

Liz Holliday on the dawning of new age fantasy

## Technovisions

Cyberpunk has imploded. Fine - but what was cyberpunk in the first place? It was near-future slum cities full of street *yakuza* with their bodies modified to suit the fashion of the moment. It was Japan dominant. It was consumerism gone mad. It was personality modification by drugs and hardware. It was corporate politics and corporate espionage. It was sleaze. It was artificial intelligence. Above all, it was computers: specifically, computers accessed directly by the brain of the hacker, who perceived the operating system in terms of three-dimensional imagery.

To some, Cyberpunk was the only valid mode of writing speculative fiction in the 80s. To others, it was less a subgenre of science fiction than a marketing niche. And to others still, it was simply something to be ignored until it went away, or was subsumed into the style vocabulary of accepted science fiction modes.

For visual references, think of the films *Bladerunner*, *The Terminator*, and now *Akira*. The literary antecedents are more difficult. The Authorised Version would have it that cyberpunk began with the publication of William Gibson's *Neuromancer*. The truth is more complex. Literary apologists for the subgenre would attempt to legitimise it by quoting William Burroughs and Aldous Huxley.

However, its roots also go back into sci-fi history: the work of Alfred Bester is an important source, as are the novels *Nova* and *Dhalgren* by Samuel Delany; one less often quoted is James Tiptree Jr's fine short story, *The Girl Who Was Plugged In*.

There is a notion current in some circles that cyberpunk was only ever 'toys for the boys'. This is nonsense. James Tiptree Jr was a pseudonym for the late Alice Sheldon. Gwyneth Jones has long played with cyberpunkish tropes. So has Pat Cadigan. Canadian writer Candace Jane Dorsey has produced a delightful satire on the whole idea in her story *Machine Sex* (in a collection of the same



Mervyn Peake supplies an image for new age nightmares

name from *The Women's Press*). The idea of this subgenre as a male preserve is just another attempt to limit what women can or should do. It's an update on the old idea that science fiction as a whole is not a very 'feminine' genre.

But cyberpunk couldn't last. It is dead, for three very good reasons.

The first is that it was almost too powerful. Its themes and images were rapidly taken up by so many writers that they became part of the mainstream of science fiction, to be employed as and when useful - part of the background of a story, rather than the *raison d'être* they had been at the beginning.

Also, fans and readers (not quite the same thing) quickly caught on to what rapidly became marketing hype. Science fiction fans are a bolshie lot almost by definition, and they refused to put

up with what they saw as exploitation. Besides, many of them knew that Gibson had merely put a name to a phenomenon that had been around for much longer.

Secondly, the real world is catching up with the fiction too fast for it to endure. Hard science fiction writers work by catching the swell ahead of the wave. By the time the wave has crested - never mind the moment it breaks on the shore - they are off exploring some other idea.

Virtual reality is the buzzword of the moment in computer circles. Powerful processors generate three-dimensional imagery, and hardware interfaces allow the user to move within it as if they were there. Anything you can imagine, the computer can create.

At the moment, the technology is cumbersome. It is necessary to wear special data gloves, headsets and

suits in order to use the system. But the rate of change is such that it will not be long until such equipment is relatively common. Already there is in Chicago an amusement arcade featuring virtual reality games - and the proprietors are planning another for London.

The third reason is that there has been a change in sensibilities. Yuppiedom is no longer fashionable - even among yuppies. Consider the difference between the acronym Young Upwardly Mobile Professional Person, and the one that is swiftly replacing it in America: Lombard - Lots Of Money But A Real Dickhead. It doesn't leave a lot of room for doubt.

The caring 90s - if they prove to exist - are hardly likely to have room for that ideal. To find out what will replace cyberpunk, look to what has replaced relentless upward mobility in the mass consciousness: the new age.

Its avatar in speculative fiction (speculative because it cannot be restricted to mere science) is 'techno-baroque'. This is a literature of excess, where hermetic magic, surrealism, symbolism and technology meet and cross-fertilise. This is fiction with the borders down.

It did not start at the beginning of 1990. For its origins, look to Tim Powers (*Dinner At Deviant's Palace*, *The Anubis Gates*), James Blaylock (*The Digging Leviathan*), *Batman* - the movie; and, earlier, the Marquis de Sade, Dali, Bunuel and *Gulliver's Travels*. It's Mervyn Peake, Rabelais and *The Picture Of Dorian Gray*; Breughel the elder, and Baron Harkonnen from *Dune*. In short, it's inclusive rather than exclusive. If you think something might be techno-baroque, it almost certainly is.

As for current practitioners, look to Storm Constantine's *Hermitech*, and Mary Gentle's infinitely more successful *Rats And Gargoyles*. Try Neil Gaiman's surreal *Sandman* comic, or watch *Twin Peaks*.

Techno-baroque did not start in the 90s. It will not end with them. And remember, you heard about it here first. 0