Cyberspace

Beat regeneration

Jim McClellan sees echoes of Kerouac in techno subcultists Orphan Drift

BRITAIN MAY LAG behind the States in terms of cyber-business, digital politics and the number of people actually hooked up to the Net. But when it comes to turning the whole cyber thing into hip subcultures, perhaps we're still ahead of the game.

The techno-hippy scene that grew up in San Francisco and coalesced around magazines like Mondo 2000 and on-line hangouts like The Well has been influential, but, at the same time, the zippies, a comparable British compu-hippy cult, grew out of the rave scene and had a crucial impact on the Americans. In the States the zippies are still rolling (they belatedly made the cover of US Wired a year or so ago). Over here, however, things have already moved on. In the cross-media machinations of the cyber-bohemian art crew Orphan Drift, you can see the beginnings of a reaction against the zippies, the start of a more punky cyber-subcult – the kind of thing that could perhaps only happen in Britain.

I'm tempted to call Orphan Drift a techno-art collective. But perhaps it's not such a good idea. OD's Maggie Roberts tells me that she doesn't think it quite catches what they get up to. Ranu Mukherjee likes to think of them as a 'signal'.

OK, so if Orphan Drift is a 'signal' which starts with Roberts, Mukherjee and Suzie Karakashian, the other person at the core of the operation, and then spreads out to encompass other contributors, what exactly are they transmitting? It seems to be about encouraging the breakdown of what they call 'stable security structures' – from nation state and family to the centred individual. It's definitely about exploring the way technology is changing what it means to be human, shifting us into inhuman territories (one of which is cyberspace), they suggest.

For example, Ariadne's Gone Virtual attempted to investigate the disorientating nature of computer-simulated worlds by trying to construct a video game space in a gallery. In a similar vein there was the eponymously titled Orphan Drift, in which swirling, colour-coded collections of photographs (arranged to look like computer chips and comprising violent images of apocalypse) were computer manipulated until they radiated an eerie beauty.

So far the Orphan Drift 'signal' has spread across a variety of media. There have been

videos – rhythmic edits designed for raves – and performances in which readings are accompanied by thumping electronic soundtracks. Now, there's a self-published book (£9.99, from alternative bookshops), again titled Orphan Drift – or, to be more correct, o(rphan) d(rift>). Billed as 'cyberpunk fiction', the book mixes up original contributions with text from authors like William Gibson, J G Ballard and William Burroughs, and theorists like Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari.

The result is a heady, jargon-laden ride which eschews narrative and comes into focus around recurrent images – vampires

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and voodoo, altered visions (everything from autism and drugs to computer vision), becoming alien, the future falling back into the present …

The book takes Burroughs's cut-ups one step further, breaking certain recurrent phrases up into alien syllables and occasionally flipping into whole pages of patterned binary code and blizzards of typographical noise. The idea, explains Karakashian, is to shift from reading to something like pattern recognition. Actually, it strikes me that the book is an attempt to bring into literature some of the practices and energies you find in jungle and techno music. It's a sampladelic book, which attempts to work with text in the same way as jungle artists use computers to rework samples and breakbeats into something strange and new. At times it has an intriguing, druggy intensity, but it can quickly slip into parody.

Orphan Drift aren't the first writers to 'trip off' the intensity of music. Beats like Jack Kerouac also tried to riff away at their typewriters in an attempt to give their prose the same kind of energy as improvised jazz. OD bring this kind of thing into the 1990s.

Orphan Drift aren't on their own in their love of theory, jungle and hair dye. There are connections with cyber academics like Nick Land and the Warwick University students who produce the techno-zine Collapse, and Switch, the crew of Birmingham University students taught by Sadie Plant.

Although there are differences, you can identify some shared concerns: a punky rejection of the feel-good techno-fantasies promoted by zippies and Californian gurus; a sense that the dystopian vision in cyberpunk sci-fi is not about the future but to some extent is happening now.

Crucial is the feeling that in British cyberculture music is more influential than the Net. Although they are interested in theorising about cyberspace, OD admit that their hands-on experience is limited. However, they do have plans for a Net contribution to an exhibition in New York and are also about to start working on a video game. Bullfrog, the developers behind the much praised *Magic Carpet*, were originally going to produce the Orphan Drift game, but they pulled out, arguing that it was 'too wild'. 'It's about how you may have to change into something else to get to the next level,' says Mukherjee. 'It's definitely not about killing aliens.'

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Bulletin board

● HALL OF SHAME 'Best of the Web' pages are everywhere these days, but I prefer those that highlight bad stuff, like the Enhanced For Netscape Hall Of Shame, currently maintained by Chris Pearce. OK, so Netscape is an essential Web browser, but the Hall Of Shame links you to some truly horrible Netscape enhanced pages. The Taste Police come to the Web at http://www.europa.com/~yyz/netbln/netscape_hos.html.

● Send E-mail for Jim McClellan to jim_mcc@clx.compulink.co.uk. The URL for Jim McClellan's Web pages is http://www.gold.net/oneday/jim/.