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THE NON-NATIVE LANGUAGE OF CYBERPUNK: FROM RETRO-DICTION TO PRE-DICTION AND BACK AGAIN. AN INTERVIEW WITH BRUCE STERLING

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ABSTRACT. Bruce Sterling, author, journalist, editor, and critic, was born in 1954. Best known for his ten science fiction novels, he also writes short stories, book reviews, design criticism, opinion columns, and introductions for books ranging from Ernst Juenger to Jules Verne. During 2005, he was the Visionary in Residence at Art Center College of Design in Pasadena. In 2008 he was the Guest Curator for the Share Festival of Digital Art and Culture in Torino, Italy, and the Visionary in Residence at the Sandberg Instituut in Amsterdam. In 2011 he returned to Art Center as Visionary in Residence to run a special project on Augmented Reality. In 2013, he was the Visionary in Residence at the Center for Science and the Imagination at Arizona State University. In 2015 he was the Curator of the Casa Jasmina project at the Torino Fab Lab. In 2016 he was Visionary in Residence at the Arthur C. Clarke Center for Human Imagination. Bruce's nonfiction works include *The Hacker Crackdown: Law and Disorder on the Electronic Frontier* (1992), *Tomorrow Now: Envisioning the Next Fifty Years* (2003), *Shaping Things* (2005), and *The Epic Struggle Of The Internet Of Things* (2014). Bruce's novels include *Involution Ocean* (1977), *Islands in the Net* (1988), *The Difference Engine* (1991) (with William Gibson), *Holy Fire* (1996), *The Zenith Angle* (2004), and *Pirate Utopia* (2016). He published several collections of own short stories, such as *Ascendencies: The Best of Bruce Sterling* (2007) and *Gothic High-Tech* (2012), and edited the short story collection which defined the genre of cyberpunk *Mirrorshades: A Cyberpunk Anthology* (1986). Bruce's writings received prestigious awards including the 2000 Clarke Award for the novel *Distraction* (1998), the 1999 Hayakawa Award for Best Foreign Short Story and the 1999 Hugo Award for 'Taklamakan' (1998), the 1997 Hugo Award for 'Bicycle Repairman' (1995), and the 1989 Campbell Award for *Islands in the Net* (1998). His most recent book is a collection of Italian *fantascienza* stories *Utopia Pirata: I Racconti Di Bruno Argento* (2016).

From retro-diction to pre-diction and back again

PJ: You are generally considered as one of the founders of the cyberpunk movement. What, for you, is cyberpunk?

BS: Cyberpunk is a subgenre and a literary movement which started at the dawn of the personal computer. We were a group of science fiction writers, first published in the late 1970s and early 1980s. Like a lot of young writers, we were trying to figure out what our own topics were and how we could express ourselves in our own voice. We had reading circles and fanzines, where we were doing stereotypical literary agitation activities: this guy is good, this guy is not so good, this guy is shamefully neglected, this is a topic we need to do more about... We were curating and sharing topics and ideas we ought to be talking about, and we were side-lining things that we felt were overdone, or too much discussed, or corny. I still do a lot of that – look for little harbingers of what this era is about, what's coming next, what's the proper thing to talk about, and so forth.

There were about ten of us, a couple of us got kind of rich and famous… I think that is typical of a literary movement. Generally speaking, literary movements last about seven years. It takes about five years just to figure out what the hell you are talking about, and then you have two years when you are fashionable. Look at these hot young writers, with their overnight success after years of labour! After this short period, the movement tends to dissipate, because people have found their own voices and they just want to write what they please.

PJ: There has been a lot of water under the bridge since the late 1970s and 1980s. After all these years, do you still self-identify as a cyberpunk?

BS: I am identified as a cyberpunk in pretty much the same way as Beatnik writers in America in 1950s would have been identified as Beatniks. If you are William Burroughs, or Allen Ginsberg, people are going to say: 'Weren't you a Beatnik?' And you can't very well say: 'I'm not very Beatnik now, it's been fifty years'. Also, Ginsberg, Burroughs, and Kerouac, wrote about the same topics, but they were not much alike. You would never mistake a Kerouac book for a Burroughs book. This labelling is just a thing; if it's proper for them, then it's proper for me. You should be willing to own up to it. Obviously, I'm not a punk right now, rather I hang out with industrial designers, but then, we cyberpunks always did that… I really like that, William Gibson and I having honorary doctorates from design schools… That's really very funny!

