

Attitude is Everything: The Importance of Cyberpunk to Contemporary Society

by

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## Abstract:

We are living in cyberpunk times. Not just because we are reaching and surpassing the years in which notable cyberpunk texts set their futures, but because the conditions of contemporary society continue to fit those that inspired the arrival of cyberpunk fictions into the science fiction scene. However, cyberpunk analysis is still commonly rooted in the idea that the movement was an artefact of the late 20<sup>th</sup> Century, that its revolution failed and that its message can be defined entirely by the same core texts. This thesis disproves these beliefs, returning cyberpunk to the critical focus and embracing its varied nature to reveal its continued production and relevance to contemporary society. In this work I set out a new definition for cyberpunk, one which proposes an open conception of genre based on core elements to reject historicization and demonstrates this variety in a close study of early cyberpunk fiction; I then prove cyberpunk's contemporary relevance, analysing its transmission into the real world and the damage it can do when appropriated by the tech elite; finally I analyse contemporary cyberpunk to show how it does more than imitate a dead genre, but reinvents its own style to reflect 21<sup>st</sup> Century concerns. Through this work I show how cyberpunk is still an important tool for understanding our contemporary society and how it should be returned to critical attention to best understand our relationships with cyberpunk's technological and political interrogations of the world around it.

***To everyone that believed in me***

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## Table of Contents:

INTRODUCTION: CYBERPUNK NEVER DIED	1
CHAPTER 1: WHAT IS CYBERPUNK? A DEFINITION	19
CHAPTER 2: THE INHERENT VARIETY OF CYBERPUNK	107
CHAPTER 3: TRANSMISSION	160
CHAPTER 4: MODERN CYBERPUNK ITERATIONS	248
CONCLUSION: THE IMPORTANCE OF CYBERPUNK	312
BIBLIOGRAPHY	322

## INTRODUCTION: CYBERPUNK NEVER DIED

Cyberpunk<sup>1</sup> is alive. And, even whilst most of its early proponents and practitioners jumped ship, it is swimming back toward the mainstream; the appeal of its grimy, neon-ridden near-futures outlasted those who had given them first life. In 1984, cyberpunk was lauded as Science Fiction's<sup>2</sup> avant-garde, its newest, hardest new wave, and a reaction against both a withered, atrophied "hard" SF and a docile, friable New Wave, neither of which seemed to have enough to say about the contemporary state of capitalism and increasingly globalised trade, cultural exchange, and neocolonialism. Rebellion, however, is hard to sustain. Once the frenetic energy of this raucous arrival into the landscape of SciFi began to transition into subsequent waves of exploration and development, the original supporters who had so celebrated the 'freshness' of cyberpunk were all too ready to drop it by the wayside. Some readers may have noted that the above short introduction is a rephrasing of the opening of Neil Easterbrook's 1992 article, "The Arc of Our Destruction: Reversal and Erasure in Cyberpunk", which famously begins: 'cyberpunk is dead'.<sup>3</sup> It is this idea that this thesis is written to countermand. It rejects the conception that cyberpunk is dead, a relic of a late 20<sup>th</sup> Century moment whose earliest practitioners failed in their rebellious desires for the

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<sup>1</sup> To note from the outset, this thesis uses the non-capitalised version of cyberpunk for reference throughout. This is not only because cyberpunk does not have a generic term with which it could be confused, but because capitalising it quantifies it, and furthers an expectation of the genre as limited. This thesis is written to break that expectation, so is committed to this even in these minutiae of its language.

<sup>2</sup> Referred to from hereon as SciFi.

<sup>3</sup> Neil Easterbrook, "The Arc of Our Destruction: Reversal and Erasure in Cyberpunk." *Science Fiction Studies*, vol. 19, no. 3, 1992, pp. 378–94. JSTOR, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4240184>. Accessed 4 Sep. 2022.

genre and abandoned it for pastures new. It refutes the accusation that modern cyberpunk is no more than an empty copy of its predecessors. Over the course of this project I will demonstrate how cyberpunk maintains cultural relevance into contemporary contexts, how it forms a vital part of familiarising audiences<sup>4</sup> to the technological potential of their own imminent futures, and how it promotes an active engagement with the political conditions of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century.

Cyberpunk is alive.

It is these ideas that are the motivation behind this thesis; here, I make the case that we need to return to the genre, to better understand what it has always done, and to engage what it's doing today, because cyberpunk has far more to say.

In recent years we have seen a resurgence of cyberpunk texts in the mainstream. In December 2020, *Cyberpunk 2077*<sup>5</sup> was released across multiple games consoles. It was a highly anticipated video game adaptation, and an extension of a Table Top Role Playing Game from the 1980s, starring Keanu Reeves, the face of *The Matrix*.<sup>6</sup> Alongside this high-budget videogame release, the indie game scene continues to

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<sup>4</sup> A further terminological decision made throughout this thesis is the use of 'audience' over 'reader'. As will be discussed later, assessing cyberpunk purely for its written texts limits the reaches of such a widespread genre; films such as *Blade Runner* are just as foundational as early cyberpunk novels, and video games are a key element to the representation, and inspiration of the genre. For this reason, 'audience' is the most appropriate term for this research as it keeps the varieties of cyberpunk at the forefront of its analysis.

<sup>5</sup> CD Projekt Red (2020), *Cyberpunk 2077*

<sup>6</sup> Another critically important cyberpunk series that will be returned to throughout this thesis. Wachowski (1999), full citation in bib.



produce a myriad of cyberpunk games, from top-down shooters like *Ruiner*,<sup>7</sup> to puzzle adventure games like *Technobabylon*,<sup>8</sup> and closest to the writing of this thesis, 2022's *Citizen Sleeper*<sup>9</sup> and *Stray*.<sup>10</sup> Television and cinema, too, has experienced a resurgence in interest for cyberpunk; Netflix's *Altered Carbon*,<sup>11</sup> the *Cyberpunk 2077* tie-in *Cyberpunk: Edgerunners*,<sup>12</sup> and *Love Death and Robots*<sup>13</sup> each wear, or quote, the genre with pride; and on the big screen we see returns to the worlds of *Blade Runner*<sup>14</sup> and *The Matrix* with new instalments in these series showing alongside fresh additions to the genre like *Ex Machina*,<sup>15</sup> *Ready Player One*,<sup>16</sup> and even *Detective Pikachu*<sup>17</sup> (based on characters from the children's card- and videogame *Pokémon*) embracing the neo-futuristic detective heritage of cyberpunk. As it was aptly phrased in McFarlane, Murphy, and Schmeink's *Routledge Companion to Cyberpunk Culture*: '[w]hile those beyond the sf community might not have even heard of cyberpunk, they will likely be aware of cyberpunk's impact'.<sup>18</sup> They point to the commonly replicated imagery of *Blade Runner*, William Gibson's concept of cyberspace influencing how we envision digital realms, and the green digital rain of *The Matrix* that still signifies the potential of reality as a simulated illusion. We can also see in articles on *Techopedia*,<sup>19</sup> in Dann Albright's

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<sup>7</sup> Reikon Games (2020), *Ruiner*

<sup>8</sup> Technocrat Games (2015), *Technobabylon*

<sup>9</sup> Jump Over The Age (2022), *Citizen Sleeper*

<sup>10</sup> BlueTwelve Studio (2022), *Stray*

<sup>11</sup> Laeta Kalogridis, *Altered Carbon*, (Netflix, 2018)

<sup>12</sup> Rafal Jaki, *Cyberpunk: Edgerunners*, (Studio Trigger, 2022)

<sup>13</sup> Tim Miller, *Love Death + Robots* (Blur Studio, 2019)

<sup>14</sup> Ridley Scott, *Blade Runner*, England, Ladd Company, 1982

<sup>15</sup> Alex Garland, *Ex Machina* (Universal Pictures, 2015)

<sup>16</sup> Steven Spielberg, *Ready Player One* (Warner Bros. Pictures, 2018)

<sup>17</sup> Rob Letterman, *Detective Pikachu* (Warner Bros. Pictures, 2019)

<sup>18</sup> McFarlane, Anna et al. *The Routledge Companion to Cyberpunk Culture* (Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2020) p.1

<sup>19</sup> Techopedia, "Cyberpunk: Definition", [techopedia.com/definition/2392/cyberpunk](https://techopedia.com/definition/2392/cyberpunk) [accessed December 2019]

article on *Makeuseof.com*,<sup>20</sup> on the website *Neon Dystopia*,<sup>21</sup> and in videos like one by Darkside Loyalty<sup>22</sup> that an interest in understanding cyberpunk persisted in the public eye. Cyberpunk's influence runs deeper than it is often given credit, creeping into our fictions and our day-to-day interactions particularly with digital technologies.

I describe the phenomenon of the recent surge in high profile cyberpunk stories as a 'rising to popularity' as it signifies a return to the mainstream of a genre that has persisted since its initial inception, rather than a resurgence of a long-abandoned form of SciFi. Cyberpunk never went away, but it did retreat from focus around the end of the 20th Century, as its most prominent authors moved away to different forms of literary experimentation, and the fashions so tightly tied to such a visual genre rotated out of public favour. The challenge with championing early cyberpunk as a home for rebellion against corporate hegemony, and a stylistically daring choice of language and motifs, is that it couldn't persist in this form once it became popular. Once cyberpunk reached the mainstream, then it struggled to shock, and its profitability and marketability ensured that it no longer rebelled against capitalist drives, but instead supported them. Once these boundaries were hit, cyberpunk was proclaimed a failed experiment, and the texts aiming to put these tenets at the forefront sank into the background.

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<sup>20</sup> Dann Albright, "What is Cyberpunk? An Introduction to the Sci-Fi Genre", *makeuseof.com*, <https://www.makeuseof.com/tag/cyberpunk-introduction-sci-fi-genre/> [accessed December 2019]. And in: Neon Dystopia, *What is Cyberpunk?* <https://www.neondystopia.com/what-is-cyberpunk/> [accessed December 2019]

<sup>21</sup> Neon Dystopia, *What is Cyberpunk?* <https://www.neondystopia.com/what-is-cyberpunk/> [accessed December 2019]

<sup>22</sup> Darkside Loyalty. *What Is Cyberpunk? (A Genre Decision... Kinda)*. 2018, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2L2Bn2a-WXY&t=18s&ab\\_channel=DarksideRoyalty](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2L2Bn2a-WXY&t=18s&ab_channel=DarksideRoyalty). Accessed 16 Aug 2022. And: Rafael Abreu, "Cyberpunk Explained — Origins, Characteristics And Themes", Studiobinder, 2022 <<https://www.studiobinder.com/blog/what-is-cyberpunk-definition/>> [Accessed 4 September 2022].

During this time, however, cyberpunk was much more than just these surface features. Easterbrook's own assessment of *Neuromancer*<sup>23</sup> shows how its rebellious foretext, and promotion in the zeitgeist, concealed a more jaded view of the inescapability of the social structures it represented. Gibson's Console Cowboy was a hypocrite, begging to reinforce the status quo with himself on top, claiming desperation to escape his body even as he required it to fuel his drug addiction. Even this focus overlooks the varieties of cyberpunk from its outset. Cyberpunk was never only about rebellious outcasts standing apart from the structures it critiques; it has always featured corporate employees struggling to reconcile their lives with threateningly intimate technologies and the precarity of livelihoods driven by overpopulation and unequal wealth distribution. It is not only those on the streets who are subject to the elision of reality from increasingly important digital spaces and overwhelmingly marketed idealised fantasy lives. This greater variety is often forgotten in discussions of cyberpunk, a fact which has contributed to the idea that it, as a genre, died out, and it is this idea that we will unpick and re-address throughout this thesis. Cyberpunk's reputation has tainted its effectiveness and limited our understanding of its complexity. It is more than has been claimed: it is not a historical moment, it is not a failed attempt to incite rebellion; it is, and always has been, capable of thoughtful exploration of living with a societal dependence on information technologies, of the impacts of ceding financial and political control to multinational corporations comprised of scores of replaceable workers, and of the commodification of the human body. These fears, which cyberpunk consistently addresses, have not changed in the 40 years since its inception. What has changed is

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<sup>23</sup> William Gibson, *Neuromancer*, (London: Harper Collins, 1984)

the stories told to explore them, and how cyberpunks have talked to cyberpunks as they watched this trajectory continue ever onwards. We have reached the years that the original texts were discussing, passing *Blade Runner's* 2019 and its unrealised hover cars and replicants, and yet we see these stories gaining traction in audiences worldwide. Why does cyberpunk still resonate today? How do we need to re-address cyberpunk to properly engage with a genre that is still popular with a broad public? These are the questions we will go on to address in this introduction and put to work throughout this thesis.

Unfortunately, the reports of its death have had a negative impact upon the library of critical material analysing cyberpunk texts. Whilst cyberpunk has not dropped out of academic view entirely, analyses of it are regrettably sporadic. Recently, this has begun to change, in particular with the recent Routledge publications.<sup>24</sup> With the initial instalment, which was first published in 2017, we see acknowledgment of the importance of this formation of SciFi begin to return. Outside of the work of this editorial team, however, material is sparse from the 1990s to present. In light of this dearth of criticism, and particularly of work outside of the limited 'canon' of cyberpunk texts that this thesis criticises, I reach frequently into the sphere of public journalism to support and expound the analysis within. The choice to include non-academic references is a conscious one, and one which allows the connection between cyberpunk and its time of writing to be strengthened for analysis of more recent texts, rather than purely relying on

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<sup>24</sup> Namely the edited collections of *The Routledge Companion to Cyberpunk Culture*, *Cyberpunk and Visual Culture*, and *Fifty Key Figures in Cyberpunk Culture*, both of which are cited fully in this thesis' bibliography.

retrospective application of older academic material. And yet, whilst it enables a broader exploration of cyberpunk, if the genre's return to academic concern continues in line with its popularity in contemporary popular culture, then this will become less necessary as it rightly returns to general, critical awareness.

### The Post-cyberpunk Problem

The issues discussed above about the limitations of restrictively defining cyberpunk are best understood with reference to the limiting category of 'post-cyberpunk'. This proposed categorisation of later cyberpunk works exemplifies the issues with understanding the development of cyberpunk dialogues and clearly demonstrates the need to return to cyberpunk itself to re-emphasise the continued importance of it into the present. In *Rewired: The Post-cyberpunk Anthology* (2007), James Patrick Kelly and John Kessel propose a new consideration of what they see as later evolutions of cyberpunk works and categorise these texts as "post-cyberpunk". From the outset, I want to state that their analysis of the conditions of cyberpunk texts and their development, and the reasoning behind reviewing these changing perspectives and experiments, are entirely valid and very insightful. It in fact aligns in parts with my intentions in this thesis but presents one critical issue. This is that separating cyberpunk into "pre-, classic-, and post-"<sup>25</sup> is an act which unnecessarily divides something that is already a subset of a greater whole, SciFi, and therefore restricts vital cross-comparison

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<sup>25</sup> James Patrick Kelly, and John Kessel, *Rewired: The Post-Cyberpunk Anthology*, (San Francisco: Tachyon Publications, 2007) p.xiv

and encourages audiences to approach cyberpunk with the intent to establish its differences rather than its similarities. It risks reducing cyberpunk to a 'solved' moment that communicated a specific message from which fiction has now moved on. It configures cyberpunk as a solve-able 'Movement', rather than an adapting and shifting form, and this thesis demonstrates how cyberpunk continually adapts and reconfigures itself to deepen its chief concerns of our present and near-future.

In fact, in their introduction to this collection, Kelly and Kessel frequently describe post-cyberpunk as a further extension of cyberpunk<sup>26</sup>, culminating in the line: '[i]n the final analysis the CP [cyberpunk] writers went to war so that the PCP [post-cyberpunk] writers could be free to experiment with new forms.'<sup>27</sup> Another way to look at this, however, would be to acknowledge that early cyberpunk laid much of the groundwork for different iterations of the genre's future. They explore a range of concerns that would continue on into the 21st Century to be revisited in fresh formats and contexts which better expand its reflection on contemporary socio-technological climates with the benefit of an established literary form. In accepting these "post-cyberpunk" texts under the greater bracket of cyberpunk, it encourages not only cross-comparison with earlier texts, such as the 'classics' produced by Gibson and Sterling, but it also future proofs our analysis for upcoming cyberpunk texts. Once the desire to divide cyberpunk into stages becomes normalised, we set up for the challenge of when post-cyberpunk has evolved into post-post-cyberpunk; we have to look for monumental changes, sweeping

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<sup>26</sup> Examples from the text are: 'A key insight of CP [cyberpunk], extended still further in PCP [post cyberpunk], is...' (p.x), 'these traits of PCP are so far mere extensions of CP obsessions.' (p.xi), and further they write that 'characters in a PCP story need this healthy dose of attitude...' (p.xii) referring to cyberpunk's punk attitude to negotiating the relationship with reality intrinsic to its stories. PCP is an extension and development of cyberpunk, rather than something that can be separated out from it.

