
Review: The Post-Liberal Mind/Body, Postmodern Fiction, and the Case of Cyberpunk SF

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REVIEW-ARTICLES

John Fekete

The Post-Liberal Mind/Body, Postmodern Fiction, and the Case of Cyberpunk SF

Larry McCaffery, ed. *Storming the Reality Studio: A Casebook of Cyberpunk and Postmodern Science Fiction*. Durham, NC, and London: Duke UP, 1991. xvii + 387. \$49.95 cloth, \$17.95 paper.

We see through eyeglasses and contacts; we eat with dentures. We remove cataracts and replace the lenses. We insert video cameras inside our bodies to aid in “keyhole” surgery; we remove our gall bladders and throw them away. We replace our hearts, kidneys, and livers with other organs: human, baboon, or manufactured. By diet or surgery, we change the shapes of our breasts, faces, torsos. We transform inoperable brain tumors genetically into things we can destroy chemically. We abort fetuses, and create new life *in vitro*. And these are just the medical interventions. We also time-shift our simulation programming on television, put disembodied interlocutors on hold on our telephones, and post messages in electronic space through our computer modems. We jog through our cities acoustically jacked into our Walkmans.

We live through our technologies, as McLuhan says, mythically and in depth, everywhere and everywhen. Technologies are us. But we keep under control our anxieties about how close to our bodies and inner lives our technologies have gotten by keeping fragmented our awareness of an amplified new interface between machinery and the human body. By the same token, we also keep reduced and under control our sense of the transformative or transgressive technological potentials available for our minds and bodies. Nevertheless, many of us are still uneasy even with answering machines, and many of our most heated social debates and control initiatives have increasingly to do with technological interventions into our minds and bodies: pharmaceuticals, abortion, pornography, film and video, youth music, electronic games, programming: sex, drugs, rock and roll, and software.

Cyberpunk SF in the 1980s made a striking vision out of the tendency in our culture to program our mental lives and to mutate our bodies—out of the spreading designer phenomenon whose extrapolation is often described as body invasion (prosthetics, implants, genetics) and mind invasion (neurochemistry, neurosurgery, brain-computer interface, artificial intelli-

gence). Most of us spend our time at work, in shopping malls, or at home on the telephone or in front of the video screen, continuing to process reality through ego-identity and personality, and absorbing the new technical options on an ad-hoc basis into personal style. But when the technological interface is foregrounded, in the way that SF typically foregrounds a whole novel environment, then it can become much more striking, engaging, and unsettling. As an environment, technology can be fearsome, satisfying, sublime, responsive, or enigmatic—a second nature that is ready made, which solicits our constant response, and which, because it is *made*, can be potentially remade over and over again.

Cyberpunk SF was not the first SF writing to incorporate technological mediations of mind and body. A long line from Mary Shelley to Shepherd Mead in the 1950s, David Compton and Philip Dick in the 1960s, and, most prominently and influentially, John Brunner, Joanna Russ, and Sam Delany in the 1970s, though mainly unacknowledged in cyberpunk discussions, has experimented successfully with the ingredients of cyberpunk, including particularly the biology/electronics interactions. Nor can cyberpunk SF claim to be the first fiction of an underground or counterculture, which latter has consistently produced a steady stream of “dangerous visions” for a quarter of a century (including Michael Moorcock, J.G. Ballard, Norman Spinrad, and Marge Piercy), both in England and in the US, to name only two obvious sites, and not only inside the SF genre but also outside, in state-of-the-art “mainstream” fiction, from Richard Brautigan and Thomas Pynchon to Ann Beattie, Kathy Acker, and William Vollmann, and a range of writings based in the differentials of ethnicity, gender, class, sexuality, or other cultural articulations. It also seems exaggerated to describe cyberpunk SF as “the apotheosis of postmodernism,” as do Istvan Csicsery-Ronay (disapproving of its amnesia) and Larry McCaffery (approving of it as “mirror”), both here (182) and in the cyberpunk issue of the *Mississippi Review* (47/48:8, 266, 1988). Such characterizations, not only reduce the feature wealth of both cyberpunk and postmodernism, but also dilute cyberpunk SF’s normal specificity (and thus its specific novelty and effects) as a transitional literary form.