PJ: Your recent works have significantly moved away from cyberpunk. What inspired you to move towards dieselpunk and other genres? What is in a genre?

BS: I am a big fan of genre, because I think it allows you to say things that you cannot say otherwise. It is important to have these minority areas of expression, that don't intend to be for everybody, because that's where ideas are rehearsed. Conjured up, where people have to invent a language. We have to have some critical arguments, there has to be a shake-up, we need to decide what is important, what is less important, and what has lasting value. We did not particularly want to

be called cyberpunks, but Beatniks did not want to be called Beatniks, either. Naming is always pejorative in some ways, but it is also a badge of honour.

PJ: What is cyberpunk about?

BS: Cyberpunk is supposedly about computers. Our work is basically design punk, it is about technology and gadgets, or impact of gadgets, or about politics. For example, John Shirley used to write a lot about neo-fascism in the future Europe, and I used to have all these arguments with him: 'There is no way! Under no circumstance!' Now, I realize he knew things better than I did.

PJ: So why is *Pirate Utopia* (Sterling, 2016) diesel punk?

BS: It is set in that particular era between the First and the Second World War, where there's a lot of diesel technology. Diesel gives a certain look and feel to that era; in that sense, it is not that different from steampunk.

People who work in the historical punk perspective commonly have this intellectual dress-up: they like design, and are involved in artisanship. If you hang around with steampunks, they usually have their brass goggles, wear waistcoats, and are interested in steam technology and replayed history. Some of them are military hobbyists, and participate in re-enactments of historical battles; others are costume makers, who hand stitch things and learn how to make clothing. Steampunks really like to revive technologies!

PJ: Do you feel any tensions between different punk movements?

BS: I knew there was a social struggle between cyberpunk and steampunk, between this romantic Ruskinian approach and this very chrome and metal futurism. Cyberpunk and steampunk appeal to different audiences, although I can write them with equal facility. It is again William Gibson… In some ways, our careers were about obscuring those differences or trying to make it clear that the differences between history and futurism are mostly rhetorical. History is a kind of retro-diction, and futurism is a kind of pre-diction, but they are all about trying to out on the page the nature of the hidden past to the unknowable future.

There are many genres around: micropunk, clockpunk, whatever, and this is no different than a thousand different names for electronic music. Dubstep, hard-dubstep, brostep, dub, electrodub, trance-electrodub… these micro categories end up making very little sense.

PJ: A lot of your work, including your recent book *Pirate Utopia* (Sterling, 2016), explores alternative histories. Why are they important?

BS: I write 'uchronia' or 'alternative history', but I don't write historical fiction. It's not a major genre in the USA, but *Promessi Sposi* by Alessandro Manzoni, which is a book of historical fiction, is probably the most important novel in the Italian language. Manzoni set his novel two hundred years in the past, because he was telling Italians that they were a people, and a nation, when the politics of Manzoni's time did not allow Italians to be either of those things. Manzoni even built Italian national literary language, literal nouns and verbs, with that novel, which connected the past to the present and offered his readers a sense of self-awareness and aspiration.

The life and death of media

PJ: We met today at the design conference Plan D dedicated to the ancient theme of techno-optimism and techno-pessimism. Why should we engage in this type of intellectual exercise? What, if anything, can we learn from that?

BS: I think that 'engagement' is a better attitude than optimism or pessimism. For instance: if you want to be a good sailor, you don't want to be 'optimistic' about the ocean. You don't want to be pessimistically terrified about drowning at sea, either. A proper attitude to the ocean is the awareness that it's older than you and is always full of surprises no matter how much you study it.

PJ: In *Shaping Things*, you describe own efforts to design a lamp (Sterling, 2005: 36). What, in your personal experience, is the difference between designing a lamp and designing a plot for a new novel?

BS: Well, the plot of a novel doesn't electrocute you or catch fire. 'Hardware is hard', as they say. Also, although people often ask me to write something, I don't get much popular demand for designing another lamp.

PJ: What, for you, is design fiction? After the concept has been out and about for a while, what are its main contributions?

BS: The neologism 'design fiction' was created by Julian Bleecker. 'Design fiction' might be replaced by one of its sister terms, like 'speculative design' or 'critical design', and that would be all right. Also, it's not all that old, so it's hard to say exactly what it's good for or bad for. I've noticed that most people who do 'design fiction' also do something else, and it's almost never 'fiction'. Mostly they do futurism, teaching, public relations or design.

PJ: You are quite famous for coining various neologisms such as buckyjunk, slipstream, Wexelblat disaster, and others. What is in a name – and why does it matter?

