

EX MACHINA

Tri-Stat Cyberpunk Genre

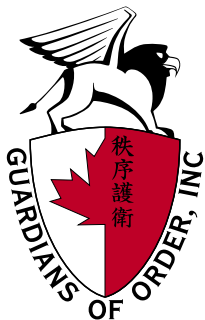
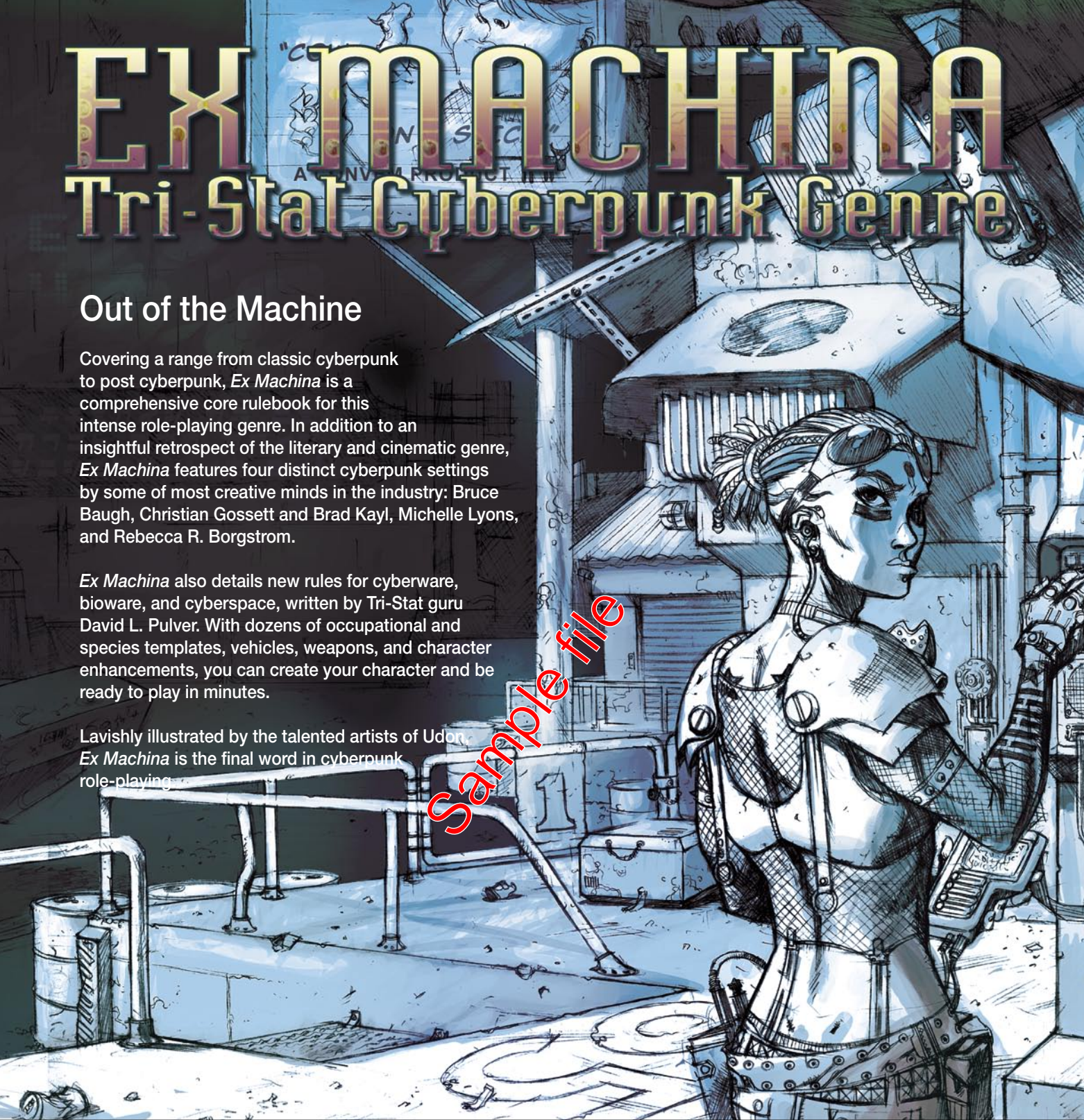
Out of the Machine

Covering a range from classic cyberpunk to post cyberpunk, *Ex Machina* is a comprehensive core rulebook for this intense role-playing genre. In addition to an insightful retrospect of the literary and cinematic genre, *Ex Machina* features four distinct cyberpunk settings by some of most creative minds in the industry: Bruce Baugh, Christian Gossett and Brad Kayl, Michelle Lyons, and Rebecca R. Borgstrom.