The cyberpunk phenomenon of the 1980s, including the label “cyberpunk” itself, which at this juncture seems likely to endure, became prominent, not only because of good marketing (by Bruce Sterling, John Shirley, Takayuki Tatsumi, McCaffery, and others), but also because in some way it touched a nerve. Our culture presents itself as being on the threshold of a major mutation of the liberal mind/body system of categories. The figuration of such a possibility as an everyday fact of life in a near-future projection makes for a novel and original literary subgrouping—especially as this is elaborated, in its current early forms, from the vantage of the lower or lowest social strata (extending upward from there, at least by implication, to the highest economic and status levels of global cartelization and symbolization). Previous approaches to this complex, like *Frankenstein*, Asimov’s robotics, or even Russ’s *Whiteawayan* induction-helmet cybernetics, have tended to figure the technological interface as either a narrative singularity (however powerful) in the world of the liberal mind/body, or as a narrative

setting of no direct consequence for the (chiefly higher-level and otherwise-consequential) liberal actants.

Cyberpunk, diverging from the prevailing previous accounts of technological anxiety, pro or con, has found a way to implode the traditional SF theme *par excellence* and to glory in a vision of the *banality* of the techno-human symbiosis in the post-liberal mind/body, from Gibson's constructs to Pat Cadigan's franchised personalities and synners. "Je est l'autre," wrote Rimbaud, an early punk (if pre-cyber) poet; in cyberpunk SF we become others not only for-others but also for-ourselves. At least in principle. Whether cyberpunk poetics has delivered or can deliver on this post-liberal, deconstructive, narratological principle, while producing texts that are narratively or conceptually effective, is another question that remains for a detailed critical discussion that is so far non-existent.

Meanwhile, the relatively modest proposition that cyberpunk SF can be seen as "one particularly intriguing example of the 'postmodernization' of SF" (McCaffery, "Introduction" 11) is both reasonable and a reasonable justification for the collection of art and commentary in the current volume. The framing difficulty of the text, however, is that McCaffery cannot make up his mind whether he wants to talk about literature or instead to make Significant Statements about Society. His approach to the postmodern is by way of technology, which is a narrative operator in the fiction and an economic and sensory/ideological operator in the society (mostly elided by McCaffery under the rubric "culture"). But McCaffery announces simultaneously and repetitively an affinity for the literature of the postmodern and a hostility to the "culture" of the postmodern. What possible grounds there may be for such a bifurcation never becomes analytically coherent in his presentation of his arguments.

Nonetheless, once the bifurcation is set in place, a kind of relationship of political epistemology is mobilized between the two terms by assertion. In effect, *postmodern culture* is somehow known to be a degrading effect of the logic of the new stage of multinational capitalism (after Ernest Mandel and Jameson) which underpins it. (Ironically, McCaffery makes prominent use of Jean Baudrillard's term "desert of the real," though this notion of "desert" is a recycling of De Tocqueville's aristocratic disdain for 19th-century American democracy.) At the same time, *postmodern literature*, including postmodern SF (cyberpunk), is to be applauded as the "break-through realism of our time," providing a "cognitive mapping" (again following Jameson) that can help us to situate ourselves in the distorting postmodern world (16). When all is said and done, McCaffery represents the literary innovation by way of an epistemological subordination of its poetics to a sociological imperative to produce a mimetic account.

By constantly diverting attention from the literature to such rusty sociographic theories, McCaffery manages to distract from the freshness of cyberpunk SF to the tragic tedium of a pseudo-theoretical academic discourse that is increasingly invading SF. In one way or another, explicitly or implicitly, the privileged interpretative terms and the privileged scale of assessment and evaluation associated with this discourse always rest on the proposition that

SF—or at least that SF which is worthy of serious attention—is the literary equivalent of the critique of capital. Another version of this proposition is that the world is sick and thus distorts everyday perception and experience; the job of art is to identify and resist the ever-new forms of the sickness, and the role of the critic/ theorist, miraculously healthy when armed with the truths known to an anti-capitalist hermeneutic, is to provide due political praise or disapprobation. An obsessive, simplistic, and devastatingly short-sighted schema.