BS: Those are metaphysical questions about the nature of language and its nature to reality. As a writer I'm interested in the past, the future, and processes of change, so I'm naturally interested in changes of language. Especially neologisms and archaeologisms.

PJ: Interestingly enough, *Shaping Things* (Sterling, 2005) is not just written – it also has a very distinct design. Please examine the notion of design as language. What are its distinct advantages and disadvantages over text?

BS: Well, there are other non-English versions of *Shaping Things* that don't have Lorraine Wild's designs. People read the book anyway. Also, sometimes there are books that don't have language in them. If you're interested in nonverbal communication, there's rather a lot of that around if you look for it.

PJ: In 1995 you started the Dead Media Project (Sterling, 2017a), which explores the history of obsolete media and their usage. What is the Dead Media Project? What is its relevance for technology and society of today?

BS: That was a project I started with the science fiction writer Richard Kadrey, when I was visiting him in San Francisco, in the heyday of the early WIRED magazine. We were talking about the new media, and the ideology of the new

media, and how annoyed we were that the new media lacked historical continuity. Because their work was digital, and had a lot of money behind it, people in digital media had this urge to seize the future and forget the past. So we started the Dead Media Project to measure and catalogue dead forms of media and make them more publicly visible. Maybe we would write a book about it, or maybe we'd just remain at a curatorial level. We wanted to understand why media live and die. Why has the telegraph gone? Why does Morse code no longer work? We also wanted to learn whether there is some kind of general principle for all media, that would predict why media die, but also then predict why media would flourish.
PJ: What did you find out?
BS: There are no such general principles. Through the Dead Media Project, I came up with a theory that media die because of larger issues in industrial design. Media do not die because of their media properties; they die because they are made of tin and powered by coal, or because they are dependent on horsepower, or because only a particular government would want to support them. There is no media magic which exempts media from the obsolescence of other forms of designed object. Once I understood that, I got a lot more interested in industrial design. Now I can teach in design schools, I can write critical praise for designers, and I know other design writers as colleagues.

I still don't know why certain media are going to fly and why others are not, but I have a few hints. If a medium starts distributing pornography, it is probably going to do pretty well. If a medium does not distribute any pornography, it will lack popular attention – it is going to be a military secret, or some kind of a closed network, and never become a mass medium. You can also make some bets about price points – if a medium is now expensive and fancy, but is getting a lots and lots cheaper, there will be probably be a tipping point where it will find some kind of audience.
PJ: What about augmented reality, Bruce?
BS: Augmented reality just fascinates me! Augmented reality has always been a very niche thing, and even though it is now a lot cheaper, and achieves some extraordinary results, maybe it will never become a mass medium. Nobody gets paid to augment stuff. Maybe there might be some industrial applications of augmented reality, for certain kinds of complicated assembly work, but that's about it. I have spent decades studying every jot and tittle about augmented reality. I love it, and I think it should be loved by any science fiction writer because of its intent to mess with reality. However, augmented reality has rarely been more than stage magic. It is a kind of stunt that you see and say: 'Wow, that's the most amazing thing I've ever seen!' Then you see it three times, and you're like: 'Next!' In a way, it is a lot like science fiction. Wow, what a cool book! Will this book change my vote? No. Can I make a lot of money with it? No. Can I get a girlfriend with this science fiction book? Not particularly. I just really liked it… it was cool and weird…

PJ: In a 2010 interview, Joris Peels asked 'If you could resurrect one dead media, which would it be?' and you replied 'The Incan quipu. It would be great to learn how those really worked.' (Peel, 2010) Why?
BS: The quipu is a major mystery. A rare example of a major medium being murdered.

The medieval nature of the Internet
PJ: You have a lot of experience in the academia. What is the difference between being an academic and being a writer?
BS: People from outside the academia do not understand the variety inside it, but there is really a lot of difference between working for, say, a small state-supported design and applied arts college, and being a famous professor at Yale, Harvard, or the Sorbonne. There are academics at MIT, who also have technology businesses, and they are really super active. They are in the lab, inventing things, they might take a few years off and build an atomic bomb for the Manhattan Project, but then they go back to MIT. Then there are academics who are serious political activists, consultants on government boards… There is wide variety in academia.