<sup>27</sup> *Rewired*... p.xiv

differences that reveal when this categorical shift occurs. This thesis rejects this premise in favour of a slow, simmering development of cyberpunk where the manner in which texts bounce off and explore each other is a continuous process. Therefore, whilst the desire to understand how cyberpunk concerns have evolved over time is entirely understandable, we must remain continuously aware of the expectations our choice of categorisation and reference is on macro approaches to cyberpunk (and, indeed, to any genre).

Kelly and Kessel's argument centres around the loss of cyberpunk's 'revolution'. That once 'popular culture hacked into it and turned cyberpunk to its own purposes'<sup>28</sup> it became 'tamer' and 'fuzzier' in definition. They see this progression as what allowed cyberpunk to be contained into a single moment that has long passed, 'consigned to the dustbin of literary history.'<sup>29</sup> Cyberpunk's initial authors fought for it to be established as a rebellion against other, as they might have seen them, stagnant or limited SciFi genres. Yet once it moved away from this cult of personality, it seemed to lose its power. Kelly and Kessel reinvigorate it through their conception of post-cyberpunk, describing fresh stories 'long after classic cyberpunk' that foster its same 'obsessions'. Their work here is fuelled by a positive intent: to acknowledge that cyberpunk concerns have been maintained in fiction through to the contemporary texts they have chosen for their connection. But they have severed these works as 'long after' the genre's arrival and dissolution, and this neglects the way that cyberpunk's initial concerns never left and have continually been reflected in its texts. And if the obsessions have remained then it is important to recognise how they have persisted, not been reborn. This thesis

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<sup>28</sup> Kelly and Kessel, *Rewired...* p.viii

<sup>29</sup> Kelly and Kessel, *Rewired...* p.viii

embraces the elements of cyberpunk that were ‘turned [to contrary] purposes’ as an element of the web to which later cyberpunk responds.<sup>30</sup> Breaking the genre into further and further distinctions overlooks the impact, both successful and unsuccessful, it has had on culture. My research here embraces both sides of this as part of cyberpunk’s whole and unpicks why cyberpunk’s ‘obsessions’ have persisted, and even evolved as part of a long process that includes its own failures.

Furthermore, in embracing Sterling’s pitch of cyberpunk’s conditions and desires as expressed in *Mirrorshades* and reinforcing this opinion through correspondence between Kessel and Sterling, they artificially limit their understanding of ‘classic’ cyberpunk. It is the purpose of this thesis to further their attempts to show cyberpunk’s variety by emphasising how it always embraced the variety, and depth of exploration of the ‘obsessions’ these editors identify and rejecting any desires to stratify cyberpunk further. In short, this thesis will not cede to the desire to classify every potential cyberpunk text in order of their period or levels of commitment to archetypical cyberpunk expectations. Instead, it will take Kelly and Kessel’s claim that ‘cyberpunk obsessions have evolved over time; some writers extend them, some react against them, some take them for granted and move the basic attitudes into new territories’,<sup>31</sup> and reintegrate these post-cyberpunk insights into one continuous path of a genre’s development.

One of the most important reasons for doing this is that the long gap that seems to distance their new post- genre from what they identify as ‘classic’ cyberpunk is filled

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<sup>30</sup> For more on this in particular, see Chapter 4’s discussion of parody and pastiche that looks at how cyberpunk replicates or reimagines its past forms.

<sup>31</sup> Kelly and Kessel, *Rewired...* p.x



with a continual output of cyberpunk texts, though their impact, significance, and quality do greatly vary. It is indeed fair to say that some cyberpunk texts produced in this time are ‘an instant cliché,’<sup>32</sup> and the idea of certain texts lacking originality and merely copying popular cyberpunk styles is the focus of the fourth and final chapter of this thesis. But to exclude these pastiche works (as they are described in Chapter 4) from cyberpunk’s overarching development is to fundamentally misunderstand how its nuanced critique of corporate power and technological intimacy has evolved. Just as an author can respond to a previous, respected text, such as those Kelly and Kessel see as ‘classic’ cyberpunk, so too can one respond to a glut of vacuous content attempting to capitalise on current popular trends. If cyberpunk can become cliché, this is not something of which later creators are unaware. And likewise, whilst some works can provide little new material to fuel the ‘obsessions’ of a genre, it is important to recognise where a genre fails; where a genre is co-opted and drained of its impact is part of its history and shapes its future potential. The trash is all part of the greater tapestry that is cyberpunk. This thesis is an analysis of where cyberpunk is most impactful and insightful, where cyberpunk fails, and where cyberpunk has been failed. Through analysis of the good and the bad, and not through exclusion, is how we can more completely understand why cyberpunk has persisted, and why it has remained so important in popular culture as an accessible tool for encouraging engagement with our relationships with technology and capital.

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<sup>32</sup> Kelly and Kessel, *Rewired...*p.ix

## The Thesis Structure

The focus of this thesis as a whole is to understand why cyberpunk, as a subset of the broader genre of SciFi, has resurfaced as a prominent, popular format of modern media and literature. It will unpick how cyberpunk's themes and presentation have remained relevant to audiences today, despite declarations that it was a short-lived and abandoned movement of the late twentieth century. In so doing, we will look at how cyberpunk has even become a recognisable shorthand for the science fictional nature of modern technological progress, and how it is commonly used in media to warn of the potential of dystopian social and technological developments in the near future.

Cyberpunk works suffuse the landscape of SciFi, returning with particular force in recent years and it is vital for academic study to acknowledge its prevalence and importance to contemporary audiences. The existing understanding of cyberpunk must be revisited to establish a shared language and understanding of cyberpunk that escapes the limitations and restricted perspectives of its past.

To begin this discussion, it is necessary to establish a concrete understanding of what cyberpunk is, and therefore the first chapter is dedicated to defining cyberpunk. As cyberpunk is a subset of SciFi, it is important to understand what separates and specifies it from the incredibly diverse reach of its parent in order to identify when and how it has gained greater attention than other subgenres (such as Hard SciFi, Space Opera, or Post-Apocalyptic fiction). A key aim of this first chapter is to identify the central characteristics of cyberpunk to clearly establish the style of SciFi that is the focus of this thesis. To say something is 'cyberpunk' is to some extent a personal

decision, and this form of active engagement with the act of 'defining' is something I wish to promote with the fluid approach taken in Chapter 1. It is important, however, to spend time in this first chapter to confirm and elucidate on the common factors that give rise to this 'innate' understanding of cyberpunk. This is important to form the groundwork of the thesis. It establishes a fluid, flexible approach to identifying genre works which circumvents those pitfalls of earlier, more limited definitions. Then as the discussion broadens later (such as in Chapter 3 where I analyse cyberpunk's use as a referent in the propaganda of Silicon Valley CEOs) there is a clear baseline to anchor the form of SciFi being discussed.

To create this approach to understanding cyberpunk, we begin by analysing how it has previously been defined, by its authors, by literary critics, and in popular culture. By looking at the intersections of each of these different perspectives we can build a broader understanding of cyberpunk that better addresses what it can mean to different audiences and for different purposes. It is explicitly important to this chapter, and to the thesis as a whole, that we build an inclusive (not an inflexible) definition, i.e. that the commonalities, desires, and obsessions that we identify as cyberpunk here are used to broadly reach out and to connect fresh texts under the umbrella of cyberpunk in order to outline, analyse, and celebrate the variety at its heart. To this end, this chapter will identify the four central aspects of the cyberpunk genre, to which its texts adhere to differing extents, just as Kelly and Kessel have previously identified their central 'obsessions'.<sup>33</sup> However rather than proposing a new sub-category that 'extends' these obsessions, I propose that they were always open categories containing a great variety

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<sup>33</sup> Kelly and Kessel, *Rewired...* p.x

of representation, and thus the new perspectives and interpretations later cyberpunk introduces are part of a long history of experimentation and mutation. Cyberpunk was always about variety, and the element-based definition I set up in this chapter supports an understanding of the genre that embraces that at its heart.

Returning to the unnecessary division of “post-cyberpunk” from early cyberpunk texts, discussed above, Chapter 2 is devoted to revisiting an early cyberpunk text to see how features that are commonly believed to be later additions to, or perspectives on, cyberpunk’s core elements were in fact key features of the genre from the start. This takes the new definitional perspective of Chapter 1 and puts it into practice to revisit cyberpunk’s origins and cement its variety right from the opening. The intent of this is to understand how the emphasis that cyberpunk analysis has placed on a small canon of literature, and the works of William Gibson in particular, has shortened our understanding of the variety at the heart of the genre. This perspective leads towards the perceived separation of post-cyberpunk, and therefore, to properly establish cyberpunk as a sustained exploration of the same concerns, this chapter questions how prior criticism of the genre has failed cyberpunk in attempts to boil it down to too quantifiable a genre, with a paragon text to which all others aspire. Therefore, the main body of this chapter will be a close reading of Pat Cadigan’s *Mindplayers*.<sup>34</sup> Cadigan is an important figure in cyberpunk. She is the only female author included in Sterling’s *Mirrorshades*, a text often credited with establishing cyberpunk as a genre and therefore she is one of the ‘central’ early cyberpunk authors. Particularly interesting as well is that she features in *Rewired*... as an example of a post-cyberpunk author. She is therefore,

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<sup>34</sup> Pat Cadigan, *Pat Cadigan: SF Gateway Omnibus* (London: Gollancz, 2013). The story itself was first published in 1987

somehow, both a classic cyberpunk writer and post-cyberpunk, demonstrating the close connection between these bodies of work, a connection that I argue is too fundamental to separate them out as genres. Through close textual analysis we can best understand the nuance prevalent in Cadigan's work, and therefore address how previous expectations of what cyberpunk 'should be', due to what it was believed to have been from the outset, are too restrictive to cover the breadth of cyberpunk's perspectives. This will be done mostly through a comparison of the representations of cybernetics and digital spaces of Gibson and Cadigan. In this close comparison we can see the differing implications of each representation, and how they introduce fresh perspectives on the dissolution of boundaries between human and machine and the destructive impact of a neoliberalist society on individual lives; this variety also reveals new relationships between cyberpunk and feminist SciFi, extolling the virtues of cyberpunk's multifaceted exploration of its central concerns as a key reason for its persistence in the SciFi spectrum.

After revisiting traditional cyberpunk to see how the existing, broad expectation of cyberpunk has inappropriately limited our understanding of the genre, I look to how this perspective also influences public opinion of real-world technological developments, and how a flexible understanding of cyberpunk protects its social commentary from exclusion or misappropriation by figures in the tech elite. Chapter 3 centres around the idea of "transmission," i.e., how texts influence, and are influenced by, the world around them. It first analyses how cyberpunk has become a shorthand for our present relationships with technology, and with a pronounced focus on dystopia, before exploring how, due to maintaining this surface expectation of cyberpunk, and limiting the

genre to texts from 30 years into the past, it has become ripe for decontextualisation and appropriation. Developing a theoretical framework to identify the methods of transmission that cyberpunk is most open to, it unpicks how cyberpunk can be, and has been, interpreted 'for' its audience for the purposes of critics or public speakers aiming at persuasion. In particular, it explores how CEOs in the tech research industry have recently started to detach the 'things' of cyberpunk, its technologies and objects, from the ethical discussions within the genre in order to secure support and funding for futuristic products whilst maintaining an exploitative status quo that has kept them at the top of the social hierarchy. Cyberpunk holds a particularly important role in the Science Fictional milieu due to its date of inception: rising to popularity in the mid-80s means it was being lauded as a fresh, inspirational sub-genre at a time when many of these current tech figureheads, and the products and industries they have become associated with, were beginning their own rise. With a position as a popular, exciting form of SciFi that commonly presented near-future possibilities, its role as inspiration for what technologies could be achievable in our lifetimes cannot be underestimated. However, as these objects become achievable targets, analysing how cyberpunk items can be detached from their ethical and moral criticism is of paramount importance; in so doing we can better understand and communicate the importance of cyberpunk's exploration of its artefacts and help to re-instate these expectations in a broad public view. Analysis and awareness of cyberpunk can, in this manner, spread awareness of the financial imbalance, exploitative production, or addictive potential to which we could become vulnerable by blindly supporting and adopting the idealistic technologies we are being promised.

After having demonstrated how cyberpunk can be decontextualised purposefully to rid it of its social commentary, this thesis turns to cyberpunk texts that are accused of lacking any desire to critique what they present. This also connects to Kelly and Kessel by looking at texts that have been ‘hacked into’ by popular culture and turned against themselves.<sup>35</sup> In Chapter 4 I look at the twinned ideas of parody and pastiche. I unpick how some cyberpunk texts playfully reimagine the expectations of the genre for fresh purposes, and how others emptily recreate key elements to capitalise on its recognisability and popularity. The latter of these is what we will discuss as a pastiche of cyberpunk. A common criticism of the genre, that resurges across this thesis, is that it has nothing left to say, and whilst this holds true for some additions to the genre, these pastiches are a key part of the development of cyberpunk. They not only establish very strongly the elements that mark cyberpunk as distinct from other subgenres of SciFi, due to their strict adherences to its most iconic ingredients, but they also form a backdrop for other creators to springboard off and respond to. Developing the ideas of cyberpunk does not solely mean expanding on those that are good, but also refuting those that have failed, and been drained of their impact by vapid recreations. This chapter looks at two main examples of recent cyberpunk texts, *Netflix’s Altered Carbon* and *Ready Player One*, in order to unpick an example of both a fresh parodic reinvention of traditional cyberpunk concerns and an empty pastiche of its popular elements respectively. Concluding this analysis of contemporary cyberpunk and its position in relation to earlier iterations, we look to the future of the genre; using the development and pre-release commentary surrounding the recent *Cyberpunk 2077*

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<sup>35</sup> Kelly and Kessel, *Rewired...* p.viii

video game we will look at how cyberpunk is again looking to progress in the public eye, at what legacies have held strongest for it in mainstream media, and what direction it appears to be moving into for the future.

This structure of analysis outlined above is designed to blend analyses of cyberpunk literature into its cultural impact whilst tracing its development and progression out of any previously limited expectations its reputation had maintained. By the end of this thesis, we understand what the weaknesses of cyberpunk are in interpretation and in creation, i.e. how its critique of social conditions and the precarity of our future can be undermined by its own adoration of adrenaline and striking visuals and artefacts, and also by its ready appropriation by popular culture and capitalist ventures. We will have analysed a number of cyberpunk texts in intimate detail, to recognise creative reimagination in a genre that is very aware of itself, and to likewise acknowledge when it falls to the temptations of pastiche.

To get to this point, however, we must start by understanding what cyberpunk is. If one of the central issues surrounding cyberpunk is that it has been misunderstood and unfairly labelled as a bygone moment, then to expand upon it we must first be able to distinguish it from the broader SciFi cannon. This is where we will begin, by overviewing how cyberpunk has been defined in its past, and how we can overturn the limitations of these previous definitions and set a new, more open and appropriate one to carry forwards.



## CHAPTER 1: WHAT IS CYBERPUNK? A DEFINITION

Logically, the ideal place to begin an analysis of cyberpunk is with establishing a clear definition of 'what cyberpunk is.' This is doubly important here in following a pivotal conceit behind this thesis as a whole, i.e. that cyberpunk's 'resurgence' is not a rediscovery of a dead genre but a resurfacing of a continuing SciFi formation into the mainstream. The act of constructing a strict definition of cyberpunk, however, is not a simple prospect and attempting to rigidly categorise it unnecessarily restricts its potential for diversity. This chapter proposes a fluid approach to identifying cyberpunk works that, whilst remaining consistent with existing conceptions of this popular genre, escapes their limitations and encourages an engaged consideration of the variety at its heart. Over the course of cyberpunk's history there have been multiple attempts at categorising it in relation to SciFi as a whole but they have done so in ways that are not only inconsistent with each other, but that also limit the scope of cyberpunk and open it to the threat of historicisation. There is an incredibly wide selection of conflicting definitions of what constitutes a cyberpunk text, and many of these limit themselves in reaching for a strict, clearly delineated definition. Through analysis of these definitions, I identify their consistent threads in order to capture the central tenets that each of these perspectives have recognised in cyberpunk fiction. By rejecting some unnecessarily tenacious aspects, and introducing previously under-recognised themes, this chapter proposes a porous approach to defining the genre; one which can expand and flow to incorporate the variety at the heart of this SciFi formation. This fluid approach to definition enables us to both look back to earlier works, deal with contemporary texts as

being cyberpunk, and set out a theoretical framework for assessing new works in cyberpunk terms in the future.

The current critical language available to discuss cyberpunk as a genre is overwhelmingly based in the overly historicised accounts that were used to analyse the initial emergence of the genre in the late 20th Century. The majority of our existing critical definitions tie themselves so strongly to the aesthetics and the authors of the 1980s that cyberpunk as a movement becomes perceived as an artefact of that time alone. This, in turn, breeds an expectation that privileges early cyberpunk writing and frames later works as blandly imitative copies of a once popular style. For this reason, it is vitally important to establish a new conception of cyberpunk that enables discussion of the genre across multiple decades in order to understand the flexibility of a genre renowned for its variety. Through rejecting previously limiting definitions and embracing a more fluid conception of cyberpunk it becomes easier to identify how its concerns have developed as it has aged; cyberpunk explores its themes through multiple interplaying perspectives and the definition proposed in this chapter supports this particular strength of the genre.

