

Reflection of Modern Society through Cyberpunk

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Abstract. “We live in a dystopian world. Filled with crime, corruption. And, poverty by mighty, power-hungry corporations and heartless, brutal governments.” The art book of the recent game Cyberpunk 2077 stated this as its basic world setting. Although the game gets a bad reputation due to its unpolished quality, it is fair to say Cyberpunk 2077 adds a few crucial pieces to the overall puzzle that is the cyberpunk world. In this paper I’ll analyze the aesthetic qualities and story settings of cyberpunk across media, contributing to the dialogue around the genre’s common theme of serving as a warning to the present society.

Keywords: Utopia; Cyberpunk; Modern Society.

1. The Definition of Cyberpunk

The word “cyberpunk” is a combination of “cybernetics” and “punk”. Cybernetics is the scientific study of “the science of control and communication in institutions, organisms, and societies.” Cybernetics was first introduced in 1948 by American scientist Norbert Wiener, is a Linguistically, the meaning of cybernetic comes from latin word “gubernetes”, which means guiding, limiting and governing. Tracing back further, gubernetes is originated from the Greek word “κυβερνητης”, means governors or commanders. In the 80s and 90s, “cyber” was popular as a prefix. Terms like “cyberculture”, “cyberspace” and “cyberfeminism” came out under the influence of popularity of the term cyberpunk. Here, cybernetics refers to the concept of control and also indicates its close relationship with high technology. Strictly speaking, punk is a genre of music that was praised among teenagers from the 70s to the 90s. It reached its prime in 1977 with the controversial piece of music *God Save the Queen* by British band Sex Pistols. Punk connotes not only the music genre which emerged as a distinct armature of rock music, but also a broad spirit of counterculture and rebellion. The punk movement was started in the late 70s by teenagers that felt disappointed with the society they were living in. The punk rejects social norms in praise of hyper-individualism. While a lot of the creators of cyberpunk story had witnessed the counterculture movement and rise of punk music, it is natural for them to draw inspirations from the society and express their attitudes and emotions through their art pieces. In the context of cyberpunk stories, the goal is rebelling against authority. The core value of any cyberpunk story revolves around reclaiming personal agency amidst control and restrictions. Cyberpunk first appeared as the title of a short story by American writer Bruce Bethke in 1983. However, the name of “the father of cyberpunk” goes to William Gibson as he constructed the general settings of a cyberpunk world in his well-known science fiction book *Neuromancer* in 1984. The book not only includes cyberspace, today known as a vertical space, but also speaks of cyborgs and artificial intelligence.

2. The Settings of Cyberpunk

This section of the paper will discuss the social structure of a cyberpunk world, asking the proverbial question “Who am I?” to assess the current boundaries between reality and cyberspace.

Two years before Gibson’s work, the movie *Blade Runner* directed by Ridley Scott was the first time a cyberpunk world was visually shown on screen, a film which remains visually influential to the cyberpunk genre at large. The movie is an adaptation of Philip Dick’s novel *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* The story takes place in a future Los Angeles where Tyrell Corporation’s capacity for producing replicants has made the company an all powerful force of domination. Replicants are artificially made and are capable of mass producing, not only that, they far exceed human abilities

physically and mentally. These means of production are not owned by the public. A monopoly is formed which puts the majority of the city's wealth in the hands of Dr. Eldon Tyrell, CEO of Tyrell Corporation. In comparison, *the 2022 World Inequality Report* stated that concerning the two leading powers in the world, the United States of America and China, roughly 10% of the population owns above 70% of the wealth. Within the cyberpunk context, the wealth gap will be pushed to the extreme: a few people own 99% of the wealth. In other words, one of the common settings of a fictional cyberpunk world has an oligarch, usually a technology corporation that has complete control of the society. In *Blade Runner*, it is Tyrell Corporation. As a result of this problematic structure, a middle class no longer exists. All that remains are the haves and the have nots. The structure of said cyber society is different from the real world which is like a pyramid shape. In the cyberpunk world, the structure is shaped as a pin, the bottom is infinitely big and the tip is infinitely small. Issues and conflicts caused by this systematically wrong society are addressed in another cyberpunk film, which is *Akira* directed by Katsuhiro Otomo. Together, *Blade Runner* and *Akira* completed the early visual interpretation of cyberpunk worlds on screen as well as discussions on authority in a cyberpunk story.