I take academics seriously. I read a lot of academic material, from places such as Academia.edu, and I find that this small-scale academic publication helps me a lot. For instance, this book, *Science and technology at the Savoy court*, published by the Italian Fondazione Bruzia, will never be a popular work. But I was delighted to see it, and I am poring through it… How many works are there on the science and technology of the court of Savoy in the 1600s? Where else are you going to find this knowledge, if not in the academy? Historians of technology, engineers, and other academics, go to conferences, write letters to one another, cite one another, seek the original documents… I have a lot of respect for that kind of intellectual activity. It is very useful to me, but also to our civilisation. I worry about attacks on the academy. When I say that whatever happens to musicians will happen to everybody – you can see that happening in the academia, too. The social damage is severe, it is frightening.
PJ: As someone who writes both fiction and academic books, please analyse the relationship between fiction and scientific research. What can these radically different ways of approaching reality learn from each other?
BS: Well, fiction doesn't approach reality, it approaches fiction. The experimental methodology of science is very strict, but theorizing in science can be quite fantastic. They must learn something from one another though, because the science and the fiction of particular periods tend to concentrate on the same topics at the same time.
PJ: Why? What are the reasons behind this tendency?
BS: *Zeitgeist.* The spirit of the era.
PJ: With William Gibson, you co-authored the famous novel *The Difference Engine* (Gibson and Sterling, 1991). As an academic writer, I often co-author research books and articles, yet I can hardly imagine the meaning of co-authorship

in the context of fiction. What does it mean to co-author a piece of fiction? Why did you decide to move back to writing alone?
BS: I still collaborate with other writers. I have a gift for pastiche; I even like collaborating with dead writers. Maybe I'll be collaborating with some Croatian *fantastika* writers soon. I would feel quite at ease with that prospect; it wouldn't bother me at all. I would learn by it.
PJ: You are a writer, a researcher, and a prominent teacher and public intellectual. What does it mean to be a public intellectual in year 2017?
BS: That is a pretty good question. It depends on who your public is, and I think there are a lot of different publics. I do not fancy myself as a policy wonk, I do not usually urge governments to do anything. What I do is more or less scrap booking; you could call it curatorial work if you want it to be really cool about it. For example, Paula Antonelli, also known as the Curious Octopus, who is the design director of the Museum of Modern Art in New York, spends a lot of time doing little seminars and just acquainting people with things she finds in her design and museum study. She has an eye for collected material, she is pulling things out of the background and explaining their deeper meanings or their relevance to what is going on, or even maybe sometimes just the irony or the oddity. I see that as a public service, even though she is not paid for it.

I really respect Paula and have learned a lot from her. Her show, Design in the Elastic Mind (Antonelli, 2008), was one of the most enlightening and interesting public exhibits I have ever seen in my life. It was a really profound experience, walking through that area, like four years of college in about four hours, even though Paula is not a designer, she does not make chairs. She is somebody who is like a mistress of a salon, but also a professional curator: she knows how to find things, how to package them, how to store them, how to put them on display properly, how to light them, how to associate this and that with the other – these are cultural skills.
PJ: What kind of cultural skills are you interested in?
BS: I have always kept a lot of notebooks, I used to have huge archives of newspaper clippings and have been subscribed to 50 magazines, but when I do public intellectual stuff now, it is commonly telling people about something that they might conceivably find of interest. And I do it in a deliberately eclectic way… I have a couple of specialized publications such as a Tumblr weblog (Sterling, 2017d) which is about home automation and the Internet of Things. It is very technical, dry, even boring, and it has a lot of insider information about the corporate intrigues among the major players. About 800 people follow that, and really, eight would be better. It does not deserve an audience of 8000, it is not particularly public, but if you are interested in that kind of thing, you are really going to find a lot of material you would not see anywhere else in the world. It is an activist collection of material, I'm not even pushing any particular ideology, but merely assembling things that might be of use to activists, practitioners, and theoreticians. That is probably what being a public intellectual means in 2017.

