Science Fiction Book Club
Interview with Bruce Sterling, July 2019

Bruce Sterling is a prominent science fiction writer and a pioneer of the cyberpunk genre. Novels like Heavy Weather (1994), Islands in the Net (1988), Schismatrix (1985), The Artificial Kid (1980) earned him the nickname "Chairman Bruce". Apart from his writings, Bruce Sterling is also a professor of internet studies and science fiction at the European Graduate School. He has contributed to several projects within the scheme of futurist theory, founded an environmental aesthetic movement, edited anthologies and he still continues to write for several magazines including Wired, Discover, Architectural Record and The Atlantic.

David Stuckey: Have you considered a return to the world of "The Difference Engine" for stories or another novel?

Bruce Sterling: That won't happen.

David Stuckey: If you were going to write "Involution Ocean" today, what would you change or do differently?

Bruce Sterling: Well, alien planet adventures are a really dated form of space opera. On the other hand, they're great when you're 20 years old. If I were doing a project like that today I might make it a comic book. Or a webcomic. It might make a nice anime cartoon.

Richard Whyte: In the 2018 'State of the World' conversation on the Well, you said you were in Ibiza working on a novel. Are you able to tell us anything about it yet?

Bruce Sterling: I dunno if I'm ever gonna finish this epic novel about the history of the city of Turin, but I seem to get a lot of work done on it when I'm in Ibiza. It's about Turin, but when I'm actually in Turin I tend to work on weird technology art projects and goofy design schemes.

Also, look at this palace. I'm supposed to work on my novel in the attic of this villa. That's pretty weird, isn't it? This villa was built in the same era as the book I'm working on, which has the working title "The Starry Messengers." Like this villa, it's big and baroque and complicated.

https://fenicerinnovata.tumblr.com

Andrzej Wieckowski: We read 'Sacred Cow' for one of our short story reads a few months' ago. Were themes such as Bolton's historic connection to the Indian cotton industry and immigration to this country deliberate or unconscious? And as it's my home town - did you visit? :)

Bruce Sterling: There aren't any towns in Britain without some historic connection to India. As it happens I'm flying to India day after tomorrow to meet with some Indian science fiction writers.

I used to hang out in Great Britain rather a lot. Brexitania I don't much care for. It's a hostile, troubled place.

Gary Denton: You were active in the Viridian sustainable design movement that many readers may not know about. Do you think that major corporations have taken that over and it is less fringe now?

Bruce Sterling: I tend to do activist stuff. Also, you get more done if you don't ask for any credit. I've come to understand that a lot of my most influential writing was stuff that I never got paid for. Some of it never got published.

I was just at the Whole Earth 50th reunion about a week ago. They're a good example of a "movement" that was super-influential and somehow a dreadful failure at the same time.

As far as major corporations, meaning large public enterprises with a lot of shareholders, I don't worry about them anymore. It's actually moguls and oligarchs who are the big problem nowadays.

Gary Denton: Do you also see a change in the major polluters now compared to 25 years ago?

Bruce Sterling: They're a lot more violent. Blood for oil, killing off opponents in sinister ways, not a problem for them anymore. They're quite grim and red-handed. They used to be engineers, but now they know that they are culprits.

Gary Denton: You once said that the cyberpunks were the most realistic science fiction writers in the 80's. Who do you think are the most realistic science fiction writers now?

Bruce Sterling: Could be the Chinese.

Richard Whyte: Whenever someone here asks about the angriest SF work ever, I always seem to end up recommending your fine short story 'Spook'. Do you think of it as an angry story?

Bruce Sterling: Well, not really. It's a rather severely disaffected story from the point of view of a person who's not human and knows it. "We See Things Differently" is rather an angry story; it's about a terrorist assassin with a righteous grudge.

Eva Sable: What is the experience of collaborating with another author like for you? Especially when working with someone who, like yourself, is rather an individual. (Never met William Gibson, but he strikes me as someone who would be more comfortable working on his own)

Bruce Sterling: I tend to collaborate rather a lot. It helps if the two of you are combining forces in order to learn something together. Gibson and I agreed that we couldn't possibly write a work like DIFFERENCE ENGINE alone. We used to urge each other to do it, but eventually we just had to have a lot of long, abstruse discussions of what a book like that ought to do.

If you read the stories I wrote with Rudy Rucker you can see that a lot of those texts are basically him and me discussing weird ideas. We've got a reason to write those stories – a high-concept, and then there are pages of bizarre hugger-mugger where we push the concept as hard as we can. Then we give up.

Nowadays I spend a lot of time negotiating or collaborating with artists, designers, architects. I don't get jealous about the origins of good ideas.

Richard Whyte: Your 1980s SF criticism seemed very much in favour of 'Radical Hard SF'. To what extent do you think your own fiction 'takes its inspiration from science, and uses the language of science in a creative way'?

Bruce Sterling: I wrote a lot of that in the 1980s. Nowadays I tend to write speculative work that's more influenced by industrial design rather than by science.

Richard Whyte: In the early 1980s I believe you were associated with a group of like-minded SF writers known as 'The Movement', who were subsequently renamed as 'cyberpunks'. Overall, do you think this name change was a good or a bad thing?