The fact that cyberpunk has persisted despite significant technological advancements that might otherwise invalidate its (also technologically dense) representations of our future, demands attention; it is important, therefore, to restructure the dominant definition of cyberpunk to move and evolve alongside the genre itself. Recognising the historical factors that play into the genre remains important, however divorcing the specifically 80s context from the totality of the genre enables both historicity and genre traditions to be analysed as separate interweaving elements that

can vary across texts. An inclusive gaze such as this can assist in more comprehensively understanding why cyberpunk rose to this level of popularity, and how its specific fears and the questions it raises have developed alongside its shifting cultural environment. It opens new avenues of historical analysis that do not exclude later cyberpunk works under the grounds that the exodus of the movement's initial authors signifies the end of the genre's production.<sup>36</sup>

An inclusive approach to definition also creates a flexible understanding of genre that allows for an easy comparison of similar, but distinct, genres through the elements they share whilst acknowledging how they meaningfully differ in their form. We will be using this conception of genre later in this thesis to identify what constituent elements of cyberpunk cause it to be so frequently referenced in the development of new technologies and in expressions of concern for their production and distribution. Using this definitional strategy we can create a more flexible underlying language to recognise cyberpunk as it appears in cultural production or discussion and thus connect its social and technological critique's continued (or changing) relevance to the contemporary contexts of its wide textual catalogue. This form of detailed definitional work does not currently exist for cyberpunk. The limitations of definitional expectations that, by their age, are unable to account for developments within the genre have yet to be addressed. Nor has an approach to definition that foregrounds flexibility in order to promote analysis of changing or varying discussion within a unified thematic base (such as cyberpunk) been thoroughly established. This thesis rectifies this, refusing to accept cyberpunk as a

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<sup>36</sup> For example in Chapter 4 which analyses more recent cyberpunk productions and how they strive to develop, or in some cases mimic, its past works.

'finished' movement and giving time to properly explore and understand what makes it tick and why it will not go away. What follows in this chapter is the most detailed definitional breakdown of cyberpunk since its inception.

This chapter presents a united analysis of the existing understandings of cyberpunk present in both critical and popular discussions. Establishing any broad definitions for literary genres as a whole, even before considering SciFi's penchant for sub- (and sub-sub-) categorising, is a difficult task due to the variety of authorial styles that definitions attempt to collate and describe. Dani Cavallaro best encapsulates this difficulty in *Cyberpunk and Cyberculture*, where she reflects that:

[d]efining science fiction often proves arduous for the reasons that its generic boundaries are fluid and that, as a result, scientific and technological motifs are frequently interwoven with themes and issues that are not overtly sciencefictional.<sup>37</sup>

What Cavallaro emphasises here is the inherent variety in representation and inspiration within SciFi. She identifies in this the need for a 'fluid' understanding of definitional boundaries, ones which are comfortable shifting in importance from text to

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<sup>37</sup> Dani Cavallaro, *Cyberpunk and Cyberculture : Science Fiction and the Work of William Gibson*, (Bloomsbury Publishing Plc, 2000.) ProQuest Ebook Central, <https://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/bham/detail.action?docID=436304>. p.8

text rather than rigidly proclaiming what a genre must be. Considering this difficulty in defining the wider SciFi genre, isolating a definitive categorisation for cyberpunk specifically presents a similarly, if not more complex challenge. Not only does an understanding of cyberpunk presuppose a definition of SciFi, but cyberpunk itself is renowned for uniting the work of a disparate collection of authors within that field. Despite these complications, numerous attempts at categorising cyberpunk have been undertaken over the years, and from both inside and outside of the academy, from early groupings of authors such as Bruce Sterling's *Mirrorshades* anthology and Gardner Dozois' overview of *Science Fiction in the Eighties*,<sup>38</sup> to contemporary popular discussion online.<sup>39</sup> The vast catalogue of definitions available speaks both to the difficulty in accurately assessing the genre and of the desire to understand and communicate about this form of SciFi, whether in academic works or in modern media outlets.<sup>40</sup>

The range of definitions now available due to the resurging quandary of what "really is" cyberpunk is problematic in how they open a variety of understandings of the genre due to their differing approaches and audiences. Video essays for a gamer culture designed to prepare them for an upcoming game release are not only coming

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<sup>38</sup> Gardner Dozois. "Science Fiction In The Eighties". *The Washington Post*, 1984, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/entertainment/books/1984/12/30/science-fiction-in-the-eighties/526c3a06-f123-4668-9127-33e33f57e313/>.

<sup>39</sup> Such as in: Dann Albright, "What is Cyberpunk? An Introduction to the Sci-Fi Genre", *makeuseof.com*, <https://www.makeuseof.com/tag/cyberpunk-introduction-sci-fi-genre/> [accessed December 2019]. And in: Neon Dystopia, *What is Cyberpunk?* <https://www.neondystopia.com/what-is-cyberpunk/> [accessed December 2019]

<sup>40</sup> The latter of these reappear across written and video formats such as: Darkside Loyalty. *What Is Cyberpunk? (A Genre Decision... Kinda)*. 2018, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2L2Bn2a-WXY&t=18s&ab\\_channel=DarksideRoyalty](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2L2Bn2a-WXY&t=18s&ab_channel=DarksideRoyalty). Accessed 16 Aug 2022. And: Rafael Abreu, "Cyberpunk Explained — Origins, Characteristics And Themes", Studiobinder, 2022 <<https://www.studiobinder.com/blog/what-is-cyberpunk-definition/>> [Accessed 4 September 2022].

from a different perspective to a literary critic's analysis of the genre's origins but are authored for a different purpose. Whilst this is to be expected, and useful in introducing each different demographic to the genre in a way tailored to them, without an approachable baseline definition of the genre, any contradictions or misinformation between sources runs the possibility of confusing audiences and, more significantly for us here, diluting the precision of the critical conversation. In an academic setting, the ability to discuss the past, present, and future cultural importance of this genre is dependent on a unified understanding or shared vocabulary of its features, conditions, possibilities, and limitations.

To combat the suffusion of extant definitions then, this chapter puts forward a concise breakdown of the four key elements that I will argue distinguishes cyberpunk from the wider body of SciFi. These four elements will constitute the loose categories that can be shaped and moulded to fit across the bulk of cyberpunk fiction; their importance over each other, and the level of their presence in the material rising and falling to reflect the shifting priorities and styles across the breadth of cyberpunk material. Drawing on the previous body of work, it will isolate the central tenets of cyberpunk that run across all existing definitions to unite the current understandings of cyberpunk, rather than building again from the ground upwards as previous attempts have done. In breaking the genre down into four distinct elements, I show how it becomes easier to discuss in detail the intricacies of cyberpunk's particular relationship with technology or capitalism, for example, whilst keeping this discussion closely tied to the thematic representation of these relationships within the texts. Furthermore, the form of categorisation undertaken here divorces cyberpunk from a purely 1980s context.

Whilst the historical origins of the genre are incredibly important to its creation, many critical assessments of cyberpunk, such as those by John Clute<sup>41</sup> and Keith Booker,<sup>42</sup> view the genre mostly through this lens. Therefore, whilst taking the historical implications of cyberpunk into account initially in the following discussion, the final breakdown of the genre will remain tied to aesthetics, themes, tropes, and tone in order to create a definition that can be meaningfully applied across cyberpunk's development and on to new works as they appear.

### Why Genre?

One question to address before undertaking the task of defining cyberpunk as a genre is why are we using the term 'genre' at all? As cyberpunk texts begin to return to academic contexts, it is important to establish the specifics of what language is used to capture the scope of such a broad collection of material. The editors of the recent Routledge series of cyberpunk editions<sup>43</sup> took the decision to avoid use of the term

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<sup>41</sup> John Clute. "Science Fiction from 1980 to the Present." *The Cambridge Companion to Science Fiction*, edited by Edward James and Farah Mendlesohn, (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2003) pp. 64–78. Cambridge Companions to Literature.

<sup>42</sup> Keith Booker, *Historical Dictionary of Science Fiction Cinema*, (Lanham: Scarecrow Press, 2010)

<sup>43</sup> Beginning with: Graham J Murphy and Lars Schmeink, *Cyberpunk And Visual Culture*, 1st ed (New York: Routledge, 2018).

'genre' specifically for referring to such texts. The reasoning Graham Murphy and Lars Schmeink gave was such:

we also avoid nearly all use of the words 'genre' or 'subgenre' to refer to cyberpunk, instead taking a cue from Foster and Rosemary Jackson in opting for the terminology of "mode," Jackson explaining it as a better term "to identify structural features underlying various works in different periods of time" (qtd. in Broderick 42).<sup>44</sup>

Of particular interest in this decision is its similarity to that of this chapter in its desire to encourage the discussion of cyberpunk detached from the historicity of its legacy. For this, as stated above, they extend out from the previous term of 'mode' that was offered up as an alternative to 'genre' in particular. Jackson's term is derived from one suggested by Frederic Jameson. As Jameson principally encouraged critics to 'always historicise.'<sup>45</sup> This understanding of mode also supports a similar direction wherein texts are still analysed within their individual historical contexts whilst simultaneously discouraging any specific historical factors from broad, genre-wide application. Jameson, when writing about this concept though still importantly uses the word 'genre' in his reasoning:

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<sup>44</sup> Murphy and Schmeink, 2018, *Cyberpunk and Visual Culture*, p.3

<sup>45</sup> Frederic Jameson (*The Political Unconscious. Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act*, (London: Methuen, 1981) p.9



we need the specification of the individual 'genres' today more than ever, not in order to drop specimens into the box bearing those labels, but rather to map our coordinates on the basis of those fixed stars and to triangulate this specific given textual movement.<sup>46</sup>

Jackson's 'mode' looks to divorce itself entirely from any lingering expectations of genre, whereas in this example, Jameson is attempting to reclaim the term itself. We need genres to give us 'fixed stars' upon which to anchor our textual analysis. Veronica Hollinger offers a different perspective on the comparison of these terms; in her writing on "Genre Vs Mode" she discusses the two perspectives as methods of approaching SciFi texts. The latter sees SciFi as 'an attitude or stance toward contemporary technoscientific reality', and the former a site for 'extrapolating fully imagined cultural futures.'<sup>47</sup> She sees genre-focused approaches of analysing SciFi encountering issues from the 'diffuse nature of the genre'<sup>48</sup> and the way SciFi imagery penetrates the 'social imaginary'<sup>49</sup> that restructures it as explorations of contemporary postmodernity through futuristic imaginings. This particular difference in approach, where the nature of SciFi is a reflection of the present or an imagining of the future, is analysed in greater detail in Chapter 3 of this thesis. Importantly for this discussion, Hollinger sees genre as relating

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<sup>46</sup> Jameson, 1982, p. 322

<sup>47</sup> Veronica Hollinger, "Genre Vs Mode" in *The Oxford Handbook of Science Fiction*, ed. Rob Latham (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), p.143

<sup>48</sup> Hollinger, "Genre Vs Mode" p.142

<sup>49</sup> Hollinger, "Genre Vs Mode" p.144

to reading SciFi in relation to its conventional literary tradition and value as a thought experiment, and mode as a body of fiction that 'offers itself as a kind of image-bank for a present that is itself deeply science-fictional.'<sup>50</sup>

From the above it is clear that both terms carry important heritage and expectations, hence the need to address this thesis' use of 'genre' before moving on. There is one central justification for continuing to use genre as the terminology of choice: accessibility. Genre is a widely used term, not just within academic discussion but most importantly outside of it. It is firmly entrenched within marketing systems as methods of collating like texts, and therefore as a reference point for a large unspecialised audience. The use of mode has an important call to include cultural elements into our understanding of the impact of fictional works, and to decouple genre from specific historical periods and its relation to purely literary history. However, in a broader sense, genre as a term is already open to this interpretation, such as is addressed in Jameson's declaration that we *need* the specification of genres. Genre still provides a base understanding of 'textual movement' such as is provided by use of 'mode' as terminology. Therefore, in continuing with the use of 'genre' over 'mode' I hope here to encourage inclusion of the general public's classification of cyberpunk and enable easier discourse on this topic across audiences. Genre holds the potential of mode. Hollinger even acknowledges that '[i]t is, finally, impossible to maintain any significant distinction between SF as genre and SF as mode.'<sup>51</sup> In continuing to use the most familiar language to establish this new definition we reduce the boundaries to

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<sup>50</sup> Hollinger, "Genre Vs Mode" p.147

<sup>51</sup> Hollinger, "Genre Vs Mode", p.148

understanding what comes below to a wider audience. The key motivation in choosing 'genre' as the terminology for this thesis is to emphasise a melding of genre and mode, bringing the advantages of mode to audiences more familiar with the concept of genre. In response to the criticism that discussion of the cyberpunk 'genre' focuses too heavily on specific historical moments, for the general public this coalesces into references to specific prior texts, the fault of which lies not in the use of genre as a term, but in way cyberpunk discussions still lean heavily on those texts with the greatest cultural impact.<sup>52</sup> The intention, therefore, to work with the terminology of genre is to reinforce an improved use of that terminology that can then best communicate with the broadest audience, both inside and outside of the academy.

### Existing Definitions

To construct this new definition, we first have to assess the limitations of the current options. This analysis assesses the different emphases it has been given in material designed to introduce it as part of the fabric of SciFi research. Through it we can see what elements persist across these definitions, how they concisely communicate the genre's specificities, and where they can potentially falter under scrutiny. This will form the basis of how a definition of the genre needs to be reformulated to fully encapsulate not only cyberpunk's historical form, but its contemporary and future incarnations as

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<sup>52</sup> The issue this thesis is directly addressing

well. To provide an overview of the current material, this chapter will start by looking at a couple of definitions in detail to offer an indicative example of the typical understanding and usage of the term cyberpunk before spending the majority of this chapter on establishing the flexible, element-based approach that is its focus.

Before addressing these specific critical perspectives, however, there is one text that must be discussed for its role as a formative piece in establishing cyberpunk as a discrete genre. Representing the closest thing to a manifesto for the movement, Bruce Sterling's *Mirrorshades*<sup>53</sup> is the most frequently cited source to clarify the defining 'rules' or 'structures' that distinguish a cyberpunk work. In this anthology, Bruce Sterling brought together a number of short SciFi pieces dating from 1981-1986. He combined them in an explicit attempt to unify cyberpunk as a fictional genre, writing in the opening of his preface:

[These authors'] allegiance to Eighties culture has marked them as a group as a new movement in science fiction. This movement was quickly recognized and given many labels: Radical Hard SF, the Outlaw Technologists, the Eighties Wave, the Neuromantics, the Mirrorshades Group. But of all the labels pasted on and peeled throughout the early Eighties, one has stuck: cyberpunk.<sup>54</sup>

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<sup>53</sup> Bruce Sterling, *Mirrorshades: The Cyberpunk Anthology*. (New York: Arbor House, 1986) Internet resource.

<sup>54</sup> Sterling, *Mirrorshades*, p.ix

Here, Sterling creates 'a broad overview of the movement', a movement, it is worth noting, that he also wrote within. As expressed by Istvan Csicsery-Ronay in his 1988 article "Cyberpunk and Neuromanticism", the inclusion of some authors in this overview 'smacks more of a friendly endorsement than of truly shared aesthetic aims.'<sup>55</sup> We cannot divorce Sterling's motivation for defining a movement he is a part of from his desire for his work to be successful; to promote his work as visionary and cutting edge, and to include his friends and colleagues to mutually support each other's success.<sup>56</sup> In this process, then, he solidified his position within a broader literary movement whilst extolling the virtues he saw within this new SciFi perspective. Importantly, however, Sterling does not create an exclusive, or comprehensive, list of all contributors to the genre.<sup>57</sup> For one thing he compiles the *Mirrorshades Anthology* to include works that were not 'widely anthologized elsewhere' to increase the likelihood of its readership finding new material in this compilation, and therefore more well-known works from the time may have been considered for inclusion within this 'genre-defining' collection and been overlooked only for their likely familiarity to the audience. Furthermore, Sterling from the outset disclaims his definition of cyberpunk as one that cannot hope to comfortably encapsulate every aspect of texts from this genre; its boundaries are, as Cavallaro acknowledged, fluid. Sterling writes that:

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<sup>55</sup> Istvan Csicsery-Ronay, "Cyberpunk and Neuromanticism." *Mississippi Review*, vol. 16, no. 2/3, 1988, pp. 266–78. JSTOR, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20134180>. Accessed 4 Sep. 2022. p.268

<sup>56</sup> What Csicsery-Ronay suggests being 'less than sincere motives' for cyberpunk to be co-opted by the 'amusement-marketplace' for financial gain. Csicsery-Ronay, "Cyberpunk and Neuromanticism", p267

<sup>57</sup> The limitations of his selection are explored and criticised further in Chapter 2

group labels never quite fit the individual, giving rise to an abiding itchiness. It follows, then, that the "typical cyberpunk writer" does not exist; this person is only a Platonic fiction. For the rest of us, our label is an uneasy bed of Procrustes, where fiendish critics wait to lop and stretch us to fit.<sup>58</sup>

The imagery of stretching authors to fit is an appropriate analogy for the work of establishing a concrete definition. Many texts, whilst fitting the broader strokes of popular cyberpunk definitions, fail to match them in their entirety and in so doing open a debate of their legitimacy within that categorisation. In order to limit this effect, this chapter embraces the impossibility of fitting a rigid conception of cyberpunk. By establishing a shortlist of key elements which reflect cyberpunk's focus in broad terms, I create a loose net into which the definition itself can be lopped and stretched to fit. My argument here is that these are the central, if porous, boundaries that distinguish cyberpunk from more general SciFi work; if such boundaries did not exist such a distinction would not be as common in cultural discourse. The term cyberpunk would not have persisted as a recognisable type of SciFi if it were not distinct from its peers in the eyes of its audience. There are key aspects to it that spark recognition despite the variety of its texts. However, if we are to lay out too many elements in an attempt to thoroughly capture what marks cyberpunk from general SciFi, we risk simply reinstating a similarly prescriptive definition of it to those that have come before. Therefore, I will analyse a number of these existing definitions to identify consistencies across them in

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<sup>58</sup> Sterling, *Mirrorshades*, p.ix

order to isolate this list of broad elements to which cyberpunk texts adhere to different extents. Texts then no longer need to be lopped and stretched to fit, as the boundaries of this new definition will flexibly accommodate its members.