PJ: You recently published the book entitled *The Epic Struggle of The Internet of Things* (Sterling, 2014). What, for you, is the Internet of Things?
BS: I think its one of those terms that becomes archaic before it actually appears in the real world. 'Obsolete before plateau' is a term of art for that. We're in a post-Internet era, so the aspirations of the original pioneers of the Internet of Things can't be fulfilled, and the forces they were promoting will play out in other ways.
PJ: In 2016, Oxford Dictionaries announced post-truth as their Word of the Year (Steinmetz, 2016) – and this popularity was by and large caused by public appearances of Donald Trump. However, it seems that science fiction has always been, in its own ways, closely related to post-truth…
BS: Indeed it has. I think that post-truth is wrongly assessed today, because there are many situations where public deceit is practised and everybody knows it. *1984* was written in 1948 (Orwell, 1948), and it was basically about Stalinist show-trials. If you look at history of that day, you can see that there was no consistency in the public statements by the regime or people or writers around it. They all know they are lying, and they are lying deliberately, and they will murder you if you object to deceit, but then they'll murder people who will murder you, too, just because they've set up a kind of meat grinder where no matter what you say, or what you believe, you are equally likely to end up in a gulag. You can be in the gulag for being Jewish, or for not being Jewish, or for killing some Jewish guys, or for not killing some Jewish guys, or for being a doctor, or for not being a doctor, or for being an intellectual or for not being an intellectual, or for speaking out, or for failing to speak out. That's the post-truth lived existence, and it's not a small ordeal.
PJ: Can you stretch the notion of post-truth beyond lying?
BS: Most people in the world are religious – 90 per cent of population believes in fantasies. They not only believe in one religion or another, but they disbelieve all other religions. If you are not a Hindu, you have a hard time believing in *Bhagavad Gita*. Why would these people think that the universe was created by a cobra and the cosmic milk? But if you are a Hindu, and if you are reading the *Bible*, you will say: 'Wait a minute, doesn't your book says that your prophet will come back? How long are you going to wait for this guy to return? It's been two thousand years, how could you possibly believe it?' These are difficult objections, but they do not stop anybody from cheerfully living a life of Hindu or Christian conviction. And they will argue with one another… In theology, you can see a lot of struggle about what the truth is supposed to be within faith, but you're just supposed to have faith, not truth. There are things you don't know, that only God knows. Truth does not belong to you, truth belongs to the divine – that's the idea, right?
PJ: How does that relate to post-truth, Bruce?
BS: In a post-truth situation, I think, it is the same mental situation, where many things are just mysterious. Why did they arrest my neighbour and take him to the gulag? Why did he fall down the stairs? The angels wanted him to be taken to the gulag, or to fall down the stairs. That has never been a minority approach to life!

With that said, I think there is something different about electronic media, and that is the struggle to answer questions about who knows what, and how. Typical journalistic questions are just investigative historic or scientific questions: who, what, when, where, why, how. How do we know that we know that? This is a more honest moral struggle than current ideologies about technology, which commonly say: I'll make the world better, but mostly it is about me and my friends making a lot of money.

PJ: Can you relate post-truth to the nature of media?

BS: You see many culture wars on the Internet, a lot of propaganda, and a lot of activity that was very typical of the world before journalism and the free press. Contemporary Internet really has a mediaeval look and feel to it, it reminds me of the 1600s, and Thirty Years' War. The printing press had been invented, there was a lot of publication, but there were no journalistic ethics. Those had not been invented, nobody thought through it, it was too early, so a lot of published material was just flaming, trolling, and denunciation. All they had was a lot of bloodshed and trouble, and these giant information propaganda machines, which spread a lot of knowledge but also a lot of hatred, and a lot of useless controversy, and a lot of war.

PJ: These days, pre-digital forms of ethics obviously do not serve us very well. What kind of ethics do we need for the age of the digital media?

BS: Well, we'll get an ethics of some kind, because everybody has one, but general ideas of proper and decent behaviour don't redeem the human condition. Mankind is too crooked a timber to build anything straight, as the great ethicist Immanuel Kant used to say.

If you remember it well, you weren't doing it right

PJ: What is the relationship between cyberpunk and futurism?

BS: Well, I happen to be both a cyberpunk and a futurist. They have different terms of art, and different audiences. Cyberpunk is fiction, a form of popular entertainment, while futurism is something you do for a client, when you provide strategic advice on what is going to happen during some era in which clients can presumably do something. Now this is a little odd: the majority of futurists and their clients do not actually have a future. If you are a company, or a government, and you know what you are going to do, you do not hire a futurist. You hire a futurist when you are worried or in a state of decline, so I see a lot of futurists acting as pall-bearers or grief counsellors. They show up, have a look around the situation, and say: 'Well, there seem to be a few bright spots, and you'd better pivot and go do that, but these other things you think have a future, they do not really have one, and you've got to let them go'. This element of psychological counselling does not exist in cyberpunk. Cyberpunks tend to be into ecstasy and dread, they like the sense of wonder, they are dramatic and high energy, they want to entertain.

