CYBERPUNK LITERATURE AND SLOVENES:
TOO MAINSTREAM, TOO MARGINAL, OR SIMPLY TOO SOON?

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One of the most popular coinages of 'eighties America seems to be the notorious term "cyberpunk". The term covered everything from popular movies such as *Robocop* and *Terminator*, comics, video production and increasingly popular Japanese manga cartoons, to music from such diverse authors as Laurie Anderson and Billy Idol. But the phenomenon did not stop there: cyberpunk became a specific way of life, demanding certain behaviour, a dress code and so on.

The notoriety and commercial exploitation of the term today make it hard to believe that the origins of what was later to become "cyberpunk culture" are in fact to be found in a literary movement at the beginning of the 1980s within the genre of science fiction. The members of the movement (William Gibson, Bruce Sterling, Rudy Rucker, John Shirley and Lewis Shiner) originally called themselves simply the Movement until, on December 30, 1984, Gardner Dozois published the article "SF in the Eighties" in *The Washington Post*, using the word "cyberpunk" to denote the work of the above authors. Since then, all the output of the members of the Movement, as well as that which shared some of the Movement's characteristics,[1] was generally referred to as cyberpunk literature.

Although most authors who are by definition considered cyberpunk are less than keen to admit that they have anything to do with the term, the combination of *cybernetics* and *punk* does not seem entirely inappropriate to denote their work, since it covers the main characteristics of such writing, be it stylistic, aesthetic or in terms of content.

As far as the content goes, cybernetics defines the prevalent theme – computers and interactions among them – thus making cybernetic systems ("Complex network structures consisting of a number of heterogeneous elements creating multiple simultaneous interactions between subsystems")[2] the unavoidable central motif. On the other hand, complex systems and the interactions among them lie in the very gist of postmodern culture and philosophy, where the subject-object relation is no longer justifiable and consequently inappropriate for a

1   Cf. Greg Bear, Pat Cadigan, Richard Kadrey, Marc Laidlaw, Lucius Shepard, Walter John Williams, Tom Maddox, Michael Swanwick etc.
2   Janez Strehovec, *Tehnokultura, kultura tehna: filozofska vprašanja novomedijskih tehnologij in kibernetske umetnosti* (Ljubljana: ŠOU – Študentska založba, 1999) 133.

description of global relations. Cyberpunk literature is a product of a culture defined by cybernetic systems, mirroring the era of cybernetics.

The second word of the portmanteau, "punk," is perhaps even more important for understanding cyberpunk aesthetics than the first. A number of authors played in punk bands or considered themselves part of the punk movement. Most authors admit to being heavily influenced by the work of punk icons such as The Sex Pistols, The Residents, Patti Smith, Meat Puppets and others. The central purpose of both movements seems to be the undermining of genre conventions by juxtaposing elements that by definition do not belong together or are used in a manner that is shocking. Both punk and cyberpunk are consequences of a desire to bring the genre back to its mythic, primeval origins. "Like punk music, cyberpunk is in some sense a return to the roots. The cyberpunks are perhaps the first SF generation to grow up not only within the literary tradition of science fiction, but in a truly science-fictional world. For them, the techniques of classical "hard SF" – extrapolation, technological literacy – are not just literary tools, but an aid to daily life."[3]

Today it is virtually impossible for a researcher of cyberpunk literature to ignore the extremely intensive theoretical debate that followed the emergence of cyberpunk movement both within literary science and general cultural studies. The question that lies at the very heart of theoretical disputes is much more problematic than it seems at first: just what is the place of cyberpunk literature within existing contemporary literary practices, especially literary postmodernism?

Each new literary movement is a reflection of the age in which it was formed. Cyberpunk literature is quintessentially linked to the forming of the information society, the rise of technology, globalization, the alteration of the production relations and so forth, which force the individual to outline anew the limits of their subjectivity and identity, provided that such outlining is still feasible. Today's technology is developing in a direction that no longer allows differentiation on the basis of traditional social binarisms of the type I-Other, natural-artificial, spirit-body, alive-dead, man-machine, male-female. What at the end of the 1970s still existed on the level of philosophical speculation and poststructuralist thought has in the last two decades materialized on the level of everyday physical reality.