With this intent in mind, the existing body of critical definitions must be addressed with regard to their work in clarifying common trends within the genre's body of work.

Foremost among these is *The Cambridge Companion to Science Fiction*. This series is marketed as a collection of 'authoritative guides [and] accessible introductions' to major writers, artists, philosophers, topics, and periods.<sup>59</sup> As an entry point for introducing an academic audience to cyberpunk, this text offers a usefully concise definition of the cyberpunk genre, one aimed at an academic audience, and which forms a good platform from which to begin assessment of the term's existing academic categorisation:

Cyberpunk, a term coined by sf writer Bruce Bethke in 1983 to describe novels and stories about the information explosion of the 1980s (hence 'Cyber', from cybernetics), most of them picturing a dense, urban, confusing new world in which most of us will find that we have been disenfranchised from any real power (hence 'punk')<sup>60</sup>

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<sup>59</sup> James, E., & Mendlesohn, F. (Eds.). (2003). *The Cambridge Companion to Science Fiction* (Cambridge Companions to Literature). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. doi:10.1017/CCOL0521816262

<sup>60</sup> Clute, *The Cambridge Companion...* p.67

This definition emphasises a number of key pieces of contextual information for the genre. Firstly, the years in which it rose to popularity, and secondly a dissection of the term itself to explain from where the genre's title is derived. It foregrounds its definition with a source writer, here Bruce Bethke, as he created the word 'cyberpunk' for a title for one of his short stories. The phrasing of this does imply, however, that Bethke was foundational in applying this word to unite the genre, which is a misconception when the term's broader use gained most traction from Gardner Dozois<sup>61</sup> and later Sterling's *Mirrorshades* anthology. Further to this incorrect implication, whilst this definition aptly relates cyberpunk's development to the information explosion of the 1980s, it lacks crucial specificity to how cyberpunk imagined this massive technological shift would impact the future, limited as John Clute's writing is in having to overview around twenty-five years of SciFi.<sup>62</sup> The specifics of cyberpunk's digital technologies, and the hyper-capitalist social order that sees multinational corporations rise to dominance of the social order are lost by the wayside. Clute does go on to cite *Neuromancer* as a central cyberpunk novel, again cementing it as 'the' key text that represents the movement, but he laments the genre's '[overleaping of] the sheer vast mundanity of the information explosion, in order to create a noir megalopolis of inner space [which did not tackle] the revolutions in the routines of individual and corporate life that were transforming the daylight hours first of the industrialized world'.<sup>63</sup> This discussion of the genre then, in Clute's own words, 'o'erleaps' the specificities of cyberpunk itself to lament what it is

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<sup>61</sup> Gardner Dozois was a renowned science fiction editor, in particular of *The Year's Best Science Fiction* anthologies and was therefore a very influential voice in establishing cyberpunk as a notable, prominent movement in 80s SciFi in his article "Science Fiction in the 80s". Full citation in bib.

<sup>62</sup> With his chapter covering '1980 to the present'.

<sup>63</sup> Clute, *The Cambridge Companion*, p.67



not, rather than what it did, or how it might be recognised in its later incarnations. Clute later touches upon another common categorisation for the genre:

Much cosmetic cyberpunk was written in the 1980s, and before the end of the century its landscapes had become advertising cliches. Writers such as Gibson, Sterling or Cadigan had long since migrated elsewhere.<sup>64</sup>

In this moment, a now familiar fear of the death of originality in cyberpunk is presented, an idea which has come to prevail in media responses.<sup>65</sup> Rather than discussing which texts this perspective is drawing upon, however, Clute points, instead, to the foundational authors' literary progression as his sole evidence. If the original authors in the genre are not still writing it, this argument goes, then its power has surely left. This is the same argument that we see in Neil Easterbrook's "The Arc of Our Destruction: Reversal and Erasure in Cyberpunk" where he writes that 'most of its early proponents and practitioners have jumped ship, swimming back toward the mainstream.'<sup>66</sup> This understanding, that cyberpunk was the work of specific authors, unnecessarily limits our definition. It rejects later authors who expand on cyberpunk concerns outright and perpetuates a belief that cyberpunk is finished. This is the historicization that this new

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<sup>64</sup> Clute, *The Cambridge Companion*, p.72

<sup>65</sup> Such as in the following article: Julia Muncy, "Altered Carbon may not be the cyberpunk show you're looking for". *Wired*, February 2, 2018, <https://www.wired.com/story/altered-carbon-review/>

<sup>66</sup> Neil Easterbrook, "The Arc of Our Destruction: Reversal and Erasure in Cyberpunk." *Science Fiction Studies*, vol. 19, no. 3, 1992, pp. 378–94. JSTOR, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4240184>. Accessed 4 Sep. 2022.

definition refutes. This chapter formulates its central elements of cyberpunk from a broad range of texts across the history of its production. Rather than purely centring the genre on a movement of authors, or on a specific historical moment, it will address the broader social fears most commonly communicated by cyberpunk pieces. This definition will create a framework that allows us to continue analysis of how social fears of rising corporate power, spreading neoliberal ideologies, and a rapidly increasing reliance on technology are explored in this form of SciFi. The historicity of cyberpunk is of key importance to the conditions of its inception, but how it has persisted cannot solely be attributed to those same conditions. Not all cyberpunk is written in the 80s or 90s, and therefore does not respond directly to the same social stimuli. The definition proposed in this chapter is intended to break this historicised assumption and establish a conception of cyberpunk that can persist into the future without again being trivialised as a bygone moment.

To take a more substantial, and more recent, example, Keith Booker addresses cyberpunk directly in his *Historical Dictionary of Science Fiction Cinema*.<sup>67</sup> His opening paragraph describes cyberpunk as

typically set in a near future world that differs relatively little from the world of the 1980s. If anything, the social, economic, and political problems of the 1980s tend to have gotten worse in this future, though it may involve significant advances in

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<sup>67</sup>Keith M. Booker. *Historical Dictionary of Science Fiction Cinema*, (Maryland: Scarecrow Inc Press, 2010)

technology, especially in technology of computers and virtual reality. Meanwhile, cyberpunk features biomedical and electronic body modifications, direct interfaces between human brains and computers, artificial intelligences equipped with “human” qualities, and the electronic transcendence provided by new technological spaces, thus calling into question what it means to be human. Indeed, much of the action of cyberpunk typically occurs in the virtual-reality world of cyberspace (a term coined by Gibson) <sup>68</sup>

From the outset, this definition also falls into a similar issue to Clute’s in that it binds the essence of the genre to the same decade as its creation. Here at least the connection is more flexible as the genre only ‘typically’ depicts this environment and considering that the texts most widely acknowledged as canonical share similarities in both their dates of authorship and depictions of the future, this is a reasonable way to introduce ‘canonical’ cyberpunk. Booker delves deeper into the specific depictions of futuristic technologies, listing numerous variations in an attempt to comprehensively cover the broad spectrum of digital speculation across the genre as a whole. Importantly for him, however, is how they ‘[call] into question what it means to be human’. This will be an important distinction later on, one that connects works in the genre through the dialogues they open about the uses of technology, not purely what historical technological environments are directly inspiring its depictions.

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<sup>68</sup> Booker, *Historical Dictionary*... p.94

The final claim in the quote above, however, is a general misnomer that also surfaces across other definitions. Computer-simulated environments are commonplace to cyberpunk and are indeed often the most emblematic technological feature of cyberpunk texts. The conception, however, that they are the central focus for the majority of the action in cyberpunk is a mislead belief. Some prominent cyberpunk texts don't feature 'cyberspaces' at all; *Blade Runner*,<sup>69</sup> for one, has no virtual environment, although Booker isolates this as an inspiration for the genre and therefore separate from it. However, *Dark City*<sup>70</sup> is a text Booker does cite in his definition as one which captures the 'style and themes of cyberpunk'<sup>71</sup> and it too also features no cyberspaces. Secondly, the tendency for action to typically be represented in cyberspace is more common in earlier works than later, and even then the balance between digital and physical focus tends to carry more of an even weighting than is often acknowledged. Even though the main protagonist of *Neuromancer*<sup>72</sup> is a hacker, a 'console cowboy', the importance of the physical body and its surrounding environments is equally important to the online struggles with AIs and security systems that form part of the challenges facing the characters in *Neuromancer*. *Snow Crash*<sup>73</sup> is a further example of a canonical cyberpunk novel that focuses on cyberspace, with its 'metaverse' being often lauded as a prediction of online communities such as *Second Life*.<sup>74</sup> However, whilst the metaverse is key to the plot, it is only as important to the action as the Raft, a

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<sup>69</sup> Ridley Scott, *Blade Runner*, England, Ladd Company, 1982

<sup>70</sup> Alex Proyas, *Dark City*, United States, New Line Cinema, 1998

<sup>71</sup> Booker, *Historical Dictionary...* pp.94-95

<sup>72</sup> William Gibson, *Neuromancer*, (London: Gollancz, 1984)

<sup>73</sup> Neal Stephenson, *Snow Crash*, (London: Penguin Group 1992)

<sup>74</sup> Philip Rosedale, *Second Life*, (Linden Lab, 2003)

floating cluster of boats home to Eurasian Refugees. Similarly the deadly linguistic virus that programs people's minds into blank servitude is transmitted not only digitally, through the metaverse, but physically through an addictive drug and infected blood; the metaverse is a new avenue of vulnerability, but it does not supercede the physical world in importance. Cyberspaces are often inflated to be the central focus of cyberpunk, and whilst they must be acknowledged for the texts where they are of great importance, it is also important to establish that their inclusion is not an unbreakable rule for the genre as a totality. The creation of these kinds of assumptions, typically extrapolated from a small corpus of previously canonical texts, is the central reason why establishing a distinct, if porous, definition remains important for the academic goal of identifying cyberpunk.

### An Element-Focused Definition of Cyberpunk

Using the examples above as typical representatives of the range of definitions already put forward for cyberpunk, it becomes apparent not only where the limitations of existing definitions lie, but where too they can benefit each other in combination. The definition outlined below will take a comprehensive approach to the full variety of cyberpunk that, whilst describing elements typical to the genre, will also highlight outlying representatives to avoid creating concrete expectations based on only specific, even if well-established, cyberpunk texts. This approach is used to emphasise the impossibility

of perfectly matching a text to a rigid definition, and in so doing encourages an active reassessment of our understanding of cyberpunk with each revisiting.

It will also bring out the effect each aspect of the genre typically looks to impart to its audience, and in so doing it becomes easier to create an expectation of what fears and concerns give rise to cyberpunk SciFi whilst avoiding a prescriptive outlook that rejects variety. The constituent elements that make cyberpunk distinct from other SciFi have not been properly analysed since its very first outings. This definitional work, to establish a shared vocabulary for discussing and analysing such a popular genre, has not yet been undertaken and it is incredibly important that we create a bedrock of understanding to best support cyberpunk analysis in the future.

The definition of cyberpunk presented here revolves around four distinct elements; these features make up the central consistencies across cyberpunk texts from all eras and, I argue, will remain relevant for defining works as joining the genre in the future.

These four elements are:

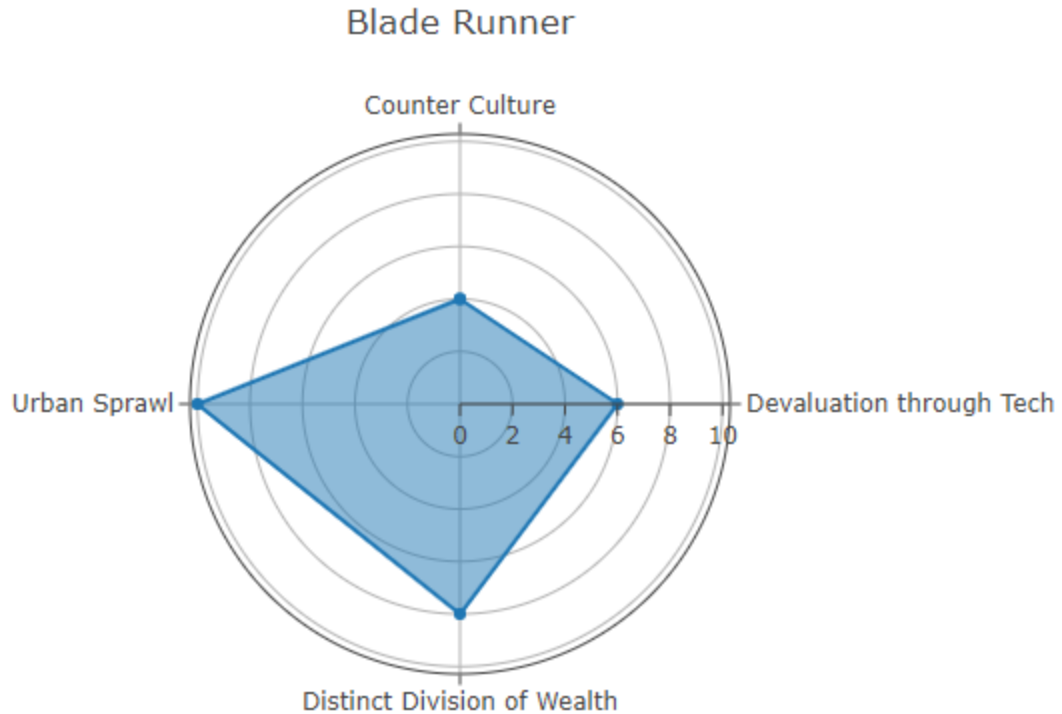
1. Representation of a fringe counter-cultural movement
2. The devaluation of the human body due to the widespread use of, and response to, advanced technology/ies
3. A distinct and extreme division of wealth, or access to resources/technology, typically readable in the layout of the environment
4. Depiction of a futuristic urban sprawl

It is at this point that I must set out clearly that this definition is intended to encourage cross-comparison of texts that share cyberpunk tendencies, rather than to exclude texts from a rigid structure denoting what cyberpunk 'is'. It is easy to use definitions as a tool to police a category in order to rigidly uphold some perceived 'sanctity' of genre, but this is anathema to the definition I am setting out below. What this chapter puts forward, building on existing work by scholars and in wider public discussion, is a more detailed clarification of the central elements of cyberpunk with an eye to addressing how such definitive expectations for the genre have come to pass.

These suggested 'aspects' of cyberpunk have been selected for their open-ended nature. This definition should therefore support an understanding of cyberpunk which is broad enough to create an analysable corpus of currently available work, but without creating concrete boundaries that can be used to exclude and de-legitimise past and future additions to the genre. Each of these aspects are to be considered as loose and flexible to create an approach to recognising cyberpunk texts where each common element of the genre intersects to varying degrees. To illustrate this method, I have created the following radar chart as a visual aid to depict the flexible nature of my element-based definition, based on my own evaluation of the film *Blade Runner*. It is an example of how we might see a 'canonical' cyberpunk with regards to the discussion above:<sup>75</sup>

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<sup>75</sup> This chart is constructed from my personal assessment of *Blade Runner*, and is in part elaborate on in the following sections. This is not intended to be authoritative. The specific values assigned to each axis of this chart were also decided arbitrarily to display the appropriate weighting for my evaluation of the text.



This chart displays the manner in which each element of cyberpunk is present in the film to certain extents. However each is weighted differently for its importance to this specific work. These elements are intended to be reshaped to match their importance for each text considered for the genre. They are guidelines, built out of the preceding definitions, to evaluate how different works fit into the web of cyberpunk as a whole; where each addition bends and reshapes our previous understanding of the genre. Each of these proposed elements ebb and flow across the corpus reflecting how cyberpunk is not rigidly tied to one channel of interpreting its cultural concerns, but shifts within these recognised<sup>76</sup> arenas in response to its creators, its audiences, or its time of authorship. Charts such as the above could be constructed for many cyberpunk (or SciFi) texts to open and encourage comparison between them. Likewise others may chart the same

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<sup>76</sup> Recognised as in the definitions listed above



texts differently to similar discussions. This chapter presents these key elements as a tool for active engagement with the act of defining. They are not rigid posts to enforce a concrete definition, but a baseline for deeper analysis.