McCaffery's desire to claim cyberpunk as both "rupture" (2) and "realism" (16), as not only innovative but uniquely and exclusively competent, and as not only "techno-urban-guerilla" art (12) but also a representation of "the most salient features of our lives" which, moreover, serves "to empower" us by providing knowledge to use against the "postmodern world that systematically distorts our sense of who or where we are, of what is 'real' at all, of what is most valuable about human life" (16)—all these are efforts to endow his enthusiasms with sociological density, political correctness, and epistemological urgency. This amounts to the cool, time-honored posture of the typical, adversarial humanist, forever colonizing new trends to suit an old argument. In McCaffery's case, however, irritating as each appearance of this automatically assumed posture may be in the context of an advocacy of literary innovation, at least it always seems a kind of afterthought, a shadow of his literary enthusiasms, rather than an antidote to them.

The enthusiasms have always been in evidence. McCaffery closed his introduction to the special cyberpunk issue of the *Mississippi Review* with characteristic promotional energy (if with somewhat questionable taste and judgment):

Almost twenty years ago, Jimi Hendrix (who seems to have stepped off the pages of one of c-p's [sic] wildest episodes), offered the following recommendation: "Electric woman waits for you and me. So it's time to take a ride." Ready? JACK-IN. (47/48:15)

Nor has McCaffery been alone in his enthusiasm for the novelties of the contemporary technoscape. It is well documented that Gibson, Sterling, and the rest of their group, like a whole generation that grew up with the ever-expanding technological apparatus of rock, film, and video, have continued to be exuberant fans of the technical trends of virtual reality. One has to work very hard to make out of cyberpunk SF a radical opposition. In the context of a generally perceptive article about punk music, even McCaffery admits this parenthetically (and goes on to ignore it, as he promises):

(For the present I will ignore the many ironies and complexities involved with capitalism's ability to co-opt instantaneously even those forms most expressly opposed to its operations.) ("Cutting Up" 293).

What remains is the *figure* of the rebel, outsider, social inferior, victim, punk, monster, Other. A narrative strategy. Strike a pose.

McCaffery's theoretical vices do not quite vitiate the virtues of this book, thanks to the merits of both his editing and the actual texts. McCaffery's taste in literature is excellent, and as a mediator of avant-garde literary

culture to a widening audience, his contributions—in volumes of interviews, biographies, bibliographies, and edited collections of fiction and criticism in books and special issues of journals (including the cyberpunk issue of the *Mississippi Review* already mentioned and the postmodern-fiction issue of the electronic journal *Postmodern Culture* scheduled for the fall of 1992)—continue to be bold, impressive, influential, and much needed. McCaffery likes to read good books; and his role, as in this text, in introducing interesting and off-beat literary artifacts to readers who might otherwise miss them, is to provide a laudable service with an infectious enthusiasm. This evaluation may stand, I suspect, even if his canonizing efforts, so soon after the emergence of a literary tendency, remain in the framework of a promotional enterprise on behalf of a mutually reinforcing affinity group.

Storming the Reality Studio is an expanded book-form publication of the special double number (47/48, 1988) of the *Mississippi Review* that McCaffery guest-edited. That issue was 288 pages. This book has 376 pages. That issue contained 150 pages of imaginative writing, more than half the text, whereas this volume has only 140 pages, just over a third of the text, preserving about a third of the special-issue material and adding some 80 pages. Three of the 24 authors represented are women: Kathy Acker, Pat Cadigan, and Misha. Eighteen of the 24 fiction entries in this section are excerpts from longer works of fiction. There are also four poems by Rob Hardin, and a short comic strip by Jim O'Barr. The cyberpunk material proper is about 88 pages in all, less than a quarter of the overall text, and it includes short pieces, frequently excerpts, by most of the well-known figures: Cadigan, William Gibson, Richard Kadrey, Marc Laidlaw, Rudy Rucker, Lucius Shepard, Lewis Shiner, John Shirley, and two pieces by Bruce Sterling—democratically presented in alphabetical order. K.W. Jeter is a notable absence. A story by Samuel Delany, "Among the Blobs," is also included, as it was in the special issue, although its designation as cyberpunk is oddly stretching a point.