In order to differentiate between the high and the low visually, the movie creators use comparisons in lighting, colour, and clothing. In *Blade Runner*, while the story takes place inside the Tyrell Corporation, natural sunlight is introduced, and the scene has a unified colour scheme. On the other hand, when the camera changes its focal point to the city, scenery is dominated by highly saturated neon lights, huge billboards and public advertisements. More than that, according to Scott, "The colonization of the elite to utopian 'off-world' planets have resulted in the large-scale migration of the upper class, leaving the city populated by mainly ethnic underclass." The film depicts an ever-expanding population and globalization; largely through the introduction of cultural elements from the east, for example, pillars with sculpted lotus, Buddha statues and Chinese beer. As for clothing, Eldon Tyrell often wears a clean, fitted suit while the rest of the character's clothing are designed for durability and functionality. For example, another main character Deckard wears a big leather jacket as well as the transparent jacket made of plastic EVA materials also worn by one of the replicants. Manga artist Yukito Kishiro has a different approach to depicting class-consciousness in his work *Battle Angel Alita*: The elite live on a plate above ground, completely having separated themselves from the rest of the population. With such a clear border between the rich and poor, these drastic differences in lifestyle seem to depict two distinct species. There is no chance to climb up for the people on the bottom, there is no such thing called "an American dream" where as long as people are willing to try hard, they will succeed. Last but not least, large area of vegetations and green fields are usually not part of aesthetic of cyberpunk. The appearance of greens mostly happens in the form of "Bonsai" or "Penzai" which are small plants in pots. The extreme compression of natural spaces implies the inhumane use of technology, rationalizes the urge to escape from reality. As a genre of science fiction, American literary critic Fredric Jameson called cyberpunk "the supreme literary expression if not of postmodernism, then of late capitalism itself." Here it is worth noting the commonalities which resonate with our current global society, one in which commercials reflect back a somber reality viewers must aspire to be a part of. Personal electronic devices become another type of body modification we have accepted as normal.

In ancient times, philosophers Heraclitus and Plato had a discussion on identity, developing a concept known today as Ship of Theseus. Ship of Theseus involves questioning if the object remains fundamentally the same after all of its components have been replaced. Body modification is very common in modern life. A lot of people have benefited from the advancement of technology, however, pushing this modifying process to the extreme, the question of Ship of Theseus is likewise raised yet again. A similar question is asked in the movie *Ghost in the Shell*, where the main protagonist Major herself is a cyborg. In the film, Major is questioning the boundaries between herself and the world: "There are countless ingredients that make up the human body and mind. There is also the ability to access vast amounts of information from an infinite network. I feel continually confined within boundaries..." She is struggling with where the boundary is to distinguish between herself and the rest. In other words, she feels lost facing the massive information she receives as a cyborg, which

makes her own sense of reality feel small. The limitations of a physical body, the uncontrollable emotions in humanity, these are considered as flaws and obstacles as the path toward the ultimate utopia. The pursue of it is in fact, not building a better society for next generations but falling into a well of a “soul-less” world, a world of human slave themselves by information and technology, in other words, slaved by instrumental rationality.

This 1995 film starts with the assembling of Major’s body along with a type of traditional Japanese music called Utai playing in the background. Utai is a traditional masked drama typically involving supernatural characters. When Director Mamoru Oshii adds divinity and mystery to a machine, the major theme of the film is underscored: A cyborg questioning her own humanity. This film only serves to highlight how today, everyone is a cyborg facing similar questions. Postmodern philosopher Donna Haraway takes this idea up in her classic essay *A Cyborg Manifesto*, writing: “(Cyborgs are) disassembled and reassembled, postmodern collective and personal self.” To further deconstruct this statement, Jean Piaget’s cognitive development theory comes in handy. According to the theory, constructing an understanding of the world involves assimilation and accommodation. Assimilation is “fitting new information into the belief system one already possesses” while accommodation is to modify the knowledge while encountering examples that are different. However, when the information one receives is infinitely large, before a personality or a way of thinking is able to be contracted, there is a great chance that a counter-opinion will come and shatter the view of the world one has. As a result, a postmodern person has a set of partial, incomplete versions of themselves. Again, when this situation is at its extreme, when a person’s soul is cut into infinitely small pieces, the boundary of one’s mind and the rest of the world becomes arbitrary. The development of technology has made the world small enough that with a tap on our phone, the mechanic part of us has access to another world completely different from what we see, smell and touch in the real world. Taking a step back, if a cyborg means partly organic and partly mechanical then everyone who lives in a modern society fits into the category of cyborg. From dental braces to smartphones and maybe implant chips in the future, these devices are either a modification of one’s body or an extension of it. If using the first two is considered normal today, in the context of cyberpunk, in a society that fully promotes replacing organic parts with machines, these new consumerist social norms will squeeze out every last coin from the lower class’s pocket. Philosopher Theodor W. Adorno had pointed out the danger of instrumental rationality in the culture of capitalism in his book *Minima Moralia*: “The subject still feels sure of its autonomy, but the nullity demonstrated to subjects by the concentration camp is already overtaking the form of subjectivity itself.” People believe they have the option to choose but in fact, they do not. It is not only applicable for younger people who are more open for new things but rather for all. Needs and wants are generated everyday as more products and services, the more consumption of these, the more one is defined by the objectivity of them. The blending of subjectivity and the modifications from objectivity not only causes questions of “Who am I”, also becomes the tool to generate wealth for those who owns the means of production. It is business all along. Technology has churned out so many tools to generate wealth in a society where the purpose of buying is buying. Where the slogan “I shop therefore I am” has become reality, is there a place to escape this reality?