My element-based approach to definition combines the logical broadening of an overly historicised conception of genre into a cultural 'mode' but maintains the recognisable terminology of 'genre' to improve the use of a word that is set to remain centrally important to the classification of fiction in public discourse. One of the significant advantages in breaking down "cyberpunk" in such a way will be to prove that despite inconsistencies across contemporaneous or generationally separated iterations of it, there remains a solid core that a reader can latch on to in order to orient their expectations. Audiences intuitively identify cyberpunk stories, as its perpetuation in popular culture proves.<sup>77</sup> However, we currently struggle to describe why this is, particularly when its texts can vary wildly in their representations of cyberpunk concerns. This approach to defining cyberpunk works provides clear features to house its most recognisable elements, without causing confusion around its more esoteric edges. It encourages conversations comparing SciFi works for the extent to which they engage with cyberpunk sensibilities and creates a shared base for which to map variety and creativity within a recognisable niche.

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<sup>77</sup> There is more about recognising cyberpunk in this manner in the Introduction to this thesis. However it is also the intention of this whole chapter to unravel the elements that connect to encourage this 'intuitive' recognition

The remainder of this chapter will break down each core element in turn and demonstrate how they each serve to distinguish cyberpunk from other sub-genres of SciFi. They will be discussed in order of which most notably distinguishes cyberpunk from its neighbours (hence the first element discussed is its most 'punk' element, moving through to the futuristic environments that intersect more strongly with broader SciFi works). In identifying and exploring how these elements combine to make cyberpunk distinct from other subsets of SciFi, we can begin to unravel why this particular recipe has remained so popular with audiences. With a definition in place to understand the conditions of cyberpunk, there is a language in place to interrogate how it encourages its audiences to think about their futures, and their relationships to their political environments.<sup>78</sup> To assist in establishing this definition, four texts will be used from across the breadth of cyberpunk's development to date. These texts have been selected to show not only clear examples for each element, but also how these categories can be applied to fringe cases that may not otherwise be readily apparent. The four central aspects explored here are intended to set boundaries on what should dominate a text in order to call it cyberpunk, but rather, as my examples show, what should feature *in at least some form* in order to coincide with the broadly accepted perception of the genre as has been encountered and continually renewed by readers, viewers, critics, and creators.

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<sup>78</sup> It enables the discussions of how cyberpunk influences (and is influenced by) the real world, such as is undertaken in Chapter 3 of this thesis. Without this definition in place identifying cyberpunk across its lifespan is much more difficult, and risks obfuscating how the genre grows alongside its audience to reflect the changing world around it.

The selected examples in these sections cover literature, film, and television, thus presenting a varied selection of the mediums in which cyberpunk finds a home.<sup>79</sup> They also span the timescale from cyberpunk's initial inception through to modern incarnation, however to limit the pool, and to remain consistent with the scope of the rest of this thesis, they are all examples from Western cyberpunk.<sup>80</sup> Finally, to further elaborate on each element in turn, the appropriate historical and contextual influences, such as technological development and the political environment of these works' creation, will be explored in the segment where each can be most clearly identified. Similarly, the literary and filmic environments that cyberpunk both built out of, around, and opened a pathway for will be an important aspect of analysis to create a comprehensive definition as establishing how cyberpunk stands apart from its environment is a powerful tool for more easily identifying new texts to be incorporated into the wider cyberpunk canon.

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<sup>79</sup> Cyberpunk is also prominent in comics, video games, tabletop roleplaying games, and music although this chapter does not incorporate examples of these in these particular descriptions.

<sup>80</sup> As was discussed in the introduction, global iterations of cyberpunk is an important area of study. Unfortunately, due to the limits of this thesis Western cyberpunk is the focus due to the frequency of its appearance in early cyberpunk scholarship, and its impact on the resurgence of the genre in recent Western popular culture. Expanding this is a key part of progressing this definitional work to the next stage, but this thesis does not have the space to perform that work appropriately.

## Representation of a fringe counter-cultural movement



*Image from: Josan Gonzales,<sup>81</sup>*

Firstly, we begin with the key element of cyberpunk that is most commonly referred to as the “punk” of its name. In Andrew Butler’s definition of the genre, he writes that:

The punk is referring to the low life, the working or lower middle-class characters, the have-nots, who populate such fiction. Rather than rocket scientists and

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<sup>81</sup> Josan Gonzales, <https://www.artstation.com/artwork/exXvw> [accessed December 2019]

beautiful daughters, cyberpunk features drug dealers, drug users, musicians, skateboarders as characters, as well as various hackers.<sup>82</sup>

The centre for his punks are the downtrodden masses with a desire for criminal, artistic or physical expression. Dann Albright describes them as: “high-tech low-lifes.” Put simply, cyberpunk lets us see into the lives of the people living on the outside edges of the high-tech society that has been established.<sup>83</sup> It is in this element that injustices of the inequalities in cyberpunk worlds are rebelled against, often through chaotic and criminal behaviour. Cyberpunk is obsessed with ‘fighting back’ and aligns itself strongly with those who are most persecuted by its economic systems. They are bonded together by social position, ideological beliefs, or artistic expression. The latter of these often revokes the term ‘punk’ specifically, due to the strong visual associations of that movement; in particular how it was evoked by Sterling in his *Mirrorshades Preface* when he describes cyberpunks as ‘fashion conscious to a fault [prizing] their garage-band aesthetic.’<sup>84</sup> This has become such a memorable indicator of this subgenre, that it has sparked a family-tree of subgenres following.<sup>85</sup> However, as we will continue to discuss below in the varying representations within each element, this specific ‘punkness’ is consistent in its implications for cyberpunk stories more than its exact representation.

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<sup>82</sup> Andrew M. Butler, *Cyberpunk, Pocket Essentials*, (2001). ProQuest Ebook Central, <https://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/bham/detail.action?docID=3386009>. p.15

<sup>83</sup> Albright, “What is Cyberpunk?”

<sup>84</sup> Sterling, *Mirrorshades*, p.x. We can see these stylings in the texts he chose for his anthology too: for example the plumed out hair of the musicians in Pat Cadigan’s “Rock On”, or the ‘classic retro-rock’ leathers of John Shirley’s “Freezone”

<sup>85</sup> Such as steampunk, atompunk, solarpunk, and hopepunk to name a few. This thesis also does not have the scope to perform adequate analyses of these comparable genres, and the conclusion covers further the ways this definitional work could be expanded to benefit these other ‘-punk’ genres.

As cyberpunks are often protagonists to their stories, in order to best explore and champion ideologies that resist corporate (and neoliberal) hegemony, the best way to unpick how punks and other counter-cultural movements direct cyberpunk stories is to focus on them.

*Moxyland*<sup>86</sup> is a powerful example of the major ways cyberpunk protagonists are most commonly conceived, particularly in relation to Butler's definition above. Its use of four central characters with interlinking storylines allows it to cover a range of common archetypes such as those suggested in the above description. It shows its protagonists not just as chaotic 'punks', but other counter-cultural actors who each emphasise different strengths to cyberpunk's focus on 'low lifes.' First there is the artist, Kendra, who is an experimental photographer championing an artistic medium she believes can reveal the truth of the world. Artistically motivated resistance can also be seen in characters such as Riviera, the illusion-crafting sadist of *Neuromancer*, in the comedic exposés of Max Headroom,<sup>87</sup> and in the graffiti-artist Jayve in "Two Dreams on Trains".

<sup>88</sup>This version of a rebellious, cyberpunk protagonist focuses on style more than the others do; it encourages stories that seek beauty in the mess of cyberpunk worlds, and can champion both individual self-expression and its fragility, and unifying with others through emotional over ideological reasons. Artists such as these characters are key to cyberpunk's visual style. The self-expression enabled by custom bodyparts, non-conformist fashion choices and the disrespect of institutions implied in graffiti tags bring

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<sup>86</sup> Lauren Beukes, *Moxyland*, (Nottingham: Angry Robot Books, 2009)

<sup>87</sup> Annabel Jankel and Rocky Morton, *Max Headroom: 20 minutes into the future*. Chrysalis, 1985

<sup>88</sup> Short story by Elizabeth Bear, included in Kelly & Kessel (2007) *Rewired...*

resistive contexts to cyberpunk's aesthetics. They are not just cool; they are cool for how they fight power and represent self-expression and freedom, what Csicsery-Ronay describes as 'supreme, life-affirming *hipness*.'<sup>89</sup> Understanding these characters can be key to understanding *why* cyberpunk wants these visuals, and misunderstanding this is a common reason for empty, appropriated cyberpunk pastiches.<sup>90</sup>

Second among these protagonist types is the revolutionary, which does bring ideological motivation to the 'punks'; in *Moxyland* this is Tendaka, whose blind desire to tear down his government consumes his life both figuratively and literally. A direct resistance to the ruling castes is a common direction for cyberpunk protagonists, such as in *Neuromancer* where Case's team battle to cause change in a world held stagnant by corporate power, or in *Transistor*<sup>91</sup> where one woman battles to undo the work of an illuminati-esque organisation. The concept of battle is frequently a part of how cyberpunk resistances function. The forces that seek to oppress and disrupt cyberpunk's counter-cultural communities often do so violently, through beatings or gunfire, physically representing the callousness of those in control as they seek to maintain the status quo. Rebellions are frequently contrasted against militarised and violent police forces. Tendaka's revolution is bludgeoned and viral bombed by the police; in *Transistor* the 'programs' that enforce order do so by threatening your death, and in *Dredd*<sup>92</sup> the police force becomes its own judge and executioner for any it identifies as a dissident. This is no coincidence. Punks sought to fight back against

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<sup>89</sup> Csicsery-Ronay, "Cyberpunk and Neuromanticism", p268 (emphasis in text)

<sup>90</sup> Discussed further in Chapter 4

<sup>91</sup> Supergiant Games, *Transistor*, 2014

<sup>92</sup> Referenced here is the latest film featuring the Judge Dredd characters and world, although this statement is applicable to the whole franchise

hegemonic, authoritarian structures, and the police are often foremost among these. Cyberpunk's police forces, as discussed in prior elements, are often militarised in their armaments, or privatised and funded by corporations into miniature armies. Police brutality is extended to similar extremes as the rest of cyberpunk; they become akin to soldiers hospitalising and killing civilians. This element grows out of the Hard-Boiled Detective genre that also heavily influenced cyberpunk's inception. These detectives are forced to work apart from their companions, as corruption runs riot in the Police forces of their cities. No-one is innocent, and often those with the most power have already been bought; cyberpunk frequently<sup>93</sup> takes the necessity to step outside of the law away from lone detectives, as in hard-boiled fiction, and puts it into the hands of the 'street criminal' or marginalised worker. Cyberpunk, then, is invested in criticising the enforcement of hegemonic authority, whether that be state or corporate, and its fascination with violence evokes the energy of the punk movement.<sup>94</sup> Importantly, however, cyberpunk does not always portray this exercising of authority as governmental control. Cyberpunk's 'police' forces more generally support the rich, and so they are not limited to a 'punk' ideology; cyberpunk resistances can draw upon more influences, such as Tendaka above, who is much more a resistance fighter than a punk. It is for this reason that this element is phrased as 'counter-cultural' rather than purely punk. Whilst it is frequently punk in ideology, this resistance, and criticism, reaches broader than that terminology might otherwise limit it to.

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<sup>93</sup> Although not always, as in *Blade Runner* with its detective protagonist, or cybernetic policewoman of Greg Bear's *Queen of Angels*.

<sup>94</sup> It is important to note that this was a major movement in the UK (and to a lesser extent the US), emerging in the mid-1970s and so forming part of the direct backdrop of many cyberpunk writers. It was therefore very influential in western culture, such as the examples of cyberpunk cited here.



We see here cyberpunk presenting united, counter-cultural fronts to resist the neoliberal ideologies that looked to exacerbate the growing financial inequalities across classes.<sup>95</sup> The growing irrelevance and deterioration of power experienced by working classes comes to a head in cyberpunk texts as neoliberal hegemony strives to isolate individuals. As Wendy Brown describes, all market actors including individuals 'are tasked with enhancing present and future value through self-investments that in turn attract investors.'<sup>96</sup> Individuals must market themselves continually in the hopes to thrive (or just survive) in these environments. We see this motion in the early neoliberal shift of situating power in the individual not the group; the desire to break the power of trade unions lead to exceptionalist ideologies where anyone can supposedly rise to fortune of the work of their own back. It is this prevailing idea that cyberpunk's communities oppose. The punk energy that directs cyberpunk characters to fight back against authority figures reinvigorates the ideas of strength through unity; that the only way out of the inequalities cyberpunk worlds present, is together.

Resistances to the dominant power structure often use other counter-cultural angles to both physically fight back, and persuasively form a resistive subculture. This is no doubt best reinforced in the most extremely capitalist cyberpunk settings, but resistance movements are engendered across the genre regardless and are fuelled in their direction by the inequality and powerlessness they experience. In this manner this aspect is important not just for reflecting and criticising capitalism and neoliberal, trickle-

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<sup>95</sup> This will be discussed in greater detail in the later element of 'A distinct and extreme division of wealth, or access to resources/technology, typically readable in the layout of the environment'

<sup>96</sup> Shenk, Timothy. "What Exactly Is Neoliberalism?". *Dissent Magazine*, 2022, <https://www.dissentmagazine.org/blog/booked-3-what-exactly-is-neoliberalism-wendy-brown-undoing-the-demos>.

down economics, but also for creating a space where unified resistance is both encouraged, and impactful. Cyberpunk texts are only infrequently isolationist with regards to their characters: Shadowrunners, for example, are teams operating from communities, such as those seen in *Shadowrun: Dragonfall*<sup>97</sup> which centres its runners in the community of the Kreuzbazaar in the heart of Berlin. Similarly, Case needs his team to even challenge the corporations of *Neuromancer*, and Neo is ‘the one’ in *The Matrix*, but his plight is nothing without Morpheus and Trinity supporting him. Cyberpunk strives to show how oppressive systems built on rampant individualist ideologies inherently draw together communities and how they might be resisted by collectives. Neoliberalism embraces individualism as a method of justifying individual wealth and corporate monopolies. It emphasises, in the words of Caroline Alphin, how individuals in these societies ‘calculate their worth based on their ability to compete’<sup>98</sup> and this emphasis on the individual ignores the reliance of corporate success on workforces and the wider population. Cyberpunk refuses to ignore those same communities and counters these neoliberal ideologies with its community resistances. In cyberpunk, collective action is the only real response to meaningfully change these systems

Thirdly, Lerato represents the position of “hacker” culture in *Moxyland*. Hackers are intimately interwoven with cyberpunk; they represent similar punk resistances as we see in these other archetypes, but as their battleground is online, or inside technology, they are key to melding the cyber and the punk. Nowhere is this more apparent than in Gibson’s *Sprawl* texts, as his stories are fascinated with introducing these console-

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<sup>97</sup> Hairbrained Schemes, *Shadowrun: Dragonfall*, 2014

<sup>98</sup> Caroline Alphin, (2020). *Neoliberalism and Cyberpunk Science Fiction: Living on the Edge of Burnout* (1st ed.). Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003044505> p.2

cowboys. However, Gibson's cowboys are only one variation on how these rebels can be shown; Lerato offers a contrasting way of exploring these hackers. Lerato is not an ostensibly fringe character, as are the other protagonists of *Moxyland*. She has a comfortable corporate job working on a company computer system from an authorised and employed position. However, her position enables her to exploit her access rights and to work to support Tendaka to undermine the corporation from within. She represents a resistive character who works to destabilise the systems of which she is a part, a rarer position in cyberpunk texts, but one which does nevertheless appear elsewhere. Allie in Pat Cadigan's *Mindplayers*<sup>99</sup> comes from a similar background to Lerato, for instance, starting life as an outsider to the system who through a sponsored program finds a way to integrate her life within the social structure of her world and from that position supporting others who are not so fortunate.<sup>100</sup> In *The Red Men* by Matthew de Abaitua, Nelson also begins as a radical journalist but is later recruited by the corporation central to the novel's story, Monad, and acts as a critical perspective seeking to destabilise and limit the dangerous overreaching of Monad's CEO. Whilst characters external to central cyberpunk society make the most common counter-cultural agents, these perspectives can also be found at the fringes of corporate structures themselves, offering doubt and resistance from positions outside of the gutter.

Finally, *Moxyland*'s Toby is the brash, self-centred wannabe-DJ-celebrity who embodies the drug-taking chaotic punk aesthetic at the genre's heart. He is the 'drug-

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<sup>99</sup> Pat Cadigan, *Pat Cadigan: SF Gateway Omnibus* (London: Gollancz, 2013), pp.1-199

<sup>100</sup> See Chapter 2 for a more detailed exploration of *Mindplayers*.

user, musician' of Butler's definition, a chaotic riot of leather and colours such as is seen in the imagery that evolved to represent many cyberpunk works: the games and editions of *Shadowrun* are perfect examples of this, as is the work of Josan Gonzales,<sup>101</sup> a popular cyberpunk artist who has designed covers for William Gibson's *Sprawl* texts among other things. Cyberpunk hackers clearly turn the tools of the oppressor against them, undermining cyber security for a myriad of purposes. They are often a strong representation of how cyberpunk technology is not inherently bad, it can be a site for self-expression, connection, and resistance.

