



The Souls of Cyberfolk: Posthumanism as Vernacular Theory.

Thomas Foster. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2005. xxix + 312pp. ISBN 0816634068.

Sometime between 1981 and 1984, cyberpunk appeared. Initially a vociferous movement within American print *sf* (science fiction) centred around William Gibson, Bruce Sterling, Lewis Shiner, John Shirley and Rudy Rucker, it was, according to Sterling's relentless proclamations and provocations, devoted to shaking up a moribund genre by making it culturally relevant. New technology was no longer big, analogue, and out there, but small, digital, and intimate. Speed was replacing accumulation in a global system of nations and governments deemed hopelessly bureaucratic and made redundant by globalised and (purportedly) flexible capital. Old hierarchies of class, race, gender and sexuality were (supposedly) being dissolved as commodities became the key to identity. Coke and amphetamines were replacing dope, just as surely as mixing decks were replacing guitar-based rock, tactics were replacing strategies, and resistance, revolution. The streets, in Gibson's famous words, were finding their own use for things. This was the new reality *sf* needed to tell. But then, just as we were learning about cyberpunk in slick lifestyle magazines like *Omni*, *The Face* and *Wired*, and finally getting around to reading Gibson's *Neuromancer* (1984) to see what all the fuss was about, so the cyberpunks declared the movement already over and done with. And in case anyone doubted them, along came the neutered US version of *Max Headroom* (1987-1988), Billy Idol's album *Cyberpunk* (1993) and films such as *The Lawnmower Man* (Leonard, 1992) and *Johnny Mnemonic* (Longo, 1995) to drive a stake through its heart. At least, that is how the story is usually told.

Thomas Foster, however, is a dissenting voice, contending that “cyberpunk didn't so much die as experience a sea change into a more generalized cultural formation” (xiv). Both popular and critical treatments of cyberpunk tended to focus on Gibson's vision of cyberspace, the realm of information and exhilarating disembodiment into which the jacked-in hacker would plunge, leaving the cage of the flesh behind. The glamour quickly faded, though, as VR failed to arrive and successive Microsoft upgrades made the fantasy of a sexy—or even intuitive—GUI seem even more improbable. Foster turns to Sterling's *Schismatrix* (1985), with its future solar system of posthuman “clades” or “daughter species” cybernetically and/or genetically engineered from humans, to remind us that, despite the attention paid to cyberspace, such fantasies of corporeal plasticity were as central to cyberpunk as those of virtual disembodiment. Consequently, “the idea of the posthuman as it circulates today perpetuates cyberpunk in a more or less displaced form” (xviii); and cyberpunk should be understood not as “a literalization of postmodern theory” (xviii) but as “a rescripting of key concepts within postmodern theory” (xix)—as vernacular theory.

Foster draws upon the work of a daunting roster of critics and theorists, from Gloria Anzaldúa and Arjun Appadurai to Sherry Turkle and Slavoj Žižek, with admirable ease and precision in his sophisticated and wide-ranging discussions of *sf* novels and stories (by Gibson, Sterling, Pat Cadigan, Richard Calder, Greg Egan,

Maureen F. McHugh, Ken MacLeod, Melissa Scott and Neal Stephenson, among others) and numerous other cyberpunk texts, including *RoboCop* (Verhoeven 1987), the video for Billy Idol's *Shock to the System* (1993), commercial artist Sorayama Hajime's "gynoid sexy robots" illustrations, *Cyberpunk* and *Deathlok* comics, and *Future Sex* magazine.

Chapter 1 situates cyberpunk (and *sf*) within a history of conceptualizing the (posthuman) malleability of embodiment and consciousness, arguing that such imaginings respond to "a popular need" (p. 10) for a more complex sense of self than Cartesian dualism offers. Chapter 2 makes the case that cyberpunk addresses this need by moving beyond the binaries of "universality/particularity, mind/body, culture/nature, freedom/determination, individual/social, and hardware/software" (p. 50) that often underpin posthumanist thought. Chapter 3 focuses on fetishism, arguing that cybersex potentially challenges normative sex-gender roles (although a number of the illustrations in this chapter point to the extent to which this is only—if always—a potential).

Chapters 4 and 5 find similar potentials in the gender and racial "cross-dressing" made possible in the virtual realm, while also noting the ways in which performativity can further reify normative identities; the latter chapter is particularly astute, noting that in cyberspace, "white people as well as blacks must pass as white to be recognized as such in the absence of their bodies, and black people as well as white must put on a kind of blackface to be recognized as black" (p. 167). Chapter 6 takes the cyborg as a figure of trauma for a white masculinity that feels threatened by "feminist and antiracist multicultural social movement" (p. 173). Chapter 7 considers the ways in which the virtual offers the possibility of new identity-communities even as it undermines locale or ethnicity as sources of identity-community.

As this outline suggests, *Souls of Cyberfolk* is never less than interesting (and is often quite brilliant), but it also never quite coheres. Despite presenting itself as a monograph, it is really a collection of essays; and as Foster himself notes, the structure of the book "recapitulates and moves beyond the tendency for technoculture studies to privilege the critical perspectives technologies offer on gender and sexuality, and to minimize their implication for race and ethnicity" (xxvii)—early chapters focus on feminist and queer theory, later ones on postcolonial and critical race theory. Chapters 2, 3, 4, and 5 are somewhat revised from articles published in the 1990s, which were of undeniable significance in the development of the critical and theoretical literature on cyberpunk. It is good to have easy access to them in a single volume. However, in a sense they have not been revised sufficiently in response to the marginalisation of race and ethnicity in the literature on cyberpunk to which Foster draws our attention; they are too much of a recapitulation. Consequently, the substantial and significant treatment of race and ethnicity in Chapters 5, 6, and 7 seem more of an "adding on" than a "moving beyond"—but it is a major step in the right direction.

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