The environment that produced the literature of postmodernism predicted the unification of all discourse on the theoretical (philosophical) level; therefore it is understandable that in postmodernist works the problems of the indefinability of a subject, reality or a higher, transcendental truth are reflected only at the level of form, glittering through metafictional practices, the mixing of genres, quotations and so on. In cyberpunk, however, all these elements move into the story. Cyberpunk heroes have no identity of their own, since "identity" is crucially linked to selecting among traditional binarisms. In an age defined by technology such binarisms disappear and identification is rendered impossible. Literary personae in cyberpunk novels remain at the level of types, which is the closest they can

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3   Bruce Sterling, "Preface from Mirrorshades," *Storming the Reality Studio*, ed. Larry McCaffery (Durham: Duke University Press, 1991) 344.

approach to the idea of subjectivity.[4] As such they are a reflection of individuals in the informational age, for whom the only identification possible remains identification with what we buy and what we do, since only thus can we to some extent identify with the typified personae in commercials and sit-coms.

In postmodernist literature, the formation of multiple realities was achieved through juxtaposing different literary discourses and is thus merely implicit. In cyberpunk, however, the existence of multiple realities is no longer a subject of speculation, but a proven fact and it can therefore enter the story. Individuals conditioned by the informational society and technoculture no longer ask themselves questions of an epistemological nature, but ontological ones: which of the worlds am I in, how do I differentiate between different worlds, in which of the worlds is my decision correct? These are the questions that cyberpunk heroes ask themselves as they travel through the non-space of the Net, as they are wired on a "simstim" unit, as they move through the islands of wealth, poverty and war.

The world of cyberpunk is basically our world. Or so it seems. One of the most important novelties of cyberpunk literature is selecting certain elements that already exist in our culture and using them to build artificial worlds that we can seemingly relate to. Literature being one of the media in a society defined by the media, cyberpunk's artificial worlds and protagonists serve as a model for real life. In this respect, the worlds of cyberpunk represent simulacra of the third order – copies without the original serving as originals for further copying - in the sense of Baudrillard's predictions regarding the development of literature in the postmodern age.

As for the relation between cyberpunk literature and genre science fiction, we can say that although cyberpunk originates in science fiction, the role of genre in general becomes problematic with postmodernist unification of all discourse. Furthermore, the postmodernist motto "Nothing is real, everything is permitted" undermines the very gist of science fiction, the element upon which the genre as such is established. How can a reader doubt the uniformity of ontological order, which is crucial for establishing the element of the fantastic, when they no longer believe in it in the first place since their life already exists on multiple ontological levels?

Science fiction as a genre thus loses its specifics and melts with mainstream literary production. The shift is brought about by a generation of writers who were growing up with postmodernism, living in a world of the gradual realization of poststructuralist philosophical speculations. Even though their basic intent may have been to write science fiction, today, the latter can no longer exist but for reasons of marketing.

What is, then, the relation between cyberpunk literature and mainstream postmodern fiction (science fiction, in this case, included)? Taking into account all that has been said, we can agree with Brian McHale's theory that cyberpunk materializes postmodernist stylistic practices. Since the latter quintessentially define postmodernism, the hypothesis that cyberpunk literature upgrades

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4 For a fuller treatment of characters in cyberpunk novels see Mojca Krevel, *Mesto kiberpankovske knbjiževnosti znotraj postmodernizma osemdesetih in devetdesetih let 20. stoletja s pregledom vplivov v Sloveniji. MA Thesis,* unpublished manuscript (Ljubljana: Filozofska fakulteta, 2000) 89-106.

postmodernism in the sense that it fully realizes its possibilities seems the most convincing. The question of how much cyberpunk already has in common with the literary era succeeding postmodernism can only be answered once postmodernism is truly over and the characteristics defining a new era of writing - essentially different from postmodernism - are established.

The relation between cyberpunk literature and postmodern fiction can therefore probably be compared to the relation of early American metafiction, *nouveau nouveau roman* and magical realism to modernism. It seems that cyberpunk literature represents a borderline literary movement that is no longer postmodernist, although its difference is established upon the very premises of postmodernism and is therefore crucially connected to it. In this regard, cyberpunk probably represents the final realization of possibilities offered by postmodernism. Cyberpunk's role in theoretical debates on the directions culture and art are taking, however, can lead us to the conclusion that it nevertheless already contains some characteristics of the artistic and literary era succeeding postmodernism.