In the year of 2021, founder of Facebook, Mark Zuckerberg announced his ambitious plan known as metaverse, a virtual space where people can fully immerse themselves. Theoretically, a place as free from limitations of the human body as possible - one where we can become anything we want. The concept is similar to cyberspace in *Neuromancer* or the Oasis in *Ready Player One*. Much like games and television shows that serve as modern entertainment, it is a space to escape from reality. Such a utopian impulse drives people who have long lost faith in the real world, those seeking to run away to a place that is much better. Unlike the punk movement of the 70s, where there was no such place, in cyberpunk, a cyberspace is perfectly capable of offering such relief. The wanting and chase towards cyberspace is a projection of the pursuit of happiness from people, however, before that, realizing how chaotic reality is in the precondition of the utopian impulse, Fredric Jameson calls it “Orienting impulse”. Like *The Truman Show*, before Truman notices that something about this

paradise is odd, everything is perfectly fine, albeit everything is fake or vertical. At the end, Truman breaks the fourth wall leaving viewers with an ominous good morning and good night. Like many films of the genre, the ending is left open-ended. Viewers will never know how Truman is going to engage with the real world. Truman chooses to take the red pill, and decides to face reality. Meanwhile, the majority of people in *Ready Player One* choose to take the blue pill and immerse themselves in cyberspace. They do not care about the reality other than basic needs like food and water. At this point, The punk element has disappeared. The multinational corporations have won, they have controlled what people want to see and want to buy. They have doomed them to spend every last penny on their own will, trained them to spend most of their time in a virtual space instead of coming together, trying to shatter the system. The prosper development in technology has give the society an optimistic view of the future and at the same time hiding the danger of less and less real life experiences. After putting down these fictional works mentioned above, it's clear that on a broader scale, not only have the people in the books been tamed, so has the genre of cyberpunk itself. It is no longer as innovative and critical as it once was, with more and more people attracted to the cool factor of its aesthetic, cyber punk is yet another advertisement, devoid of any core value. The “punk” in cyberpunk has disappeared.

3. Conclusion

The genre of cyberpunk is a space for filmmakers, writers and artists to express their vision of the future. Many older classics of the genre offered frighteningly accurate premonitions of the rapid expansion of the internet in the 90s. Today, we are living in the future of the past. Improvements in technology have changed our way of living in countless positive ways. And yet, many suffer as loss of privacy and the attention-stealing tools of international corporations lead to serious mental problems for the masses. It seems the future is pessimistic. Eventually, technology will create a world in which running away from reality is the only way to live happily. Or everybody has an ending like Major, giving up her physical form to live on the internet forever, becoming the one with no self, no separation from others and no difference. The attempt to represent subjectivity by objectivity either partially or entirely is a way of eliminating humanity and uniqueness, which are what make us stand today. On the other hand, if a replicant has a subjectivity that can not presented by any objectivities, then the name of “replicant” will not longer be accurate. In the end, the one who controls the use of technology is humans ourselves. Technology will still be beneficial to people as long as a more humane approach governs its development. Our present day is a movie with an open ending where nobody can predict it precisely like Laplace's demon. Cyberpunk is a warning to the present day. It is a close enough illusion of a possible dead end, where technology has turned from the hero who frees humans from Laws of the jungle to the dragon that holds all the treasures.

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