The predominant representation of this counter-cultural, resistive element to cyberpunk texts takes the 'punk' of its name quite literally. Building off of the cultural climate of the 70s preceding cyberpunk's origin, the leathers, piercings and chaotic assemblage of the punk music scene invaded cyberpunk's SciFi setting. The cleanliness of previous futuristic environments devolves into the mess of urban streets and the cluttered wires of overworked machinery. The inhabitants of these urban sprawls are divided starkly into the professionally dressed corporate employees and the stylish mess of those who resist such control. As the style of punk was, in Matthew Worley's words, 'deliberately designed to shock',<sup>102</sup> so too do the punks of cyberpunk aim to shock their audiences through their outrageous presentation and behaviour. This is exemplified in *Cyberpunk 2020*, a role-playing system that foregrounded the importance in early cyberpunk, especially, of actively breaking from expected fashions and styles and exemplifying a personal expression of identity through a chaotic

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<sup>101</sup> The artist of the image at the head of this section

<sup>102</sup> Matthew Worley, "Teenage Warning: Punk, Politics and Youth Culture." *No Future: Punk, Politics and British Youth Culture, 1976–1984*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2017. Xi-Xiv. Print. p.5

assemblage of existing material. As Stina Attebery and Josh Pearson note, the self-fashioning of *Cyberpunk 2020* becomes a method with which the game disrupts fantasies of unlimited power transcribed by the augmentations of cyberpunk worlds.<sup>103</sup> In this manner they provide new forms of identity that focus on the sense of being woven into a fictional world and culture above other readings. The base of these fashion styles is taken predominantly from Punk culture, but they are supplemented in cyberpunk by taking the penetrative images of studs, safety pins, and piercings and extending them out into the bodily augmentations discussed above. The 'punks' of these texts often embody the flexibility and possibility offered by implantation as it becomes a further way to inscribe identity onto their bodies. Turning once more to Sterling's *Mirrorshades* preface, 'Cyberpunk comes from the realm where the computer hacker and the rocker overlap [...] technology is visceral [...] it is pervasive, utterly intimate. Not outside us, but next to us. Under our skin; often, inside our minds.'<sup>104</sup> The desires for rockers and punks to shake the foundations of expected form, and in so doing to engage with their audiences and break down distinctions between performers, revolutionaries, and onlookers in the adversarial atmosphere of rebellion in punk performances carries into technologically creative contexts in cyberpunk. Hackers become punks, and vice versa.

Whilst this is the most common representation of the 'punk' in cyberpunk, as discussed at the outset in the analysis of the variety of protagonist styles in *Moxyland*, it is far from the only way this attitude is expressed within the genre. Due to this variety in

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<sup>103</sup> Murphy and Schmeink, 2018, *Cyberpunk and Visual Culture*, p.62

<sup>104</sup> Sterling, *Mirrorshades*, p.xiii

representation, it is inappropriate to refer to these factions as purely 'punks'. They are all, however, tied together with a key distinction, i.e. that they present a fresh and clearly distinct perspective from the dominant power structure. This is summarised by Sterling who writes that:

cyberpunk [...] captures something crucial to the work of these writers, something crucial to the decade as a whole: a new kind of integration. The overlapping of worlds that were formerly separate: the realm of high tech and the modern pop underground.<sup>105</sup>

What is important in these distinctions is that a counter-cultural, often brash and violent, movement presents a resistive alternative to the established corporate power structure. The artist, revolutionary, and punk discussed above all work to either destabilise or escape from their societies. They chaotically disrupt the cities of cyberpunk with revolutionary movement, raucous celebration, and ingenious re-invention of traditions and technologies. Importantly, however, they are not required to be the protagonists, or even the central force behind the action of the text, but an alternative resistive force must be present to express difference from corporate norms. *Mindplayers* by Pat Cadigan, for one, follows Allie who, whilst beginning as a mind criminal using stolen tech for psychedelic highs, spends the majority of the novel as a corporate employee with only occasional interactions with the criminal, "punk" characters. Returning to the

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<sup>105</sup> Sterling, *Mirrorshades*, p.xi

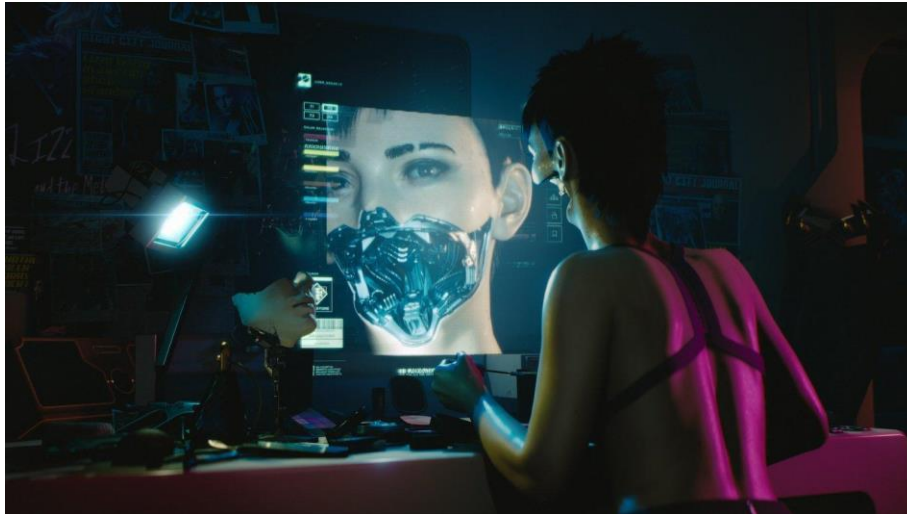
canonical *Blade Runner* is useful here as despite being a widely cited cyberpunk text, its fringe, 'punk' element is less overt than elsewhere in the genre. *Blade Runner* mostly plays into the punk aesthetic in its supporting, ensemble cast, weaving its limited bright coloured hair and clothing into its busier street scenes. The specific counter-cultural movement, however, is found in the Replicants, headed by Roy Batty, who challenge their subjugation through violence. This varies from the traditionally expected representation of "punk" culture, however 'they prize their garage-band aesthetic'<sup>106</sup> still as Sterling poetically framed, with their leather clothes and stylistic face paint. The Replicants' plight represents the struggle of an unfairly exploited demographic looking to change their situation for the better. Their goals follow the same trajectory as Case in *Neuromancer* who is just looking to '*change something*'.<sup>107</sup> Therefore, it was not mandatory for the 'fringe movement' to fully embody the punk aesthetic, even at the genre's inception, but it is important for conflict to be introduced through a counter-cultural faction.

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<sup>106</sup> Sterling, *Mirrorshades*, p.x

<sup>107</sup> Gibson, *Neuromancer*, p.307. Emphasis in text

The devaluation of the human body due to the widespread use of, and response to, advanced technology/ies



*Image from: "Cyberpunk 2077" <sup>108</sup>*

We have already established cyberpunk as a descendent of the broader SciFi genre, and it is in this third aspect of the genre that much of this legacy is found. Initially the implication might seem to be that cyberpunk is distinct specifically for its use of digital, 'cyber', technology. This is an argument supported in the definitions criticised above. It is the case that computers and other information technologies are particularly common in this genre; digital spaces such as 'the matrix' and 'the metaverse'<sup>109</sup> are physical embodiments of spaces behind the computer screen, and cybernetic interfaces to allow

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<sup>108</sup> CD Projekt Red, *Cyberpunk 2077*

<sup>109</sup> From Gibson's *Sprawl* works and Stephenson's *Snowcrash* respectively



innovative connections to computer chips for myriad purposes abound. Importantly though, cyberpunk does not restrict itself to purely these sorts of technologies, and it embraces a far wider variety than the limited scope of the “cyber” might imply. Therefore, just as urban sprawls need not be exact recreations of the same city, cyberpunk technology need not be ‘cybernetics’ specifically. The implications of whatever technology is chosen is the most important thing for this element of the genre. Cyberpunk interests itself with how our minds and bodies can become devalued through our relationships with technology. Bodies in cyberpunk can become superfluous to our lifestyles, as more and more experiences take place in an insubstantial online world. Or they can become outmoded in comparison to more beautiful, augmented eyes and more efficient cybernetic limbs. Just as cyberpunk cities and economies are fascinated with the obsolescence of individuals,<sup>110</sup> so too are cyberpunk bodies under threat of replacement.

The fact that cyberpunk explores a variety of technologies is not unaddressed in existing definitions of cyberpunk, but it is worth highlighting specifically due to the threat of assuming otherwise in the naming of the genre as ‘cyber’-punk. We can start with the *Historical Dictionary of Science Fiction Cinema*, in which Keith Booker includes the following passage in his description of cyberpunk films featuring:

biomedical and electronic body modifications, direct interfaces between human brains and computers, artificial intelligences equipped with “human” qualities, and

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<sup>110</sup> As will be discussed in the following elements

the electronic transcendence provided by new technological spaces, [each] calling into question what it means to be human.<sup>111</sup>

This idea of a body directly integrated or interfacing with technology persists across multiple critical and popular definitions. Butler, for example, identifies ‘human/machine hybrids’<sup>112</sup> and Bruce Sterling, in his formative preface to the *Mirrorshades* anthology, highlights ‘[t]he theme of body invasion: prosthetic limbs, implanted circuitry, cosmetic surgery, genetic alteration.’<sup>113</sup> What this reveals is that although body-modification is central to these understandings of cyberpunk, biotechnologies as an aspect of the genre are more uncommon than digital and cybernetic technologies, which are often brought up in the context of implanting digital technologies into the body. Biotechnology independent of the digital is still not entirely absent from discussions of cyberpunk, but when cyberpunk is reduced to brief summaries, the technologies it plays with are often one of the first to be limited (the name “cyber”-punk carries that unfortunate expectation).

What ties them all together, however, is the idea of the body as a permeable substance, one open and vulnerable to ‘invasion’ by the knife, the drug, or the computer chip. What we can see in Sterling’s choice of language, then, is that this manipulability of the body is not always portrayed neutrally in definitional work; it can be an ‘invader’,

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<sup>111</sup> Booker, *Historical Dictionary...* pp.94

<sup>112</sup> Butler, *Pocket Essentials*, p.15

<sup>113</sup> Sterling, *Mirrorshades*, p.xiii

and whilst in cyberpunk not all of these technologies are portrayed negatively, the innate dystopic pessimism of the genre can influence how we present key aspects of our definition of it. Some cyberpunk works do present these penetrations of the body as negative, but this is not universally a focus in the genre. Whilst it is the case in works such as *Altered Carbon*, where the digitisation of human life becomes the central method of exploitation used to oppress the lower classes, we can see contrasts in examples such as *Moxyland*. In this, the artist Kendra, who was discussed in the previous section, agrees to have experimental nanobots injected into her as a corporate marketing strategy, and whilst it comes at a cost, this biological augmentation becomes a central strength for the main protagonists to resist oppression at the hands of their government; the experimental nanobots that protect her physical health are not depicted as grotesque by the author; instead it is the corporate structures that police them which are unnatural and dangerous. It is important for *Moxyland* to show Kendra's body as exploitable in this intimate manner to emphasise the extent to which people are vulnerable (and even expendable) to faceless corporate greed. The nanobot injection is not an inherent negative, the technology remains neutrally represented, but the systems that implement it are. We can see this as well if we look back to Gibson's *Sprawl* trilogy. In the sequel to *Neuromancer*, *Count Zero*,<sup>114</sup> the brain of a major protagonist is grafted to interface wirelessly with the matrix. Whilst this is initially distressing due to her lack of control of her capabilities, and the desire of others to capture and research her, it becomes a liberatory boon that allows for a better channel of communication with the multitude of AIs that now inhabit cyberspace. The impermanence of the body is not to

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<sup>114</sup> William Gibson, *Count Zero*, (New York: Ace Books, 1986)

be despised in its entirety, but it opens new avenues of control that can exploit the worker, and it is this discussion surrounding technology that interests much of cyberpunk. This use of technology to compromise the human body is a key strategy across the cyberpunk genre, but it is used to criticise other systems, namely the rampant societal inequalities we discussed above, not just to scare its audience away from technology itself.

Of the many forms of devaluation used across cyberpunk texts, cybernetic implantation is the most common. *Neuromancer*, *Synners*,<sup>115</sup> and *Hardwired*<sup>116</sup> are examples of early cyberpunk novels which both depict direct cybernetic augmentation.<sup>117</sup> This persists through *Altered Carbon* with its representation of a society dominated by mind-storing spinal implants. It also finds a particular home in video games, due to their tendency to frame cybernetic augmentations as character upgrades, as seen in the variety of performance-enhancing robotic limbs in the *Deus Ex*<sup>118</sup> series and the recent *Cyberpunk 2077*. These representations are common in visual media as they create striking and memorable imagery, such as the bare biological remnants of *Robocop*<sup>119</sup> and the nearly entirely robotic cast of *Alita: Battle Angel*.<sup>120</sup> Implants pierce the unity of the flesh and offer up the idea that the body is somehow not enough anymore, and that it can be improved or reshaped to match the

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<sup>115</sup> Pat Cadigan, *Synners* (New York: Bantam Books, 1991)

<sup>116</sup> Walter Jon Williams, *Hardwired*, (New York: Tor Books, 1986)

<sup>117</sup> This is not to say cybernetic implantation does not occur in texts earlier than these, one example of this would be Joanna Russ' *The Female Man* from 1975 (full citation in bib) which also features cybernetically enhanced people. This story only briefly precedes the rise of cyberpunk to popularity, and its style better fits the wave of feminist SciFi at that time. This is discussed further in Chapter 2.

<sup>118</sup> The first instalment of which is: *Deus Ex*, Ion Storm (2000)

<sup>119</sup> Jose Padilha, *Robocop*, Sony Pictures Releasing, 2014

<sup>120</sup> Robert Rodriguez, *Alita: Battle Angel*. Twentieth Century Fox, 2019.

desires and needs of the individual. This is made explicit from the outset of the genre with Case in *Neuromancer* disdainfully referring to his body as nothing more than “meat.”<sup>121</sup> In this manner the relationship people have with their physical body is brought to the fore. In breaking the boundaries of the flesh, cyberpunk emphasises how strongly we identify with physical forms, whether they are meat from which to be freed or inseparably part of our identity. Stina Attebery and Josh Pearson address this awareness of the intimacy of technology and the cyberpunk body (in their analysis of posthuman fashion in *Cyberpunk 2020*) in writing how it can ‘destabilize subject/object relationships and invite risky new ethical identities for human subjectivity and embodiment.’<sup>122</sup>

Some cyberpunk texts express a desire to leave behind this meat for a bodiless existence;<sup>123</sup> such as how Kevin McCarron writes that: “[r]unning through all cyberpunk texts is a fascination with the ways in which the flesh is inessential, irrelevant;” This extropean,<sup>124</sup> ideology can be seen in the work of Hans Moravec<sup>125</sup> where he describes a brain being destroyed as the mind is scanned and copied into a computer to achieve immortality.<sup>126</sup> This is the extreme of cybernetic bodily replacement: the total escape

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<sup>121</sup> *Neuromancer*. p.12

<sup>122</sup> Murphy and Schmeink, *Cyberpunk and Visual Culture*, p.67

<sup>123</sup> Mike Featherstone, and Roger Burrows eds., *Cyberspace/Cyberbodies/Cyberpunk : Cultures of Technological Embodiment*, (SAGE Publications, Limited, 1996). ProQuest Ebook Central, <http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/bham/detail.action?docID=1024070>. p.267

<sup>124</sup> Extropianism is a philosophical, transhumanist framework for continuously improving the human condition, that ultimately culminates in human immortality. See: Max More (2003). "Principles of Extropy (Version 3.11) : An evolving framework of values and standards for continuously improving the human condition". Extropy Institute.

<sup>125</sup> Moravec is a robotics and artificial intelligence researcher with a focus on transhumanism

<sup>126</sup> Hans Moravec, *Mind Children: The Future of Robot and Human Intelligence*. (Harvard University Press, 1988). pp.109-110

from a body which some argue only limits us. Cyberpunk often presents these futures as possible, and many of its characters desire this immortality. However, this perspective is also commonly criticised by the texts themselves and the flesh is not as frequently 'inessential' as McCarron implies. Continuing cyberpunk's pessimistic view with faulty memory storage systems, and vain and villainised 'Methuselah-like' figures.<sup>127</sup> Cyberpunk's perspective on these subject/object relations are more diverse, as Attebery and Pearson suggest. In *Nexus*<sup>128</sup> augmentations enable radically improved lifestyles, and in *The Matrix* the implants that let humans enter the matrix itself are repurposed to grant them extra powers to fight back against machines. Even in *Neuromancer*, Case's view of the body as 'meat' is shown to be only one perspective on this relationship,<sup>129</sup> and his mentor figure (who is now a purely digital recording of a human brain) argues vehemently about his hatred of this life and how all he wants after the job is done is to be erased for good.