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Regardless of their notoriety in America and Western Europe, cyberpunk literature and the cyberpunk movement in general seem to have more or less bypassed both the general Slovene public and literary science. The most obvious reason for that seems to be the quintessential connectedness of cyberpunk writing with the cultural situation in 'eighties America (and partly Western Europe), which is evidently still foreign to us to the extent that we cannot identify with it. To paraphrase: our cultural and social environment have (so far) not raised questions that would demand a specifically cyberpunk literary treatment.

A similar situation is observable in the field of translation. So far, we only have translations of two cyberpunk short stories and a novel, all written by William Gibson. The first translated short story, "Burning Chrome" (from the 1986 short story collection of the same title), was published in the 150/151 issue of *Časopis za kritiko znanosti* (1992), which was dedicated to virtual reality. Two years later, translation of "Hinterlands" (from the above-mentioned collection) appeared in the literary magazine *Literatura (36/37)*. Both short stories were translated by Samo Kuščer, who later also translated Gibson's novel *Neuromancer*.

In 1997, the Cankarjeva založba publishing company published the translation of Gibson's *Neuromancer* in a collection dedicated to twentieth century literature. To this day, *Neuromancer* remains the only translated cyberpunk novel. As for the adequacy of the translation itself, Jakob Kenda critically evaluated it shortly after publication in the May issue of the *Razgledi* magazine.[5] We can only add that the translating of literature so quintessentially linked to contemporary American culture and its language is an extremely demanding task, requiring not only excellent knowledge of American culture and language, but also extreme flexibility in the usage of Slovene. The translation is more or less accurate,

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5 Jakob Kenda, "Spodkopavanje hermetičnosti kiberpanka," *Razgledi* 10 (1997): 26.

although we have to admit that Kuščer did not exactly manage to find a style that would dazzle the reader as much as the original.[6]

As for translations of theoretical studies and authors' statements on cyberpunk, there is one theoretical study and one statement translated into Slovene. It has to be noted, however, that we are referring to *the* theoretical study and *the* authors' statement, namely Brian McHale's "Towards a Poetics of Cyberpunk" (translated by Katarina Jerin) from his 1992 collection of essays on postmodernist literature *Constructing Postmodernism*, and Bruce Sterling's "Preface to Mirrorshades" (translated by Nataša Hrastnik), the cyberpunk manifesto. Both were published in the 1994 issue of *Literatura* (*Literatura* 36-37), and together with the translation of Gibson's "Hinterlands" formed a section entitled "Kiberpank" (Cyberpunk).

There are, however, a few translations of essays and articles that discuss cyberpunk literature in the context of broader reflections on the postmodern age. Cyberpunk literature is primarily considered the most up-to-date embodiment of the age, mirroring the new role of a subject and technocultural aesthetics in a painstakingly accurate manner.[7] Perhaps the most illustrative example of the above is the 1999 translation of Margaret Morse's "What do Cyborgs Eat? Oral Logic in the Information Society," published in the magazine *Maska*.[8] The author explains the relation a postmodern individual has towards their physical body in relation to contemporary gastronomic cultures by using examples from Gibson's *Neuromancer*. Gibson's heroes are thus no longer fictive characters, but representative examples of humanity at the brink of the third millennium. Similarly, Donna Harraway employs cyberpunk's female protagonists to illustrate the role of women in today's culture in her *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women: The Reinvention of Nature* (1991), a translation of which was published in 1999 by ŠOU – Študentska založba.

Compared to the theoretical debate cyberpunk literature triggered especially in America, but also in Western Europe, the Slovene response was much more reserved. Theoretical articles dealing with cyberpunk literature are mostly general presentations of the phenomenon summarized from Sterling's manifesto, and covers of cyberpunk novels.