This is complemented by some 52 pages of "postmodern" fiction, mostly two-three page excerpts from books, by Acker, J.G. Ballard, William S. Burroughs, Don DeLillo, Harold Jaffe, Thom Jorek, Mark Leyner, Joseph McElroy, Misha, Ted Mooney, Thomas Pynchon, and William Vollmann. The very short selections, even though McCaffery's excellent feel for what he reads guides him to intelligent choices, unfortunately amount to something less than the galaxy of stars might otherwise be. The package of deployed editorial strategies underwrites an end result where the values of the writings themselves tend to be subordinated, as I have suggested above, to a thesis about the Significant Value of Postmodern Writing as a mimesis of New Realities. As it turns out, the whole is less than the sum of its parts.

McCaffery's argument is that postmodernism is a set of ruptures and dislocations in postindustrial society and its culture, closely tied to technological developments, and that there is an international multi-media and multi-genre dialogue of writers, critics, musicians, video and performance artists, and so forth, linked by the fact that they are uniquely in touch with these changes in our global life and by the corresponding fact that they all rely on

"themes and aesthetic modes previously associated with SF" (2-3). McCaffery is particularly interested in showing that SF and avant-garde literature are related, and in showing the affinities between such "postmodern" writing and "postmodern" theory. The book includes a good short piece by Brian McHale which makes the arguments for the cross-fertilizing feedback loops between the different strata of culture and, in particular, between SF since the 1970s and state-of-the-art mainstream fiction. His emphasis falls on the *traffic* in models between different cultural sites, including the exchange of postmodern forms and ingredients (311). Although McCaffery's (like Gibson's) own preferences point instead to the popular thesis of postmodern *mongrelization* (266), that is, a melting of everything previously solid and the collapse of boundaries of genre and stratification, with the consequence of an ad-lib intermixing of declassified ingredients, McHale's article, which keeps its focus steadily on the literature itself, does probably more than any other to provide actual support for McCaffery's editorial goals.

Where the special issue had 130 pages of critical and theoretical commentary, all of it centered on cyberpunk SF, this book has 236 pages of discursive text, including all seven of the essays (but not the symposium) from the special issue, some new essays on cyberpunk, plus a number of short selections from noted theoretical texts. Thus there are two pages from Jacques Derrida's *Of Grammatology*, three pages from Jean-François Lyotard's *The Postmodern Condition*, ten pages each from Jameson's *Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* and Arthur Kroker and David Cook's *The Postmodern Scene*. None of these excerpts has to do with contemporary literature as such. The material specifically about cyberpunk SF includes interesting, though already familiar, testimonial entries by leading cyberpunk writers Sterling and Gibson (who are also represented in the imaginative writing section), as well as intelligent cartographic elucidations by one former and two current editors of *SFS*, Darko Suvin, Veronica Hollinger, and Csicsery-Ronay. Timothy Leary, David Porush, George Slusser, Brooks Landon, Tom Maddox, McCaffery himself, and Joan Gordon round out this section.

Slusser and Landon raise provocative problems about the relationships between visual image and language. Gordon, the only woman besides Hollinger in this section of 20 entries, occupies the token position of an affirmative "woman's point of view." The 12-page Kadrey-McCaffery annotated bibliography, "Cyberpunk 101: A Schematic Guide to *Storming the Reality Studio*," deserves special mention for its flashes of intelligence, linguistic interest, and canonizing effectiveness. At the same time, it must be lamented that neither this article, nor any other in the volume, makes any learned effort to connect the new SF with either the genre tradition of SF or the wider traditions of American fiction that lie behind or beyond the experimental (postmodern) subsection of the contemporary.