Ex Machina also details new rules for cyberware, bioware, and cyberspace, written by Tri-Stat guru David L. Pulver. With dozens of occupational and species templates, vehicles, weapons, and character enhancements, you can create your character and be ready to play in minutes.

Lavishly illustrated by the talented artists of Udon, *Ex Machina* is the final word in cyberpunk role-playing.

Sample file



EX MACHINA

Tri-Stat Cyberpunk Genre

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IT'S A CRIME ...

... that Red Bull isn't available in Canada. Or, more accurately, it has been suggested to me that it is in fact illegal to sell it here — something about regulations banning the sale of non-cola coloured, caffeinated drinks. I don't know if it's true or not (it probably has more to do with regulations of additive levels rather than colouration), but I do believe that this book would have been finished months ago if I could get it locally. Of course, I could probably say that about every book I'm in charge of, but then I imagine I'd be a burned out husk all year 'round, instead of just during con season.

That might be appropriate for further projects, mind you ... just wire my desiccated body up via neural jack and let me live ghost-like on my writer's computers, haranguing them into more and more frenzied and gonzo writing (simply feed me by Red Bull IV-drip, please). Some probably say I do that already.

Did I say the book would have been done a few months ago? Even that was running well into delays. *Ex Machina* was originally conceived in September of 2002 — bloody hell, I'm embarrassed to admit that — with a tentative street date of November 2003. 14 months sounded like enough time ... apparently I was off a bit. We were all a little too idealistic in those pre-friend-networks/pre-taste-tribes/pre-future-phone days. The iPod had just been released, both *Matrix* sequels still had potential, and blogging was going to be the new voice of the commons (awful word, blogging — how the hell can we have collectively agreed upon such an ugly term?).

And I sold this idea of a giant cyberpunk genre book not only to Mark and Jeff, but I somehow conned a quintet of warm and fuzzy writers into climbing aboard, and fleshing out their take on the genre.

This book is about these writers, and their savage, electric ideas that crackle on every page. They are a wonderful, vicious, motley crew of neo-cyberpunks (or is that post-cyberpunks? or post-post-cyberpunks, maybe?) who have struggled with me over these long months to properly showcase their visions. Their worlds each present a different image of cyberpunk, viewed through a perspective of the early 21st century. Not only do we have the advantage of having grown up with and studied the classic cyberpunk authors, but we sit on the brink of "tomorrow;" we may not have *Blade Runner's* air cars or Voight-Kampff tests, but we do have future-phones, WiFi, hybrid electric cars, and supercomputers masked as video game systems.

The challenge was to put it all into place and make it sparkle.... Future-shock, indeed!

Beneath the chrome and glitter were hideous little gems that cut to the quick, as manuscript pages came in, there were days I felt a desperate need to wash my brain.

Michelle Lyons is a sweetheart. When she proposed "Daedalus" to me, neither of us saw how close to home the metaphor would strike. She described it as the world gone wrong, about 90 minutes in the future. Skimming my RSS feeds, I wonder if we're closer to 30 minutes from "Daedalus." The oft-repeated Ben Franklin quote comes to mind, "They who would give up essential Liberty, to purchase a little temporary Safety, deserve neither Liberty nor Safety." It's not a vision I find very comforting.

Rebecca Borgstrom is loved and respected for *Nobilis*, a game of high concept and big gods. "IOSHI" is a story of little gods — tiny people who are masters of their own abilities, in a world of complex, corporate machinations. Some days, I'm convinced Rebecca is one of these little gods herself, a shark most likely — albeit a friendly, nearly tame one. (Nice shark, pretty shark).

Bruce Baugh, like Rebecca, I knew only through reputation before this project. He's a clever guy, with a good sense of the game industry as a whole. He's also a master of references, and undoubtedly not only read every book, movie, and comic in the bibliography, but read them twice. And by "read" I mean "analysed," and taken notes. Pondering the logistics of his orbital beanstalk is daunting, but I hope he takes over Columbia one day and makes it happen.