In this regard we must mention Marjan Kokot's "*VR + cyberpunk = tehnopoganska revolucija*" (VR + Cyberpunk = The Technopagan Revolution),[9]

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6 Cyberpunk literature is defined by style to the extent that Carol McQuirk, for example, calls it the main hero of cyberpunk novels (McQuirk, "The "New" Romancers: Science Fiction Innovators from Gernsback to Gibson", *Storming the Reality Studio* 119). As far as style is concerned, cyberpunk literature probably comes closest to the aesthetics of modern media: reading a cyberpunk novel is similar to bombardment by images on MTV or the berserk rhythms of industrial rock gurus. The rhythm of narration is so fast that it is sometimes virtually impossible to follow the story line, reducing the reading experience to the enjoyment of dazzling images (often expressed through neologisms we can sometimes decipher, sometimes not) flashing by with incredible speed. The reading is furthermore rendered difficult by cyberpunk's intrinsic obsession with detail, spawning information to the point that their density defies evaluation.

7 For a detailed presentation see Krevel 118,119.

8 Margaret Morse, "Kaj jedo kiborgi? Oralna logika v informacijski družbi," *Maska* 3-4 (1999): 32-37.

9 All translations of Slovene articles' and books' titles by Mojca Krevel.

published in the 150-151 issue of *Časopis za kritiko znanosti* (1992). Kokot briefly introduces the cyberpunk movement in general, calling William Gibson the cult writer of the movement. In the same issue, Karlo Pirc provides brief biographies of "main cyberpunk authors" (William Gibson, Bruce Sterling, Rudy Rucker and Greg Bear) and introduces some of the novelties that cyberpunk literature offers (the new role of technology, simstims, the web) in an article titled "Cybersex, Smartdrugs & Technocore".

In 1993, the *Locutio* magazine published Jože Slaček's article "Tehnopoganska revolucija Williama Gibsona" (William Gibson's Technopagan Revolution). The article is characteristic of the early Slovene reception of cyberpunk literature, since information in it is directly transcribed from Sterling's manifesto and Gibson's book-covers.

Official Slovene literary science reacted to the new movement in 1994. In an issue of *Literarni leksikon* (Lexicon of Literature) dedicated to science fiction, in a section dealing with SF in the 'eighties, the author describes some of the main features of cyberpunk literature and explains that such novels are called "neuromantics."[10]

In his overview of recent American fiction (*Literatura* 32, 1994), Andrej Blatnik briefly mentions the publication of William Gibson's *Virtual Light*. His remark that Gibson's greatness exceeds the limits of hardcore SF known as cyberpunk represents a turning point in the Slovene reception of the literature in question. That is, none of the authors before Blatnik questioned cyberpunk's placement within the SF genre. Blatnik is thus the first to imply the possibility of connecting cyberpunk literature to mainstream production, pointing to the question that is at the very centre of the American theoretical debate on cyberpunk.

In 1994, *Časopis za kritiko znanosti* dedicated the entire 166-167 issue to cyberculture. Beside translations of essays by foreign authors, there are two articles by Slovenes promising an insight into cyberpunk in the title. The first one, Andrej Ilc's "Cyberpunk – iz velikega raste malo" (Cyberpunk – The Big Is Growing Small) discusses cyberpunk in music, mentioning cyberpunk literature only briefly at the end. The second, Sergeja Kavšek's "Iz računalniškega podzemlja in virtualnih svetov prihaja kiberpank" (From The Computer Underworld Comes Cyberpunk) places cyberpunk literature within the broader context of the cyberpunk movement, which in her opinion is the movement most attuned to the age in which we live. The author makes an extremely interesting point: that it is virtually impossible to consider cyberpunk as a subcultural movement because, like most subcultural movements formed in the 'eighties and the 'nineties, it transcends the prevalent national culture in the sense that it does not acknowledge national borders. The new position of subcultures could thus be compared to the changed role of genre in postmodernist literature, although Kavšek does not make the connection, explicitly placing cyberpunk literature within the SF genre. However, since Kavšek's study is sociological, the absence of an in-depth literary historical perspective is understandable.

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10 Metka Kordigal, *Znanstvena fantastika, Literarni leksikon* 41 (Ljubljana: DZS, 1994) 40.

