non-instrumental. It is at this point, taking off again from Tricia Rose’s observations, that the two best essays in the collection – and the ones that make this book ultimately a really compelling read – press home a rigorous critique: Manuel de Landa’s wide-ranging and concise summary of the emergence of synthetic reason; and Mark Pauline’s recollection of Survival Research Laboratories’ Austria gig.

De Landa shows in detail the extent to which the technological research programmes of Artificial Life, and increasingly of Artificial Intelligence, have undergone a major shift from an analytical/instrumental approach – we need something to do just *that* (be intelligent, be alive) – to a synthetic approach in which the basic conditions are set up for the automatic self-construction of intelligence or evolution, and the systems are left to produce results that are essentially unpredictable to the system designers, and whose final utility is entirely contingent. In these cases there is no fundamental difference between the model system and the modelled system. The distributed and synthetic nature of the Internet or other cyberspatial systems in general (paradoxically a product of military paranoia) makes them equally good spaces for the autonomous and unconscious development of unforeseen products.

Mark Pauline and his SRL have been delighting (and scaring) audiences in the San Francisco Bay Area for some years now. Although often masquerading as a rock group, this should not be taken as a limiting definition of their activities. Indeed, with only barely Third World technology, Pauline has had notably more success in synthesizing robot motility than has MIT. The last word goes to him:

Aside from these basic considerations of scale and style, peculiar circumstances differentiate an SRL production from the outwardly similar technical activities undertaken by military, industrial or scientific organizations. Constrained by requirements of practicality, public opinion, or rationally explicable goals, other technically driven organizations nearly always exhibit dreary predictability in their products or restraint in their operations. SRL activities share their reliance on careful direction and scripting, their intentional or accidental provocation of relentless public debate, and their endless ‘official’ explanations of events. But for SRL, such practical considerations present only the flimsiest of barriers to unrestrained action. (pp. 287–8)

Almost the last word. Again it is a question of disguise here. But what if the other organizations are also front-organizations, and SRL were the truth of IBM?

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