Sometimes in the works of William Gibson, you can see this kind of elegiac feeling about losing the past, that the future means we have to bury our heritage. I think that is one of the reasons Gibson is an important and morally powerful science fiction writer, is that he is willing to talk about pawnshops, abandoned things, and wreckage. They call him the *Gomi-no-Sensei*, the master of trash. When he talks about technological advancement, Gibson is aware that there are going to be losers, that areas will go into a Detroit style decline because of competition and obsolescence. He is willing to write about that, and people understand the moral clarity of his writing. You do not see a futurist do that, futurists tend to be more morale-booster types: 'This is going to happen in five years from now, if you do what I say, you will be in a better situation'. Futurists and cyberpunks also have very different vocabularies. Strategic forecasting tends to use the language of business, or the academy, or government policy, and you do not see fiction writers talking in that way unless they are making fun of somebody.

PJ: Speaking of Gibson's nickname *Gomi-no-Sensei*, how did you get the nickname Chairman Bruce? What does it mean to you?

BS: At some science fiction convention, a friend was trying to read one of my manifestos, and somebody was objecting because one should not be reading manifestos in some light-hearted discussion. John Shirley shouted down the opposition by saying: 'You have to listen to Chairman Bruce!' I was the ideologue of the cyberpunk movement in a sense that I was writing a lot of manifestos and declarations, and of course I wrote the famous Introduction to *Mirrorshades: A Cyberpunk Anthology* (Sterling, 1986) which was the more or less the official cyberpunk manifesto. So, I deserved that term 'Chairman', but with the point that I am not a Maoist, not even a communist. I hang out in ex-communist countries, and I know what they were doing. Back to the theme: you've got to be called something, right? People call me Chairman Bruce, and I was also known as the Cyberpunk Guru, that was quite common… So Gibson was *Gomi-no-Sensei*, I was the Cyberpunk Guru, and other people were known by works they'd written. Pat Cardigan was called the Queen of Cyberpunk… These are just funny nicknames, people understand that. At least I'm not a rock musician, or an actor, so I don't actually have to change my own name in order to be famous.

PJ: The form of manifesto has always fascinated me – so much so, that my newest book is actually entitled *The Digital University: A Dialogue and Manifesto* (Peters and Jandrić, 2018). What, in your opinion, is the relevance of manifestos? And, more importantly, what makes an influential manifesto?

BS: Well, you are making your ideas and intentions 'manifest'. You are implicitly inviting other creative people to do the same thing. You are inviting controversy, discussion or debate. It's like the openness of scientific publishing: 'here's my theory, prove me wrong'.

I think a manifesto is a success if people can make fresh mistakes afterwards. It shouldn't be an effort to declaim eternal truths, a manifesto works better as an

experimental program. You should be willing to test your own manifesto, to try to do the opposite and see if it works.

PJ: While we discussed many faces of cyber, we actually never touched upon punk. What is the meaning and relevance of punk in cyberpunk?

BS: Well, as with most bohemian behaviours, you kind of had to be there, and if you remember it well, you probably weren't doing it right.

I'm from Austin, a town that favors music. I used to go to punk clubs, collect punk records and read a lot of punk music criticism. I'm still a supporter of V. Vale and his San Francisco punk fanzine RE/Search. It always astonishes me that Silicon Valley refuses to give Vale a lot of money. They have plenty, but they can't support their own culture.

PJ: As the ideologue of the cyberpunk movement, you probably answered this question many times: What is the ideology of the cyberpunk movement?

BS: A cultural sensibility is hard to put into a bumper sticker, but oddly, when Lauren Beukes appeared as a writer in South Africa, long after we had stopped publishing ideological statements, we immediately knew she was one of us. There were people in Italian counterculture who were 'cyberpunks' and didn't write or even bother to read much science fiction. There were also writers who were very close to us, and genuinely helpful to us, who weren't cyberpunks at all. I don't want to mystify it, but really, you either get it on some visceral level or you don't.

PJ: In my recent book (Jandrić, 2017) I interviewed Fred Turner and Richard Barbrook, who launch powerful ideological critiques of the WIRED and the Californian Ideology (Turner, 2006 and 2013; Barbrook and Cameron, 1996). What is your take on WIRED's combination of hippie iconography with hardcore individualism and neoliberalism? Is that something you would embrace or challenge?

BS: I quite liked Barbrook and Cameron's famous critique of WIRED, 'the Californian Ideology.' I was on quite good terms with the late Andy Cameron. Of course that wouldn't stop me for writing for WIRED. I don't mind Californians having an ideology; they're as entitled to their own way of life as anybody else.