We can see this mixed representation in cybernetic implants, such as bionic limbs, too as they also suffer pejorative representation, often due to low-grade faulty mechanisms and reclamation of parts by corporations. It is important to note however, that this issue rises from our third element, i.e. an unequal access to wealth and high-grade technology and is discussed further in that section; with this distinction in mind, we can understand that cyberpunk texts do not innately mistrust technological

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<sup>127</sup> Morgan's *Altered Carbon* is prime example of this, where the immortally brain-uploaded mega-rich are literally dubbed 'meths', short for Methuselah. We can also see this in Gibson's work, where in *Neuromancer* the digitally stored mind of Case's mentor only wishes for death to escape the emptiness of his existence.

<sup>128</sup> Ramez Naam, *Nexus*, (Nottingham: Angry Robot Books, 2013)

<sup>129</sup> In fact his disdainful self-hatred supports this even from his own perspective

progression, but the manner they are implemented, and for whom. This devaluation does in fact set the cyberpunk body as the site of change and self-expression. Implants can be personal and powerful for people in cyberpunk settings.<sup>130</sup> Cybernetic implants are also a visually memorable technology, making them a useful tool for the genre's continued recognisability. They are a clear metaphor for the plasticity of the flesh. They display the ease of alteration of the body, alongside the seamless connection we share with technology. People become inseparable from it, and this carries into the metaphorical relationship we now experience with information technologies.

To understand why this intimacy with technology is so important even from the outset of cyberpunk, we have to look at the technological climate of the earlier cyberpunk texts. The information explosion of the 20th Century, whilst developing as a societal condition from its early mentions in the 1960s, began to hit new heights of development in the 1980s, with the capacities of digital information storage rapidly increasing at this time. Digital technology was rapidly progressing in capacity and availability to the general public in the years leading up to cyberpunk. The critic and editor Larry McCaffery considers this influence of the technological environment on cyberpunk:

[T]he cyberpunks were the first generation of artists for whom the technologies of satellite dishes, video and audio players and recorders, computers and video

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<sup>130</sup> See the many stylish and practical augmentations in cyberpunk tabletop roleplaying games, or for a literary example Molly in *Neuromancer* whose cybernetics make her cool, dangerous, and importantly free to make her own choices.

games (both of particular importance), digital watches, and MTV were not exoticisms, but part of a daily 'reality matrix'<sup>131</sup>

There is an everyday reality to cyberpunk's technology, a purposeless and lack of specialness that differentiates it from earlier SciFi. There is a chaotic surplus of machines competing with each other in a hypercapital market. Whilst many do still fulfil those same purposes, their existence is cluttered and surrounded by competitors and other pleasurable technological distractions. It is into a society dependent on technology not for survival, but more through addiction, saturation, excess, or intensity that cyberpunk takes its audience, and it is from a time when technology becomes part of a 'daily reality matrix' that this relationship is envisioned. The technology at this time begins to progress into daily life and routines, becoming a part of how the world is navigated. Taking this even further, cyberpunk takes technology from an external tool necessary for certain pleasures or careers and internalises it, emphasising our dependency or desire for the further use and innovation of technology. This is particularly notable in the 1980s, when cyberpunk first appeared. During this time mobile phones and walkmans were becoming more ubiquitous, and computers were rapidly advancing. Digital technology was becoming an unavoidable fact of life.

It is also important to highlight here that one of the more commonly referenced influences of the contemporaneous technological climate for 1980s cyberpunk is the increase of Japanese products on the American market. This is reflected in the

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<sup>131</sup> McCaffery *Storming The Reality Studio*, p.12



dominating Asian corporations within cyberpunk works, and a fetishisation of Japanese aesthetics (though this can often blur to a generic “Asian-ness”). Andrew Butler acknowledges this in *Cyberpunk: Pocket Essentials*, writing that ‘[t]here is a mistrust of the Japanese, and behind that a racist fear of an undifferentiated Asian horde.’<sup>132</sup> This is not all permeating, and varies in its influence and depicted fears, but a persistent fascination with Asian aesthetics can be seen from *Blade Runner’s* neon Geisha to the problematically whitewashed Japanese setting<sup>133</sup> of the American remake of *Ghost in the Shell*.<sup>134</sup> This is a trait, particularly of early cyberpunk,<sup>135</sup> that can be identified not only in specific Asian visuals but in how it situated a typically Orientalist style in its science fictional representations of new spaces. It is this that Wendy Chun analyses in “Orienting Orientalism, or How to Map Cyberspace”, wherein she focuses on, in particular Gibson’s,<sup>136</sup> cyberspace. She writes that ‘narratives of cyberspace [...] have depended on Orientalism for their own disorienting orientation.’<sup>137</sup> The structures of cyberspace become the Other, forming a ‘relationship of identification, desire, and alienation’ where ‘just as the multiplicity of “Oriental Spaces” works against to totalizing myths, so too does the multiplicity of electronic spaces threaten to disorient the user

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<sup>132</sup> Butler 2001, *Pocket Essentials*, p.15

<sup>133</sup> The image of a Geisha in a neon advertisement dominating a skyscraper in *Blade Runner* is indicative of using Asian culture to represent an oppression of the West whilst othering Japanese culture as an exotic fantasy. The ‘whitewashing’ concern was in the more recent Hollywood adaptation of a Japanese cyberpunk piece *Ghost in the Shell* wherein the central characters were played by non-asian actors.

<sup>134</sup> Rupert Sanders, *Ghost In The Shell* (Paramount Pictures, 2017)

<sup>135</sup> Although as early cyberpunk established many persistent tropes and techniques to which later texts frequently adhere, this issue does recur throughout a number of cyberpunk works.

<sup>136</sup> But also recognising similar elements in Neal Stephenson’s cyberspace from *Snow Crash*, ‘the metaverse’. See Chun (2013) p.73

<sup>137</sup> Wendy Chun, “Orienting Orientalism, or How to Map Cyberspace” in *Asian America. Net : Ethnicity, Nationalism, and Cyberspace*, edited by Rachel C. Lee, and Sau-ling Cynthia Wong, Taylor & Francis Group, 2013. p.74

they seek to orient.<sup>138</sup> Cyberpunk, in this manner, carries the concerns of Orientalism not just in its appropriation of Japanese imagery and language, although Chun also notes that a number of important markers Gibson uses to both orient and disorient his readers are racial and ethnic ones.<sup>139</sup> Chun discusses Gibson's use of Japan becoming shorthand for the future, and his positioning of cyberspace as a new American frontier. In Chun's words: "cyberspace— unlike the physical landscape— can be conquered and made to submit: entering cyberspace is analogous to opening up the Orient."<sup>140</sup> In these ways, Orientalist perspective can be identified in both the specific imagery and language of cyberpunk, but also in its representation of new, science-fictional spaces.<sup>141</sup>

This does not encompass all cyberpunk works, however, and cyberpunk does move away from these perspectives in places; *Moxyland*, *Red Spider White Web*,<sup>142</sup> and *He, She and It*<sup>143</sup> for instance are divested of a traditional, Gibsonian, matrix and the Asian aesthetics of earlier cyberpunk and move cyberpunk narratives away from this form of Othering.<sup>144</sup> Similarly other texts use Asian influences to express multiculturalism and do so in less fearful manners than analysed above; *Supercute Futures*<sup>145</sup> is such an example where Asian influences become a distinct cultural

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<sup>138</sup> Chun, 2013, "Orienting Orientalism..." p.82

<sup>139</sup> Chun, 2013, "Orienting Orientalism..." p.87

<sup>140</sup> Chun, 2013, "Orienting Orientalism..." p.92

<sup>141</sup> Whilst Chun's analysis is important in recognising Orientalist narratives that do recur across cyberpunk fiction, this definitional work must also move on from it to prevent purely re-engaging with Gibson's particular conception of cyberpunk; as put forward here, this perspective is influential, but not all-encompassing and for this reason must be tempered with other varieties of cyberpunk.

<sup>142</sup> Misha, *Red Spider White Web*, (Morrigan Publications, 1990)

<sup>143</sup> Marge Piercy, *He, She and It*, (New York: Ballantine Books, 1991)

<sup>144</sup> And other texts, such as "Red Sonja and Lessingham in Dreamland" by Gwyneth Jones in 1996 (found on pp.37-51 of Kelly and Kessel's *Rewired...*) avoid Asian influences altogether using Western fiction to represent their surreal digital experiences.

<sup>145</sup> Martin Millar, *Supercute futures*, (London: Piatkus, 2018)

marker to emphasise the weakening of national borders in a corporatocracy. In many cyberpunk works, race and nationality fall in their significance due to the ease of border crossing enabled by global corporations and diverse casts are common in, for example, the *Shadowrun* series of games, or in *Netflix's Altered Carbon*. As highlighted by Butler however, this can vary in representation from inclusivity without close attention to race, to fear and othering and depends on the authors' sensitivities to exploit the boundary-breaking potential of the genre. At the heart of this potential in cyberpunk is the issue that the early cyberpunk texts that set the expectations and representations of technology for later works carry some Orientalist perspectives. In the words of Timothy Yu in his article on Oriental cities and postmodern futures:

'The postmodern city of science fiction, while sharing some of the attributes of the globalized, transnational, borderless space of postmodernity apotheosized in the notion of 'cyberspace,' remains racialized and marked (however superficially) by history, exposing the degree to which Western conceptions of postmodernity are built upon continuing fantasies of and anxieties about the Orient'<sup>146</sup>

Therefore, whilst cyberpunk texts still work to distance themselves from this particular perspective, as the examples above suggest, there is a legacy at its heart that perpetuates this viewpoint. As writers have 'mimicked' perspectives from

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<sup>146</sup> Timothy Yu, "Oriental Cities, Postmodern Futures: Naked Lunch, Blade Runner, and Neuromancer" – *MELUS*, vol. 33, no. 4, 2008, pp. 45–71. *JSTOR*, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/20343507> p.46

*Neuromancer*,<sup>147</sup> these ideas have persisted and still recur in later additions to the genre.

Cybernetics are not the only method of compromising the human body however, as biological compromise also frequents cyberpunk texts. These technologies are powerful as they more subtly question the distinction of the body from external forces. This can range from the bio-inscriptions on Angie Mitchell's brain in *Count Zero* to the mind-melding drugs of Ramez Naam's *Nexus* series.<sup>148</sup> This form of representation often crosses, or blurs, genres by moving toward "biopunk."<sup>149</sup> Biopunk, itself is a further sub-genre of SciFi that derives its origins from cyberpunk itself; it's described by Brian McHale as a notional denomination springing out of cyberpunk with a focus on biotechnologies not information technologies.<sup>150</sup> As a whole, the genre differs in its style to cyberpunk, mostly in the implementation of its 'punk' aesthetic, as argued by Lars Schmeink in his analysis of biopunk. Here he notes that cyberpunk finds connections with 'punk music and drug culture, anarchy as a valued political form [...] and rebellious devil-may-care attitudes' whereas biopunk embraces these 'punk connotations' less thoroughly, finding its punkness in anti-government/corporate positions rather than across its social cultures.<sup>151</sup> Some biopunk texts, such as the 1997 genetic engineering

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<sup>147</sup> Chun, 2013, "Orienting Orientalism..." p.83

<sup>148</sup> Central to *Count Zero* is Angie's augmented brain that lets her access the matrix without 'jacking in' to any computers, she is effectively her own wireless system. And in *Nexus* there is a particular nano-drug that, when taken by a group, enables their brains to communicate directly almost like a mass-hallucination.

<sup>149</sup> For further discussion on the Biopunk movement and how it intertwines with cyberpunk ideals, see Chapter 3

<sup>150</sup> McCaffery, *Storming The Reality Studio*, p.257

<sup>151</sup> Lars Schmeink, *Biopunk Dystopias: Genetic Engineering, Society and Science Fiction*. Liverpool University Press, 2016. JSTOR, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt1ps33cv>. Accessed 7 Sep. 2022. p.25

film *Gattaca*,<sup>152</sup> or biologically focused texts, like David Cronenberg's *eXistenZ*,<sup>153</sup> do still share the same perspective of the body as meat to be manipulated and improved upon as cyberpunk, however, and this does tie these texts across to cyberpunk. Combined with their SciFi setting, they share many of the features laid out in this chapter to be considered as cyberpunk works which differ mainly in their representation of technology. This distinction however highlights how the technological development of biological or cybernetic manipulation of the body forms a soft boundary for the distinctions between these two sub-genres. Whilst they intersect in this element, in the previous element<sup>154</sup> they diverge, with *Gattaca* in particular challenging its eugenic society through less of an energetic, social movement than that which we just explored. It is in this way that this form of definition embraces the similarities between genres, addressing elements that intersect and blur their boundaries. However it also provides the key constituent parts that allow us to recognise the elements they do not share, helping support an understanding of genres that is able to clearly distinguish between those with close similarities, such as these. A major distinction across this soft boundary is the digital medium behind the specific technology. *Gattaca*'s designer babies form a biologically crafted society, *eXistenZ* uses biological materials to create digital gaming consoles, and William Gibson's *Count Zero* uses biological grafting to allow Angie access to the Matrix. Therefore, in these examples, the biological methods grant cybernetic capabilities, and therefore digital technology remains the main focus of the text. The blurring of boundaries between the physical, the virtual and the artificial is not

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<sup>152</sup> Andrew Niccol, *Gattaca*, Columbia Pictures, 1997

<sup>153</sup> David Cronenberg, *eXistenZ*, Momentum Pictures, 1999

<sup>154</sup> Discussing the counter-cultural ideology of cyberpunk

solely the concern of cyberpunk but is a central part of the heritage it communicates to its audience and passes down in its inspirations.

Finally, a very important representation of technology in cyberpunk texts is implied body devaluation, and despite being the most indirect representation of this factor it is still a widely represented tool for generating the same questions as the above techniques across the genre's development. An early example of this mode is *Blade Runner*; in this work the majority of the technological developments with regards to the human body fall under the creation of artificial life forms, the Replicants. Replicant, or robot, parts are not directly integrated into any human characters; they remain distinct as either built Replicants or born biological humans. However, the sanctity and integrity of the biological body is called into question by the believability of Replicants as humans. This is Deckard's central fear: if Replicants can appear this human, how do I know I am not one of them, and should I empathise with them as an 'other'? The body is empowered with the potential of artificiality in the same way a character with a cybernetic arm questions whether it is as much a part of themselves as their biological one. The Replicants disrupt the hierarchy of humans over the artificial as their physical superiority to humans, alongside their indistinguishability from humans, unsettles biological privilege. They are limited in life to prevent their succession of their creators, as they are marketed, 'More Human than Human'.<sup>155</sup> This argument, this questioning of the artificiality of one's own body or mind resurfaces throughout cyberpunk works: from Douglas Quad in *Total Recall*<sup>156</sup> doubting his own personality after his memories

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<sup>155</sup> Scott, *Blade Runner*

<sup>156</sup> Paul Verhoeven, *Total Recall*, TriStar Pictures, 1990

were falsified to the duplicate, digital personalities competing with each other for legitimacy in *Altered Carbon*. The biological becomes interchangeable with the mechanical, at least in the minds of the characters exposed to cyberpunk technologies.

Whilst many of the examples provided above emphasise the uncertainty and suspicion often communicated in cyberpunk texts about this interchangeability, it is worth highlighting that this is not the only response to such possibilities represented by cyberpunk. Cyberpunk presents the potential for advocacy of the plasticity of identity and the body too. Wendy Gay Pearson, in her discussion of Queer Theory in cyberpunk<sup>157</sup> writes that:

‘the inability to tell if someone’s virtual gender reflects their ‘real’ gender identity [...] should have also made cyberpunk a haven for trans sf writers [but] there remains more queer-identified than trans-identified cyberpunk writing, suggesting there is still a long way to go for cyberpunk to catch up to the quotidian realities of everyday life.’<sup>158</sup>

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<sup>157</sup> With a particular championing of a wave of feminist cyberpunk beginning in the early 1990s which explored non-heterosexual gender and sex identities and represented the experiences of sexually-marginalised groups much more than the texts that preceded them.

<sup>158</sup> Anna McFarlane, Graham J Murphy, and Lars Schmeink, *The Routledge Companion To Cyberpunk Culture* (London [i. e.] Abingdon: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2020) p.303

She identifies that whilst cyberpunk has made leaps in representing marginalised, queer, voices, it is still developing in broadening that representation. However, highlighted here is the progression of cyberpunk's engagement with these topics, and how it actively adapts and updates its format to represent 'the quotidian realities of everyday life.' We can see a desire to support this direction of cyberpunk's development in popular culture as well, when responses to the development of *Cyberpunk 2077* have included discussion of transgender representation within the game and spoken out in criticism of the game problematically producing transphobic narratives and representation.<sup>159</sup> What this highlights is the awareness of cyberpunk audiences about the importance of this representation and the liberating potential of the cyberpunk genre upon the body to openly integrate these possibilities of body control into cultural discourse. Implantation also further enables cyberpunk to engage with discussions of disability and this has the same potential as the discussions of race mentioned above. Cyberpunk offers the liberating ideology where all flesh has workable potential and can be restructured to the desires of each individual. It also becomes a tool of othering the differently abled, however, as in *Deus Ex Mankind Divided*<sup>160</sup> where augmented people are ostracised and oppressed for their different dependencies. Cyberpunk presents the ability to control the human body without the stigma of the sanctity of the flesh, and this can be analysed for both its concern and its liberating potential by authors aware of the dialogues with which this genre can engage.