I met Brad Kayl and Chris Gossett in Las Vegas ... where else would one meet two L.A. kids bursting with pride over their urban magic retelling of the Soviet/Afghanistan conflict? Not only are they tremendously funny, sharp guys, with a fabulous comic in *The Red Star*, but they knew gaming ... and had a long history of *Shadowrun* campaigns, among others. Some nights I lie awake thinking about the horrors they've concocted for Underworld ... vile abuses that have burned their way into my brain.

I've known and worked with David Pulver longer than anyone else here, but only recently have I truly grown to appreciate his knowledge, skill, and killer wit. This book — massive quantities of Red Bull included — would remain incomplete without his aid and assistance.

I hope to work with all of these fine people again, someday. I think they are all much smarter than me. They scare me. But I am changed for it, and that is for the best; you must always keep moving, and always have an escape plan.

As the voice over in *Blade Runner* says:

"A new life awaits you in the off-world colonies. The chance to begin again in a golden land of opportunity and adventure. New climate, recreation facilities..."

Welcome to *Ex Machina* — a new life, a new chance, a new climate. With luck it will terrify, intimidate, inspire ... and ultimately change you, if only a little bit.

— Jesse Scoble, Night, July 2004

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Sample file

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

He stared at the deck on his lap, not really seeing it, seeing instead the shop window on Ninsei, the chromed shuriken burning with reflected neon. He glanced up; on the wall, just above the Sony, he'd hung her gift, tacking it there with a yellow-headed drawing pin through the hole at its centre. Closed his eyes.

Found the ridged face of the power stud.

And in the bloodlit dark behind his eyes, silver phosphenes boiling in from the edge of space, hypnagogic images jerking past like film compiled from random frames. Symbols, figures, faces, a blurred, fragmented mandala of visual information.

Please, he prayed, now —

A gray disk, the colour of Chiba sky.

Now —

Disk beginning to rotate, faster, becoming a sphere of paler gray. Expanding-

And flowed, flowered for him, fluid neon origami trick, the unfolding of his distanceless home, his country, transparent 3D chessboard extending to infinity. Inner eye opening to the stepped scarlet pyramid of the Eastern Seaboard Fission Authority burning beyond the green cubes of Mitsubishi Bank of America, and high and very far away he saw the spiral arms of military systems, forever beyond his reach.

And somewhere he was laughing, in a white-painted loft, distant fingers caressing the deck, tears of release streaking his face.

— William Gibson, *Neuromancer*

CYBERPUNK 101: WHAT WE'RE TALKING ABOUT

Cyberpunk is science fiction set in the near future, usually in the next 25-100 years. It emphasises the social changes created by cybernetics, biotechnology, nanotechnology, and other emerging technologies that can change not merely what we do but what we are. It portrays the struggle of outsiders — punks — to make a place for themselves in the face of future shock and oppressive political and economic powers: the “system.” The protagonists are often unwilling heroes, if they're heroes at all; many of them are criminals or operators on the fuzzy margins of legality.

There are exceptions to each of those points in stories widely recognised as cyberpunk. Above all, cyberpunk is defined by the attitude of openness to transformation, respect for the power of innovation and improvisation, and a fondness for rebels and dissidents. A story set in a cyberpunk-like future in which wise, far-seeing chief executive officers skilfully suppress dangerous lunatic outsiders isn't cyberpunk; a story set in a typical space opera, which emphasises social change wrought by new technology and the desirability of building communities and responding to new needs may well be. Most cyberpunk fiction, however, fits the greater part of this working definition if not all of it.

ROOTS AND INSPIRATIONS

Stories about the future tend to portray it in stark and extreme terms. Sometimes it's an awful prophecy of doom, such as Fritz Lang's nightmarish film *Metropolis*, or the classic dystopias like Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* and George Orwell's *1984*. Sometimes it's a vision of the world made perfect or near-perfect, like the technocratic tales of early science fiction magazines and H.G. Wells's film *The Shape of Things to Come* (in which the world is redeemed after tremendous suffering). Very seldom does the future have the complexity and ambiguity of the present.

RECYCLED DOOMSAIVING. MARK I: 1970s

Thirty years ago, the future looked very bleak to a great many observers, both within and without the community of science fiction writers. The Cold War was in full force, and very few informed people could imagine it coming to any peaceful resolution. The history of the 20th century strongly suggested that however nice it might be to live in a democratic society, the totalitarian regimes of the Soviet Union and the People's Republic of China would probably outlast their rivals.