These pieces generally are of a good quality, but are all overviews on roughly the same level of abstraction and in many respects overlap: good for a first approach, including a first approach to marketing, but they leave a lot

to be desired in terms of any subsequent investigation or assessment, not to mention the analytic or theoretical needs of an academic audience for which the book appears to be designed. (Apropos of this latter, the absence of an index is a real shortcoming; apart from the inconvenience to the reader, it means also the loss of a pedagogic opportunity to make explicit some of the linkages that are announced in McCaffery's "Introduction.")

So what do we have here as an overall collection? Read for their own virtues, singly, all the entries may stimulate a reader entirely new to them with their own qualities. Taken together, the selections may frustrate both those readers familiar with their sources (which offer not only more but sometimes different and actually more pertinent dimensions) and also those wishing to explore the implications of the materials and especially of the thesis that links them together. On the title page, the book is subtitled *A Casebook of Cyberpunk and Postmodern Science Fiction*, but the book's cover drops the "science" and makes the larger claim of *A Casebook of Cyberpunk and Postmodern Fiction*. An error, no doubt, but it is emblematic of McCaffery's own slippery theoretical formulations whose immodest rhetorical intent is, first, to dismiss "most contemporary American authors," "with only a handful of exceptions" (9) as obsolete; second, to advocate postmodern fiction—especially where it borrows from SF—as the only fiction that is in touch with the novelties of "the postmodern condition"; and finally, to promote cyberpunk SF as the cutting edge of postmodern fiction on the argument that it alone deals systematically with the most crucial issues of our day.

The "casebook" in truth provides not nearly enough "case" material about postmodern fiction (a few pages of literary excerpts and no critical analysis) to permit any conclusions about it at all. Nor is the "postmodern condition" documented with evidence or argument beyond the occasional rhetorical allusion to some new stage of capitalism that is multinational and deeply involved with cybernetic, informational, and cultural technologies. Perhaps, if McCaffery's "Introduction" had been included as just one among the many alphabetically ordered discursive essays in the text, the text might have been more readily susceptible to alternative appropriations. As it is, his effort to frame his editing work in an encompassing argument forces the conclusion that his case about postmodernism is not made.

There may just be something of a case here about cyberpunk, however, at least in terms of the amount of critical discussion and the number of imaginative entries. But a better book would have had more fiction and a more variegated set of approaches to the materials, including more close-up analysis and more scholarship with respect to intertextual contextualization. And the most modest and most reasonable case that McCaffery wants to establish—which is also the most congenial and the most interesting and valuable—to the effect that American culture now comprises a notable interaction between genre SF and the literary avant-garde, would have benefitted from a less lazy reprise, four years after the fact of the special issue, of the latter's uniquely cyberpunk-related critical focus, and a more intensive inquiry into the relations between prominent contemporary literary categories.

I would stress, as well, that novel payoffs might accrue to a literary poetics that escapes being held in privileged interpretive bondage to a given socio-economic schematism such as McCaffery attempts to sustain. The speed and density projected as the everyday, near-future, urban experience in the most successful cyberpunk works—whether read as analogy to the present or extrapolation forward, and whether their readers are identified with punk, underground, or countercultural marginality or with some other social position altogether—may arguably deliver their exhilarating effects precisely because these *do not underwrite* with any special privilege the cognitive transparency and rhetorical critique that occupy such central position for McCaffery.

In this respect, *against* the grain of the framing commentary, the texts may be appropriate as aids in withstanding the apocalyptic disdain for the present that has always been a hallmark of the political and humanist traditions that McCaffery and so many other literary or cultural critics espouse. If indeed the near future holds a world “unimaginably transformed” (9), then we are well advised to look for intellectual tools that do not constrain the articulation of fictional allusions to that unimaginable transformation by reducing them to a thin congruence with the always already pre-conceived terms of a consoling incantation about the capitalist “logic that underlies the postmodern condition” (16).