I never wrote for Louis Rosetto and Jane Metcalfe because I agreed with their ideas. They have too many ideas to agree with. I wrote for them because they were innovative publishers who took the trouble to come to my town and literally knock on my door. Also, Louis Rosetto was never a 'Californian.' He's actually a guy from Piedmont, Italy who really likes the chocolate business.

PJ: I just visited your blog, and noticed that you edited the Summer 2001 Issue of the WHOLE EARTH. Step by step, I also found out about your long-lasting relationship with the WIRED magazine… Can you describe the confluence between cyberpunk and the Silicon Valley?

BS: It's true that I've known a lot of Californians for a long time. I was in the last issue of WHOLE EARTH and the first issue of WIRED. But I'm not Californian myself, so I don't spend a lot of time explaining them. I'm from Texas.

A writer should have a career

PJ: The computer revolution has produced a new elite called the digerati – in my recent book (Jandrić, 2017), I had the privilege to interview some of these people. Cyberpunk has also produced its own elite, which includes the majority of authors from *Mirrorshades: A Cyberpunk Anthology* (Sterling, 1986). Both elites are predominantly male, white, and Western. As someone who actively contributed to creation of the cyberpunk elite, can you explain how this neo-colonial setup arrived into being?

BS: Cyberpunk is not all that neo-colonial – the problem of a literary elite is baked in the nature of communications. There is no way that you can have a thousand cyberpunk writers, who are all read identically, and who all have the same amount of social impact. It's just not going to work! It's like complaining that Keats, Shelley and Byron were a colonial elite… They were certainly existing in the time of rampant colonization, but nobody would go around and say, Byron, the colonialist, even though Byron was a colonial person – he died fighting in Greece, while he was trying to drag the Greeks back into Christendom.

PJ: Literature may not colonise with guns, but I still need to learn English in order to read your works, and you can comfortably read mine without speaking Croatian…

BS: A large part of your question is indeed connected to language. Non-Anglophone writers, like the *connectivismo* writers in Rome, or the *tupinipunk* people in Brazil, or the *biopunk* people in the late 1980s in Prague, are doing a lot of inventive cyberpunk-style writing. It is just that nobody would notice them, because they were not writing in English, and because they did not have a massive English-language megaphone and publishing apparatus. I could name those people, I could tell you to read them, but you wouldn't do it. Nobody in Croatia wants to read Brazilians, even if they have very interesting stuff to say – and this is not colonial, in the sense that us American guys are colonial.

Actually, a lot of the major effort in cyberpunk is not American, it is Canadian. Gibson in an American émigré who became Canadian – he is a Canadian citizen, and has Canadian wife and children. There is a lot of Canadian science fiction written which does not get the cultural understanding that it deserves, because people at a distance from North America think that Canada and America are somehow the same – a bunch of white guys in the G7.

PJ: And what about media?

BS: Margaret Atwood wrote the book *The Handmaid's Tale* (1986), which was recently turned into a TV series, and which is all about the United States, but written from a Canadian political perspective. She is like us in a lot of ways. She has the same publisher, and a lot of the same readers, but nobody would accuse her of being a white guy and Anglo-colonialist. The issue there is not so much that of the writers, as it is that of media. If you are Margaret Atwood, and you have a television programme made of one of your novels, you're going to be more famous for that television series, than you ever were for forty years of literary work. There

is very little that a writer can do about that. She did not write the script, she did not choose the actors, she is not the set designer – but she is going to be the Margaret Atwood of *The Handmaid's Tale* TV series. Being a writer in English, who has the American-British publishing apparatus behind you, is a lot like being a Soviet writer who is highly placed in the Writers' Union. You just get a ton of stuff that you do not really deserve as a writer, because of the historic accident of where you came from.

PJ: You were born in Texas, and your early novels are situated in that surrounding. Then you moved to the Balkans, then to Italy, and your more recent works have shifted to Europe. What is the role of your surroundings in your work? How fictional is your fiction?

BS: Regional writing interests me. Especially other people's regions. The past is a different country; the future is this place at a different time.

PJ: Books can be situated geographically, and also linguistically. Can you imagine yourself writing a non-native language?

BS: All languages are eventually non-native languages.

PJ: In *Holy Fire* one of your characters says: 'There is no poetry left in English. When they stretched that language to cover the whole earth, all the poetry fell out of it.' (Sterling, 2006: 284) Somehow, after studying your works for a while, it seems that you speak through this character…

BS: I don't say that, but it was quite an interesting thing for a character to say in a book that has a lot of interest in the future of art and poetry.