Once-liberal democracies couldn't keep down either unemployment or inflation, and state intervention couldn't resolve social problems like racism or personal yearning for meaning and order. The military-industrial complex US President Eisenhower warned about in the '50s seemed in charge just about everywhere. Mass protest could help end the Vietnam War, French opposition to Algerian independence, and the sub-Saharan struggle for post-colonial self-determination, but it couldn't create justice or happiness once the fighting stopped ... if the fighting ever did. The superpowers used guerrilla forces and puppet regimes as their pawns in the ongoing struggle for world domination. Karl Marx wrote, “Man is born free, and everywhere he is in chains,” and that seemed true — whether the chains were First World corporate hegemony or Third World subjugation to external empires.

Furthermore, a growing number of economists and futurists suspected the Cold War would, in the end, be no more than a sideshow in the fading circus of the West. The Third World's leading nations were on the rise. Japan played the game of capitalism more skilfully than either Europe or America, and China and the “Seven Tiger” nations of Southeast Asia were building their own paths to wealth without the complications of Western liberalism. Demographics were on their side. The West couldn't compete against the looming combination of ever more efficient production and ever-greater numbers of labourers.

The space race ended with the 1969 triumph of Apollo over its Soviet competition, and now the US's space efforts were trickling down. Skylab would not be followed up on. The Space Shuttle fell victim to political manoeuvring and would end up more costly and less capable than originally planned. Meanwhile, back on Earth, media corporations got ever-better at co-opting the spirit of youthful rebellion as another tool for merchandising, and the rising insurgency represented by punk rock was commercialised even faster than its predecessors. The corporations could, it seemed, engulf and devour any threat to their position.

Nor were problems of the day purely social and political. The world's environment was also going to hell, and gaining speed on the way. Biologist Rachel Carson had long since sounded the first warning notes about the dangers of DDT and other pesticides in *Silent Spring*, but that was just the beginning. Toxic wastes proved responsible for more problems than anyone had imagined, and no amount of public concern seemed likely to keep pesticides out of the air, land, and water. Toxic emissions from factories and cities constantly replenished the supply of environmental poisons. Lasting climatic changes also loomed: in 1979, the World Meteorological Association warned that the world was cooling and had been for several decades, and that an ice age might well be imminent. In reaching these conclusions, the WMA drew on research in both specialised meteorological journals and prestigious cross-disciplinary journals, such as *Science*.

Science fiction of the late '70s reflected the divisions of the time. On one side, the heirs of Golden Age technophilic optimism continued to sing the praises of analytical problem solving, dismissing those who doubted progress as obstacles to an ever-brighter tomorrow. On the other, writers critical of the established order called into question the very possibility of progress as long as patriarchy, capitalism, and other established forces endured. Those uninterested in this ongoing struggle or unwilling to commit themselves to a faction took refuge in stylistic extravagance and technical formalisms.

In the midst of all this, some authors both inside the science fiction community and outside it hunted for unconventional futures and alternative ways of expressing their thoughts and feelings. William Burroughs, one of the survivors of the Beat generation of literary innovators, was already famous for combining SF imagery with the stuff of drug trips, nightmare, erotica, and more, all fused in a spare and often witty prose that reflected the influence of earlier styles, including pulp and noir. (William Gibson would later refer to Burroughs as “this dangerous old literary gentleman who sent so many of us out, under sealed orders, years ago,” and indeed the cyberpunk debt to Burroughs is very strong and lasting.) Latter-day innovators like Thomas Pynchon also drew on SF for their experiments, feeling that as the present careened ever faster into unknown territory, the boundary between present reality and possible future crumbled into a miasma of waking nightmare, daydream, and chaos.

One response to the challenge of escalating systems of social control drew on a tradition including Surrealism and Situationism, and the idea that the tighter would-be rulers clenched their fists, the more of what they held would slip through. The eternal tyranny of *1984* turns out, they thought, to break up in bureaucratic inefficiency, rival agendas, and the possibility that outsiders can manipulate the information on which all governance depends. Alfred Bester, John Brunner, and others wrote stories in which overlords fell not just because plucky entrepreneurs challenged them, but because the status of overlord itself is unstable. Their imagined worlds were messy, each totalising trend offset by new complications, and life continued without any end state ever taking over.