In the specifics of the matter, I would venture one step further. Cyber and punk together have accounted for the power and flavor of the 1980s version of the technological interface in SF. And yet, the future of the writing around that interface probably lies beyond that collocation. My guess is that the exhilaration of adventures in cyberia has finally wider resonance than the punk’s eye view of urban desperation and technosleaze. The punk form of literary cyberiana, I expect, belongs to a specific moment. Not only does it not exhaust the formal possibilities of the fictive region, but it signals only the early stages of a thoroughgoing literary interest in whatever may be conceivable for a technological imaginary, and especially for its still only embryonic post-liberal varieties. There is no reason why the allegedly “totally ambivalent” cyberpunk attitude to technology (“An Interview with William Gibson” 274) should not prove susceptible of interesting fictional figuration, within and without SF, in relation to a variety of emplotments and a range of differentially elaborated matrices of conceivable social and cultural strata. The destiny of such literary exploration does not depend on the current forms of cyberpunk SF, which may therefore continue or atrophy, as the case may be, without diminishing the merits of what has been achieved in the first heroic moments.

In this vein, a final comment may be appropriate. The “reality studio” (in that phrase from Burroughs’s *Nova Express*, further popularized by Leary and friends in the psychedelic era) is not the kind of thing that is literally susceptible to being stormed, captured, destroyed, or emptied out, and there is no utopian consolation entailed in confronting the machineries of semiotic control. The title of the volume is itself an instance of McCaffery’s constant and politically motivated back-sliding toward the clichés of some kind of

neo-realism, given to privileged representation. By contrast, if the *pluralization* of realities were to become an ontological feature of prominent literary and conceptual trends, in and out of SF and SF-related critical discourse, as it has already in *some* cyberpunk and postmodernist texts, and if this pluralization could escape being reduced by powerful objectivizing currents of thought, then the postmodernization of the cultural agendas might indeed take on and consolidate some novel imaginative forms.

What is likely to remain of interest about this new McCaffery volume, then, is not so much whether in the aggregate it provides or fails to provide a realistic and sustainable cognitive mapping of "our" future or a prefiguration of the future of significant SF or non-SF avant-garde literature at large. Rather, its achievement, like its ambition, is likely to be measured in terms of its relative successes in fixing within literary time a moment in the emergence of the figuration of a post-liberal mind/body conception. If the emergence is successful and the figuration survives, then, in time, similar and related figurations are likely to mutate through literature, philosophy, and the arts in ways yet unknown. Some morticians already anticipate that cyberpunk SF *per se* may be moribund today and, by then, long dead. But it will have given birth to something new and viable. Long live cyberpunk.

Istvan Csicsery-Ronay, Jr

Postmodern Technoculture, or The Gordian Knot Revisited

Fredric Jameson. *Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*.

Durham, NC: Duke UP, 1991. xxii + 438. \$34.95 cloth, \$19.95 paper.

Andrew Ross. *Strange Weather. Culture, Science and Technology in the Age of Limits*. London & NY: Verso, 1991. 275p. \$59.95 cloth, \$16.95 paper.

Constance Penley and Andrew Ross, eds. *Technoculture*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991. xvii + 327. \$39.95 cloth, \$15.95 paper.

Ever since we have had "Western" history, we have been taught to admire Alexander's bold stroke, when he sliced through the decadently over-complicated Gordian knot with the consummate logic of his sword blade. Somehow that use of force became associated with reason, and theory became the razor, the keen edge, the brilliant stroke that could cut through the tangle of the world. With postmodernism and what Fredric Jameson calls postmodernism theory, the knot is making a comeback.

The Gordian knot is a good emblem for the problem of postmodernism. For the postmodern sensibility, the threads of the world are inextricably intertwined. What earlier eras took to be different categorical levels, hierarchical heights and depths, postmodernism sees as twists and loops. With the debunking of the ideas of origins and ends, signs and referents,