PJ: In the age of technological unemployment, one of the first occupations to become precarious were journalists, writers, and artists at large. Silicon Valley promised a quick fix in the form of self-publishing though various venues from simple webpages to more complex models such as Amazon Kindle. As of recently, however, we know that making money on self-publishing heavily relies on personal popularity and personal branding. Somewhat paradoxically, this has resulted in even more inequality between the artists. Today, only the best of the best can expect to make some money from their artwork – others have become starving artists or hobbyists (Jandrić, 2017: 240). As a pioneer of online publishing, what are your thoughts on the relationships between digital media and the arts?

BS: This change has been very severe, and I often say that whatever happens to musicians will happen to everybody. I'm not sure whether that is properly called technological unemployment, it is more about precarity, or even just melting of disciplinary silos, that has something to do with the nature of the network society.

I always did a lot of self-published material, with Xerox machines back in the heyday of punk and its do-it-yourself (DIY) ethos. Václav Havel and his companions did a lot of publishing by *samizdat*; they literally had an underground press. Works of *samizdat*, like *Power of the Powerless* (Havel, 1978), represent a non-commercial virally distributed writing that made Václav Havel eventually into the president of the Czech Republic! Who can we trust to be a president? Well, you know, how about this guy with his photocopies? You cannot say that writing for no

money will have no social impact, and I find over the years that my stuff that had the most social impact, and probably the most effect on culture in general, was commonly stuff I was not paid for. A speech, an essay, or a critical intervention of some kind, can really seem to fire people's imagination!

PJ: Can you elaborate this tension between social impact of one's work and making a living a bit further?

BS: As a writer you can find yourself in a trap, being treated unjustly, and you can decide to do only paid gigs. But if you end up in these situations where money and labour issues become number one, you run the risk of writing stuff which people just pay no attention to. If you want a whole lot of money for writing, joining the Screen Actors Guild in Los Angeles is the best way, but the likelihood is that 9 out of 10 of your scripts will never be produced, and even if they are produced, they may never be released. The Screen Actors Guild puts you in a very profitable situation: you have a very good labour union behind you, and you can even be a kind of famous Hollywood scriptwriter. But you are never gonna be the *auteur* – you are not treated as the author of the movie, because the director is the author of the movie. You have to look at this situation and imagine what it is that you are asking for.

In many cases, the treatment people are asking for is basically how writers are already treated in some small scale non-Anglophone countries. If you are in Denmark, or Norway, you get a lot of state support as a creative writer, but you must publish something every year. This puts you in a kind of a grind. You are like an academic, who is required to publish, and then hopefully you'll be cited – but if you are not publishing research, because you just felt like thinking about things more deeply and did not have much to say, you'll get fired. You see people who are quite productive in a sense that they turn out a lot of words, they are well treated, they have health insurance and a roof over their head, and they can afford to get married and have children. Those are important things, but, if you're not reaching the audience, and if you're not contributing to debates of culture, what exactly are you doing? Why don't you get another career? There are other things to do… You can be a lawyer, a doctor, a teacher, you could move the garbage, you can be an emergency rescue worker or go to a leprosarium, and do something that is a genuine contribution to the well-being of humankind.

PJ: Are you saying that professionalization of writing has a negative impact on literature?

BS: It was always precarious, to be a writer, and most writers, even in very profitable markets, do not make enough money to earn their living only by writing. Also, as somebody who did earn my living only by writing for quite a long time, I have to say that it gets kind of dull just to write about things all the time. I actually prefer to investigate stuff, or have discussions with people, or join activist groups, or travel. Not everything I do has to be put down on paper as the sum of my being.

Havel, who I like to quote, but also Chekhov, said that a writer should have a career. Chekhov was a doctor, and he said: 'if you want to work on your art, work

on your life'. If you devote yourself too entirely to literature, you actually do harm to literature. You are not carrying through enough of lived experience. I don't urge writers to be dilettantes, but I know that there are a lot of writers who are dilettantes, and there are also great writers who had just one really great book. They had their say, and then they should do something else – that is a legitimate thing. You wanted to write a novel, and you wrote the novel, and it's a great novel, and then you went back to photography, or public service, or whatever.

In the long run, you're subjected to the judgement of history. If you want justice and mercy from that judgement, then you need to deserve it, by demonstrating some justice and mercy for the writers who came before you.

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