

An Interview with Novelist Michael J. Cavallaro

Author of *Cybernetica*

The idea for your book came from a report that listed the world's top 100 economic entities. What specifically caught your eye?

Well, mainly the fact that it wasn't just countries listed. What specifically caught my eye was the main point of the report, compiled by the Institute of Policy Studies. Of the top 100 on the list, 51 of them were *corporations*. That's an alarming number when you consider the present climate of things, but even more so when you put those numbers in their proper context. For example, General Motors has more money than the entire country of Greece. Mitsubishi has more money than both Bangladesh and Algeria combined.

Your book is officially science fiction, but how close are we to some of the realities you describe in it?

Honestly, people have no idea how fast the next major technological revolution is coming. The one described in the book is admittedly very extreme, but it's a direction we could be heading in if we're not careful. Still, some of it has already happened. Much of the *Cybernetica's* back-story is based on very recent privacy rights issues regarding sensitive information stored in computer databases. When the Internet went commercial in the 80's, government watchdog agencies were concerned about their ability to monitor its activities. They essentially wanted access to Virtual Private Networks, something corporations viewed as a threat to both privacy and self-interest. And considering the rate of their growth via mergers, it may be only a matter of time before they separate themselves and develop some sort of autonomous paramilitary to protect those interests.

That's how I came up with the idea of the Encryption Wars. While some may view Iraq as a corporate-sponsored war, it's possible that such wars in the future may be corporate-led.

By privacy rights issues, do you mean the Patriot Act?

Not necessarily. People always talk about these being new and dangerous times, but in reality, the times are not new and they were always as dangerous. With the Patriot Act and the war on terror, it just happens to be getting more play.

One of your cousins is John Gaeta, Special Effects Director of *The Matrix*. Since your book seems cut from a similar cloth, did he inspire you in any way?

Actually, it's pretty different from *The Matrix*, as well as the traditional cyberpunk and post-cyberpunk novels, but I see where you're going. None of it really takes place in cyberspace, but in physical reality, where the characters are being affected *by* cyberspace. I wanted to broaden the audience a little, and to do that I needed a storyline that was accessible to both the people and the issues of today. In some ways, Irvin Kirschner did that with *The Empire Strikes Back*, one of the reasons I thought it was the best of the Star Wars films. As for *The Matrix*, there's a similar type of action in the book, and John won an Oscar for those sequences, so I guess when you talk about inspiration, his work would be at the top of *anyone's* list.

Is the city of Cybernetica just a thinly disguised version of the United States?

I wouldn't exactly say that. I mean, it's just another global power center, and there have been many throughout history. In this case we're talking about a power center that happens to control a global technology.

That global technology you created for the book is called Sublimation. Describe it.

Basically it's a brain-to-computer interface system where wireless encryption signals are encoded within the human brain to influence parallel thinking. In other words, mind control, a variation on Big Brother, developed by government as a result of the Encryption Wars. The American Society for Cybernetics calls it meta-system transition, the relationship between the controller and the controlled. The idea was intriguing because there are so many mysteries about the human brain we have yet to unlock. It's far more advanced than any supercomputer today, because that's just what it is. We have mathematical formulas on how it works. We just don't have access to its full potential yet.

Okay, so if Sublimation is a technological form of mind control, then what is *blindsight*?

Returning to my original point, there's a clinical definition that already exists. As we know it, blindsight is the ability of a partially blind person to perceive stimulus in the visual cortex subliminally; in other words, without actually realizing it. I was fascinated by that and wondered if the same process could directly occur in the *cerebral* cortex of the brain. Then during research I discovered that subliminal advertising techniques have been used—with statistical success—to influence consumer trends: what they buy, how they feel, even who they vote for. What's traditionally believed is that subliminal messages can only influence people if they don't *consciously* realize what they've experienced. So for the story I decided that blindsight would be a neurological immunity to the influence of sublimation, where encoded signals are received consciously rather than unconsciously, producing no cybernetic affect. That's what makes the characters who have blindsight—particularly Jake—different from everybody else. They're not controlled. They're able to think for themselves. To a system striving for uniformity, that's what makes them dangerous. Today we live in a world where the individual is struggling badly against the will of the collective—the majority who believe what they're told to think. It's something a lot of us can relate to.

Let's talk about Jake for a second. Would you say he's you, thinly disguised?

I would say *most* of the larger characters are, but hopefully more than that. I'm just an archetype. They developed into different people on their own.

Some might view the character of Van Curen as a villain. Others might not. What is *your* view of him?

Well, I'm only 30, but as I've gotten older, I've become—maybe for the worse—more emotionally detached from things. There's a point where you start seeing the world in a very clinical way. I think that's how Van Curen sees it. His designs may be considered nefarious, but we live in a universe where everyone has a point. I tried to make it hard for the reader to draw a line and take a side. That's where the richness of storytelling comes

from—the gray zone. It's pretty hollow and unrewarding when you see something that presents everything in dimensions so black and white.

What about Kendrick? It's hard not to call *him* a villain.

True, but even then the primal part of us identifies with him. He doesn't care who hates him because he's the Vice President and Chief of Operations at the Onyx/Enigma Group, a corporate superpower. While most of us go through life with barely any power at all, our thirst for it would be limitless if given the chance. That's a hard emotion to counterbalance with the emotion of detesting him.

At the end, Jake learns a very hard truth about himself. Would you say most people are kidding themselves about who they are and what they believe?

Sure. It's inherent in every person, in you, in me. The truths we create are the truths we put forth in the world. Philosopher Jean Paul Sartre said it best: we don't want to look in the mirror and see ourselves there.

Your book was independently published—a growing trend in publishing today. Why do you think so many authors are now going out and having their own success? What does it say about the industry as a whole?

In my view, independent authors are now having success for two reasons: one, the technology is now available for it, and two, big publishers have gained far too much control. How would you like to receive only ten percent from the total sale of your book? Or get almost no marketing for it? Or have no control over production? Or have your chances for publication eroded by corporate mergers? Or watch mediocre books fill the shelves while yours fills the slush pile? Like I said, it's a kind of culture—the *corporate* culture—where the collective wins and the individual loses. All I can do is talk about what I know and put the power back where it belongs. Many have done that already, but we still have a long way to go...

**To schedule an interview with Michael J. Cavallaro,
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