Bruce Sterling: If people notice you, you're gonna get a public slang name anyway, so it's good if you can cheerfully put up with it. As for forming like-minded groups, that's a valuable life-skill.

John Grayshaw: Who are your favorite science fiction writers? And how have they influenced your work?

Bruce Sterling: Well, those favorites change with time. In different decades of my own life I've had different ambitions for my own science fiction. I tend to write pastiches. Lately I've been writing a lot of "science fiction" that's heavily influenced by Italian fantascienza, or, really, Italian fantasy generally.

I'm a long-time Jules Verne fan. I wouldn't describe Jules as a personal "favorite," but I recognize him as a titan of my genre. Knowing the personal details of the guy's career as a working creative has been of a lot of help to me.

I had a couple of professional SF writers who I regarded as my literary mentors. They're both dead now: Harlan Ellison and Brian Aldiss.

John Grayshaw: I heard that you are currently dividing your time between Belgrade and Turin, do you miss living in Texas? Or America in general?

Bruce Sterling: I'm back often enough that I don't really "miss it." I find that if I stay in one place too long, I tend to miss travelling. I roam a lot. If I get too old and tired to lift a suitcase and I settle somewhere, it probably won't be Austin, Belgrade or Turin.

John Grayshaw: I recommend everyone read your essay "Cyberpunk in the Nineties" (http://lib.ru/STERLINGB/interzone.txt) to understand that Cyberpunk was a movement and can't be removed from its time and place…But a Cyberpunk aesthetic has emerged over the years and that is what writers like Neal Stephenson or Richard K. Morgan are emulating. Was this aesthetic conscious at the time?

Bruce Sterling: Well, we spent plenty of time fussing about it. A lot of that conceptual work doesn't really show on the surface. Aesthetics interest me a lot. For instance, I'm the Art Director of the Share Festival in Turin, which is an Italian technology-art fair. Italians are good at fussing about how stuff looks.

John Grayshaw: Did "Mirrorshades" have a theme? What directions or guidance did you give the writers?

Bruce Sterling: It didn't have a set theme. Mostly I was trying to pick work from colleagues I respected, that I thought put them in a good light.

John Grayshaw: Other than writing what are your interests/hobbies?

Bruce Sterling: I like design and technology art. Also I travel a lot. I spend a lot of time in arcane online research.

John Grayshaw: Why do you think Steampunk has become a popular subgenre/aesthetic in the last 30 years?

Bruce Sterling: I think it's about the craft aspects of steampunk. Hobbyist people like the costumes and the gadgets. It's like traditional historical recreation groups, but with an alluring fantasy aspect.

John Grayshaw: Can you explain why you have said that Artificial Intelligence is a bad metaphor?

Bruce Sterling: I think the AI metaphor gets in the way of actual progress in the field, with actual hardware and software. Rodney Brooks explains the problem a lot better than I can, and nobody can understand his explanations either. That's not exactly fair – actually I get what Rodney's saying enough to more or less agree with him. He's an expert, so I'd refer you to him.

"Deep Learner" and "neural net" are kinda better metaphors than "Artificial Intelligence," but they're still metaphors. We haven't created sharp, focused words for what these odd devices really do. "Intelligence" is not what they're doing.

John Grayshaw: Cyberpunk was a dark look at the future. Do you feel optimistic or pessimistic about the future?

Bruce Sterling: People always ask that. People in Russia never thought that cyberpunk was "dark." Also, whenever you get to "the future," no matter how scared or happy you are about some particular historical episode, there's always more future on the way. Eventually people are dead, so if you ask if I'm optimistic or pessimistic about the 20th century, the whole idea sounds silly. The future is a kind of history that hasn't happened yet.

John Grayshaw: In cyberpunk technology often contributes to society's ills. What lesson do we take from this? That we must learn how to live with tech or that we should reject it and live like the Amish?

Bruce Sterling: Kevin Kelly kinda likes the idea of living like the Amish. Kevin's an interesting guy. If I myself wanted to "live like the Amish" I'd probably move to Christiania in Denmark, where at least they have reggae music.

John Grayshaw: Do you keep up with the latest technologies? Or do you stay "off the grid?"

Bruce Sterling: I do both, actually. I'm generally so "off the grid" that I'm not even in its time-zone. I don't have a business card, there's no settled mailing address, I'm never on Facebook, and no one knows my phone number. Like they say in the world of electronic privacy, "I have nothing to hide, but I have nothing I want to show you, either."

John Grayshaw: Do you think people will have "immersive" VR type experiences on the internet in the next 20 years?

Bruce Sterling: They have it already.

John Grayshaw: What do you feel is your legacy?

Bruce Sterling: Hard to say. It's like asking a Beatnik writer what "his legacy" is. The Beats wrote a lot of more-or-less memorable stuff, but there's also the existence proof that somebody was able to live like that, and that is their legacy. I lived in a different historical period than the Beat writiers, but a lot of the stuff that entertained and engaged me is also quite archaic nowadays. I don't thing people aspire to emulate Bruce Sterling, but they do like the idea of operating in the same cultural spaces that I do. That something lively can exist between "science" and "fiction," or between "cyber" and "punk," that's a valuable thing to know.