The greatest contribution to Slovene reception of cyberpunk literature is doubtlessly that of Janez Strehovec. In his 1994 book *Virtualni svetovi* (Virtual Worlds) he merely mentions the phenomenon to explain the origins of term "cyberspace" (William Gibson's coinage). With his foreword to the 1997 Slovene publication of *Neuromancer*, however, Slovenes finally get a broader in-depth study of cyberpunk literature. Strehovec introduces the movement as a constituent part of "Americanized technoculture,"[11] placing it within the context of contemporary philosophical and sociological changes of paradigms. He then briefly summarizes the story, discusses elements he finds most typical of the path cyberpunk literature is taking (landscape, characters, style) and explains its relation to mainstream postmodernist literature in the sense of McHale's findings.[12] The two crucial elements of the novel, for him, are the postmodernist destabilization of the hero's identity and the ontological instability of the world, materialized in the form of a pluriversum.

In 1998 Strehovec published a collection of studies on art in the electronic age, *Tehnokultura – kultura tehna* (Technoculture – The Culture Of Techno), where the novelties that cyberpunk introduces in the medium of literature (structure of character, structure of the world, relation to technology, as well as cyberpunk's relation to genre SF and postmodernist literature) serve as a springboard for discussion of the new social and cultural situation conditioning recent artistic production.

The role of cyberpunk literature in Strehovec's *Tehnokultura – kultura tehna* is thus similar to the role cyberpunk literature has in foreign studies on postmodern culture and art. Taking this into account, we can probably speculate that despite a rather poor response on the part of the Slovene general public and literary science, cyberpunk literature nevertheless plays a very important role in understanding contemporary social and artistic phenomena in Slovenia as well. There is a very simple explanation for this: in the information age the world is much smaller and easier to access than Slovenia.

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Let us conclude by examining the possible reasons for the lack of a broader response to cyberpunk literature in Slovenia. The most obvious explanation seems to be the normal twenty-year delay with which new literary tendencies reach Slovenia. In Slovenia, the debate on postmodernism, for example, started at the beginning of the 'eighties, reaching full swing in the mid-eighties both in theory and in practice – the latter especially with the work of the so-called "young Slovene prose" authors. According to this, it would be reasonable to expect the

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11 Strehovec, "Spremna beseda k *Nevromantu*," *Nevromant*, Gibson (Ljubljana: Cankarjeva založba) 296.

12 In his "Towards the Poetics of Cyberpunk" Brian McHale introduces the theory that cyberpunk literature represents the embodiment of postmodernist formal practices. What in postmodernist fiction occurs as a configuration of narrative structure or a pattern of language is in cyberpunk literature translated to the level of content, occurring as an element of the fictional world. In his opinion, cyberpunk "literalizes" postmodernist metaphors. See Brian McHale, *Constructing Postmodernism* (New York: Routledge, 1992) 246.

first examples of original Slovene cyberpunk writing around 2005 and a more lively theoretical debate around 2010.

However, such a course of events seems rather unlikely. Slovene literature and literary science have simply missed the cyberpunk phase of literature's development, generally writing it off as a passé marginal curiosity within American genre production. As for Slovene literary production, the question remains as to what trends will eventually perform the role that cyberpunk literature has performed in American literature and art in general. Strehovec's use of cyberpunk literature in *Tehnokultura – kultura tehna* actually signals a rather alarming fact: in Slovenia, other arts are much more flexible in accepting and incorporating new trends than literature. Let us only mention the pioneers of European industrial rock, the Slovene group Coptic Rain, or the achievements of the youngest generation of Slovene theatre makers and dancers (i.e. Emil Hrvatin's *Camillo*, Dragan Živadinov's *Gravity 0*). As for general Slovene literary production, it seems that it just cannot find a way out of metafictional loops or even modernist confirmations of subjectivity through stream of consciousness.

This gap between literature and other art forms is probably the reason that cyberpunk literature (or its Slovene equivalent) will never find its place in Slovenia. Considering the speed with which trends in art change these days (due to the rapid development of technology), by the time Slovene literature would by rule catch up with the logic and thought that triggered cyberpunk, other arts would be so remote from cyberpunk aesthetics that the occurrence of such literature would not only be negligible and marginal, but utterly ridiculous.

It is therefore much more probable that irrepressible globalization will sooner or later affect Slovene literature as well, forcing it to skip a few stages and directly enter the current course of events. Whether this should happen in the shape of neo-neo-realist writing, avant-pop tendencies or even the global hypertext, depends on our capacity to find ways of upgrading the Romantic notion of nationality in a direction that would allow us to claim our place within the global village.

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