OUT OF THE LAB. INTO THE STREETS: 1970s TO 1982

Science fiction has a long tradition of small press magazines, fanzines, and amateur press association magazines (many of them only distributed to a small circle of contributors) and of ongoing correspondence both in the letter columns of professional magazines and directly between would-be authors. These forums act as incubators for ambitious young writers. In the mid-1970s, the writers who would establish cyberpunk busily exchanged letters and ‘zines, honing their craft, critiquing the published work of the time, trading ideas, news, and commentary. They pushed themselves and each other.

John Shirley started publishing stories of high-tech horror and fusions of fantasy and science fiction in 1973. Bruce Sterling made his debut in short fiction in 1976, and at novel length a year later. William Gibson’s short stories began appearing in 1977, his first novel some years later. W.T. Quick joined the growing throng in 1979, Michael Swanwick in 1980. Bruce Bethke wrote a story of crucial importance well beyond its content in 1980. The story, “Cyberpunk,” provided a widely acceptable name for the movement; it did so well before the story was actually published in 1983, thanks to the habit among cyberpunk authors of circulating work in progress.

Rucky Rucker’s intensely bizarre novel *Software*, published in 1982, is either a crucial early cyberpunk work or sufficiently weird to constitute its own genre; critical views vary on the matter. John Varley’s *Eight Worlds* series (running from the early 1970s into the early 21st century as Varley’s health allows him to write more) has very little cyber-anything in it, instead emphasising biotechnology. Its setting (a future solar system with Earth off-limits to humanity and the surviving members of the species living on the Moon and other bodies) and its concern with the social changes set in motion by technology (allowing for cheap and reversible sex changes, cloning, and longevity) both partake of the cyberpunk outlook and approach, though.

By 1980, it was clear to many observers (as well as to the authors themselves) that something was going on. Editors like Ellen Datlow (handling science fiction for *Omni* magazine) and Gardner Dozois (in charge of *Isaac Asimov’s Science Fiction Magazine*) gave the new writers space and attention. This rather motley crew differed in many ways, both conceptually and in terms of their presentation, but they shared a lot, too: a fascination with the social consequences of ubiquitous computing power; the role of style in defining identity; the opportunities for low-lives in high-tech contexts; and difficulties facing average people in the face of overwhelming concentrations of corporate and political power. The new writers rejected both the old-school SF trust in technology and reason (subjecting both to trenchant critiques about their origins and consequences) and the newer conventional wisdom of impending doom and despair (likewise regarding it as a flight from life as it is actually lived). The new futures weren’t particularly cheery, but they had hope and the potential for changes both small and large.

In 1981, computer scientist Vernor Vinge published the novella “True Names.” It didn’t make as big a splash as William Gibson would a few years later, but it has been an enduring influence within both SF and computer programming communities. Vinge laid out a near-future world in which complex interactions between individual users and their computers can be abstracted into virtual landscapes. Vinge cleverly recognised the lasting appeal of fantasy among programmers and hackers, and his protagonists inhabit a jointly constructed landscape with both dungeons and dragons. He also showed governments helpless in the face of a threat born from their own operations, and the world saved by sufficiently insightful and independent individuals.

Many cyberpunk authors are musicians, some of them professionally so, and many of the early-proposed labels for their movement drew on musical inspirations. Terms like New Romantic and Techno-Punk refer to contemporary developments in rock and pop. But for every delighted proponent or advocate of a general label, there was at least one other author with a serious objection, and the debate dragged along until Bethke’s invention, “cyberpunk,” came along and suited almost everyone.

Even before an agreed upon name, the new movement attracted immediate attention. Some of the new authors won awards; many were cited and discussed in annual anthologies of genre fiction. Not that they were universally loved, of course; they came under criticism for (depending on the critic) sneering postmodernist ignorance about science, irresponsible Western male capitalist confidence in the possibility of progress, foolish obsession with flash and surface at the expense of substance, and so on. The general response on the part of the authors was either amused agreement or relaxed dismissal of the power of the critic to get in the way of the authors’ message.

• BIRTH OF CYBERPUNK •

It’s possible to argue for a long time what best warrants the label of “first cyberpunk story.” Close up, the boundaries of cyberpunk dissolve; continuous changes matter as much as radical ones. William Gibson’s 1977 short story, “Fragments of a Hologram Rose,” is clearly cyberpunk. John Brunner’s 1975 novel, *The Shockwave Rider*, is almost universally regarded as “nearly cyberpunk but not quite.” Anyone who really needs to give cyberpunk a birthday, however, can regard it as being born in 1976 or 1977.