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<sup>159</sup> See Chapter 4 for further discussion of this.

<sup>160</sup> Eidos-Montreal, *Deus Ex Mankind Divided*, 2016



A distinct and extreme division of wealth, or access to resources/technology, typically readable in the layout of the environment



Image from: "Blade Runner"<sup>161</sup>

Underpinning both the narratives and the social background of cyberpunk works is the depiction of a distinct inequality between the upper, richer classes and the struggling, poverty-stricken lower classes which comprise the majority of the populations of cyberpunk worlds. For the most part, this tends to be a financial, capitalist-led divide; as Fredric Jameson writes about cyberpunk, it becomes 'the supreme literary expression if not of postmodernism, than of late capitalism itself.'<sup>162</sup> Naturally this division lends itself

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<sup>161</sup> Scott, *Blade Runner*

<sup>162</sup> Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, (Duke University Press, 1991) ProQuest Ebook Central, <https://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/bham/detail.action?docID=3007805>. p.419

to an unequal wealth distribution across its societies which frequently manifests as a financial inequality. However, this is not the only formation of this element as it can also find form in the control over access to resources and technologies. Foremost, this communicates a similar message to one which recurs in the later discussion of urban sprawls: how does one thrive, or even merely survive, when the prevalent economic system is designed to withhold wealth from the masses to be hoarded by the few? We can see cyberpunk's distinction from other SciFi genres in its focus on questions such as these. Looking at M. John Harrison's novel *Light*,<sup>163</sup> as an example, we can find living computer systems, cybernetically altered characters, and dense urban spaces, however its focus on exploration and discovery over social precarity and urban survival mark it as more generally science-fictional in its style than cyberpunk. Precarity in particular is a driving factor in much of cyberpunk, and whilst we've discussed how the punks of these texts respond to and rebel against this economic divide it is important to acknowledge how this element is reflected and interwoven deeper into cyberpunk stories than this.

The societal structures of early cyberpunk texts, such as *Neuromancer* and *Blade Runner*, provide ideal examples for this element, with their urban sprawls owned and controlled by the corporate overlords at their heads. The Tessier-Ashpool family, the antagonists of *Neuromancer*, embody their unassailable wealth through the unending immortality of clones and cryogenic storage; they remain untouchably aloof from the lower classes and grime of the Earth in their artisanal orbital ring world, literally looking down on the world below them. This extreme geographical separation recurs

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<sup>163</sup> M. John Harrison, *Light*, (London: Gollancz, 2002)

elsewhere in cyberpunk's canon, in the spires of *Altered Carbon*, for instance, in the 'Orbital' corporations of *Hardwired*, or in the orbital base seen in *Elysium*.<sup>164</sup> Likewise, the Tyrell corporation not only presents a similar physical distancing from the streets with their pyramidal arcology, but it completely controls all information regarding the production of replicants. In fact, the central plot to *Blade Runner* sees a gang of replicants struggling to obtain the technology needed to extend their lifespans past their in-built four years; a prize they are ultimately denied. The division, then, of two main castes of a populace is a defining driver of cyberpunk stories, enabling the 'punk resistance' that similarly repeats across the genre's development (discussed above); from Case's heist crew in *Neuromancer* to the eponymous criminal agents of the *Shadowrun*<sup>165</sup> games, resistance is key, and the physical, intellectual, spiritual, and material divides of cyberpunk underpin what must be resisted. The divides within cyberpunk, whether they are financial or otherwise, create an unjustly persecuted demographic, which can vary between characteristics such as class and race depending on the text. The criminal activities of these persecuted groups tend to be legitimised as a heroic striking back against a clear evil due to the exaggerated benefits of being within the upper caste; The more obtuse the inequality, the more morally unsound those benefiting from the system are presented.

This societal structure common to cyberpunk in particular can be traced in inspiration to the political situation of the 1980s when the genre developed a distinct identity. At this time neoliberalism was a dominant force in the countries where the

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<sup>164</sup> Neill Blomkamp, *Elysium*, Sony Pictures Releasing, 2013

<sup>165</sup> Of which *Shadowrun: Hong Kong* is the latest addition (see bibliography for citation).

canonical western cyberpunk texts were authored. Both Britain and America saw a rise in this ideology under the leaderships of Margaret Thatcher and Ronald Reagan respectively. A particular aspect of neoliberal economics comes to the fore in cyberpunk writing in the lowering of regulations on corporations. Neoliberalism, which is covered in greater detail in Chapter 3 of this thesis, can be briefly described in the words of Wendy Brown as:

“In popular usage, neoliberalism is equated with a radically free market: maximized competition and free trade achieved through economic deregulation, elimination of tariffs, and a range of monetary and social policies favorable to business and indifferent toward poverty, social deracination, cultural decimation, long-term resource depletion, and environmental destruction”<sup>166</sup>

Neoliberalism desired to increase the freedoms of the market with belief it would create an ideal, competitive, self-regulating system. It also strove to move away from more socialist power systems, such as those that gave rise to the importance of trade unions. One of the ways this was done was through a reduction of taxes on corporations, and the wealthy in general, with the theory of stimulating investment and boosting the economy. In this movement we can see where cyberpunk fears are born, as reins are loosened from corporations granting them space to expand in a hungry desire to

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<sup>166</sup> Wendy Brown, *Edgework: Critical Essays on Knowledge and Politics*, Princeton University Press, 2005. ProQuest Ebook Central, <https://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/bham/detail.action?docID=445457>. pp.37-38.

maximise their profits. Whilst this enabled a long economic expansion, this decision also caused the gap in income distribution between rich and poor households to widen,<sup>167</sup> and it is this trend that becomes extrapolated and exaggerated in the inequality of capital and access to technology represented in cyberpunk works. In these fictional worlds the rich minority are unassailably privileged in their wealth and their incomes are so ingrained into the societal structure that the poor in cyberpunk texts have no hope to approach their living conditions. We see this in the stark living locations of *Elysium* and *Neuromancer* where the rich live off-planet and the poor must suffer the environmental catastrophes of a burned-out Earth. Cyberpunk emphasises this growing difference between classes but is not fully dystopian in its prediction. It rebels against the idea that this is inescapable, which we see in the final, 'punk', element of this description. Cyberpunk's neoliberal societies have destroyed official, union resistance, but it fights back through communal action. They have merely found a new venue for this, as discussed above.

Class inequality as a feature of capitalism that has been exacerbated by economic policy choices,<sup>168</sup> and seeing this portrayed so starkly in cyberpunk agrees with Jameson's diagnosis of its supreme representation of late capitalism. In the extremes of cyberpunk, we can also see the intensification and extension of Corporate

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<sup>167</sup> See the following articles for further analysis of the effects of 'Trickle Down Economics'. Amadeo's article is particularly interesting for how it suggests the application of Trickle Down Economics may not have had the positive effect it claims to, instead suggesting other spending decisions made in those administrations would have affected America's financial situation. Amadeo, K., 2022. *Does Trickle-Down Economics Work?*. [online] The Balance. Available at: <<https://www.thebalance.com/trickle-down-economics-theory-effect-does-it-work-3305572>> [Accessed 4 June 2022].

<sup>168</sup> See the 2022 World Inequality Report for a review of the far-reaching effects of Reagan (and others') economic policies: "The World Inequality Report 2022", World Inequality Report 2022, 2022 <<https://wir2022.wid.world/>> [Accessed 6 September 2022]. See Kaplan and Kiersz (2022) for a direct connection of this to 'trickle-down economics' (full citation in bibliography)

Personhood<sup>169</sup> as corporations are given not just the rights of people, but in a sense the rights of nations themselves; the arcologies and ringworlds described below, in particular, situate themselves as above national power. The ringworld of *Neuromancer* is owned by the Tessier-Ashpool corporation and is almost a planet to itself.<sup>170</sup> Cyberpunk worlds are defined by their inequalities, and structured around reinforcing this social division. In the same way the governments' support of public services reduced under neoliberal ideology, and with the concomitant privatisation of national resources, so we see services foundational to ways of life handled as non-essential and driven by corporate monopolies in cyberpunk societies. The "Trauma Team" of *Cyberpunk 2020*<sup>171</sup> and its successor *Cyberpunk 2077*, for example, presents medical services as an expensive luxury which defends its clients like a military force; they are a corporation in their own right. For cyberpunk stories, services such as this become their own organisations separate from a ruling government and privatised for their own financial gain; police forces becoming private security forces is another example of this. Elements taken for granted in day-to-day life are driven to reinforce the control of the financial elite; the rich own better health, better living spaces, services previously run for the public and access to technologies that might better their lives.

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<sup>169</sup> This is the ability of organisations to be recognised by law as individuals.

<sup>170</sup> We can corporations as above nations too in such texts as *Blade Runner*, whose Tyrell corporation owns the huge, almost-city-sized in itself, arcology that is the image at the start of this section. We can also look to *Snow Crash* where corporate franchises create isolated compounds to separate their territory, and their workers from their competition. We can look also to the Orbitals of Williams' *Hardwired*, as mentioned previously, where corporations become almost planetary nations

<sup>171</sup> Mike Pondsmith, *Cyberpunk 2.0.2.0*, 2nd edn (Berkeley: R. Talsorian Games Inc, 1993)

Inequality, driven by finance, is at the heart of cyberpunk stories, reaching into each other element. Locations such as the Arcologies<sup>172</sup> of the corporate, such as Tyrell's, become self-sustaining locations, nations in their own rights, whilst the spaces outside of these become deprived, financially abandoned settings. The grimy street levels that represent the extremes of the world's living conditions are represented in direct conflict, with the lives of run-to-the-ground workers right next to, but kept away from, the capital elite of corporate culture. Within this space contest and resistance can grow, with cyberpunk stories showing hope, potential, or pessimism towards this overwhelming inequality.

This division, similarly to the architectural writing-in of these societies' inequalities, also enables the ingenuity of the street-level technician to shine, again reflecting Gibson's oft-quoted line 'the street finds its own use for things'<sup>173</sup> because official access to new technologies is kept exclusive to the elite. This sentiment captures the celebration of making something from nothing; it shows resilience in the face of repression, and it is important to acknowledge how cyberpunk, in this idea, celebrates a community's potential: 'The Street' finds its own use for things, not an individual. In personifying this site of precarity and abandonment, there is a feeling of unity. Whether the potential to 'find [your] own use for things' is present in every individual in this situation, or shared communally to support and protect one another, is open to interpretation. But importantly, cyberpunk encourages resistance and persistence in the

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<sup>172</sup> An arcology is an integrated city contained within a massive vertical structure. The most famous example from cyberpunk is the image at the head of this section, which is the Tyrell arcology from *Blade Runner*.

<sup>173</sup> Gibson 1987, *Burning Chrome*, p.215

face of inequality. It is core to how cyberpunk sets up or explores the other aspects discussed in this chapter, such as its counter-cultural desires. In that section, we addressed how cyberpunk presents resistance to these living conditions. Here, however, we can see the persistence of the lower classes struggling on. They endure, 'finding their own use for things' to turn the world about them into practical items for survival. Despite the inequalities of cyberpunk worlds, its disadvantaged peoples find ways to persist. When even the police and healthcare organisations are owned by the rich, the ingenuity of those less well-off becomes a praisable, positive message regarding how technology can be both a tool of betterment alongside one of coercion and oppression (i.e. it is rarely the technologies in and of themselves that are criticised, it's their introduction into a society ill-prepared to receive them equitably or with the best interests of human life in mind).

This concept of a distinct division ties heavily across all four elements of cyberpunk discussed here, lying as an important exploitable facet to more fully explore the implications of the others. Restricted access to, and control of, technology accentuates the devaluation of the human body present in cyberpunk discussed below. It takes control away from the participant, forming a dependency upon the system due to their augmentation. In Bloober Team's horror video game *The Observer*,<sup>174</sup> for example, augmentations are rejected by the human body, meaning the augmented require constant doses of a drug named synchroline to even exist without catastrophic bodily failure. Once receiving implants, there is nothing the user can do other than spend their livelihoods on corporate manufactured products to continue, driving them

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<sup>174</sup> Bloober Team, *Observer*, 2017



further into poverty and stripping them of their agency as humans. We can see this reflecting the terrible nature of the rising price of insulin in contemporary America,<sup>175</sup> wherein, due to the vulnerability of the population that need this drug to survive, the manufacturers are able to raise this price however they deem fit, knowing their customers must buy or die. Unequal access to a non-luxury item here shows how an enforced, stark contrast in availability can literally kill those at the bottom; death is frequent in cyberpunk, emphasising the precarious lives of large demographics again through the extremity of their situation. In positioning its stories in dense, enclosed, urban sprawls, these fears of precarity are granted an imminence that engenders a feeling of urgency to connections an audience might make with the world around them. Cyberpunk therefore commonly distances itself from purely intellectual consideration of the issues in its texts and instead speaks to a world that may be on the precipice of these often-dystopic worlds, as seen in this connection between *The Observer* and insulin accessibility issues; this exercises its punkness in directing its audience to consider taking action against processes that are not yet decided over theoretical discussion of their implications, and it is this punkness that echoes most resonantly in the first element of this description.

This aspect of cyberpunk therefore seems mostly narrative (over aesthetic) in its presentation, being as it is a description of political forces and established hierarchies. However, cyberpunk remains a genre fascinated with the visual, and often embodies these ideas in the geography of its settings. *Altered Carbon*, for one, very clearly

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<sup>175</sup> See the following: Rajkumar, S., 2020. "The High Cost of Insulin in the United States: An Urgent Call to Action." *Mayo Clinic Proceedings*, 95(1), pp.22-28.

separates the two sides of this inequality visually with the rich living forever in graceful spires that reach skyward to the sun whilst the downtrodden populace struggle below the choking smogs of street-level overpopulation. We have talked too about how *Elysium* presents the earth, where the workers toil, in contrast to luxury off-planet ringworlds for the wealthy. Whilst many texts represent this division quite overtly, such as the dystopic deployment of riot police and lethal infections that the ruling class of *Moxyland* use to keep their public under their heel, some more creatively abstract this notion. A key example of this can be seen in *The Matrix*, where the structure of the narrative pits the machines and humans against each other in a warlike scenario thus taking the setting away from the more traditional entrenched social control of cyberpunk texts. However, *The Matrix* instead presents this division as both restricting the humans' access to the resources they need to survive in their post-apocalyptic world by setting them in conflict with the machines, and also in positioning the machines as a shadowy, government, secret-police within the virtuality of the matrix itself. In this way, the machines remain as social authority figures, thanks to the presence of the Agents within the matrix, whilst still maintaining their status as an external military threat to the protagonists. The links between this representation of a divide, and the capitalist divides of other cyberpunk texts is therefore the restricted access to resources, whether they be financial, technological or other. It is the manner in which these elements interlock that makes cyberpunk so recognisable to its audience. This is the reason the 2013 film *Oblivion*<sup>176</sup> is not cyberpunk despite featuring a clone (similar to the vat-grown inhabitants of the matrix) and an artificial intelligence as the ultimate antagonist.

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<sup>176</sup> Joseph Kosinski, *Oblivion*. (United States: Universal Pictures. 2013)

*Oblivion* does not represent these social hierarchies and political interplay. Earth's resources are at risk but the machines show no use for them, there is no enforced competition for access but a dystopic destruction of those resources. Cyberpunk identifies itself against other science fictional stories through embracing each of these elements to some extent, and in this comparison the urban environment of the matrix and the joint competition over restricted resources both combine to make *The Matrix* a cyberpunk story and not *Oblivion*. Despite its surface-level distinctions, *The Matrix* embodies cyberpunk concerns, and those concerns are epitomised in these four elements. The way the restricted access to resources in this film interacts with the other central elements to cyberpunk, such as the virtual urban sprawl within the matrix, creates a uniquely cyberpunk environment. This is why the previous definitions reviewed early are too limited in how they describe cyberpunk; they do not leave the space for these flexible connections to be formed and it is this interplay that is most important to establish in this chapter.

These divisions of wealth, or access to drugs, technologies, food, and even physical locations, penetrate cyberpunk texts broadly. It is a distinct, intrinsic part of this subgenre, motivating its stories of resistance or capitulation. It emphasises the differing power dynamics that result from its capitalist political environment, and the lethality of the precarious lives that expendable workers in these conditions experience.

Importantly though it enables, indeed it demands, representation of resistance. It opens up channels of individual and group ingenuity and resourcefulness. It criticises the idea of embracing these systems as an inevitability, and even when it undermines the

struggles of the lower classes with a pessimistic viewpoint, it encourages us to ask, 'was it just too late'? Cyberpunk's extreme progression of contemporaneous economic policies and their social effects aims to spark recognition in its audience, and drive us to question, resist, and unite ourselves in response. It is a force that defines the fears of a corporate-owned future which drives cyberpunk and its resistive or dystopic perspectives.

## Depiction of a futuristic urban sprawl

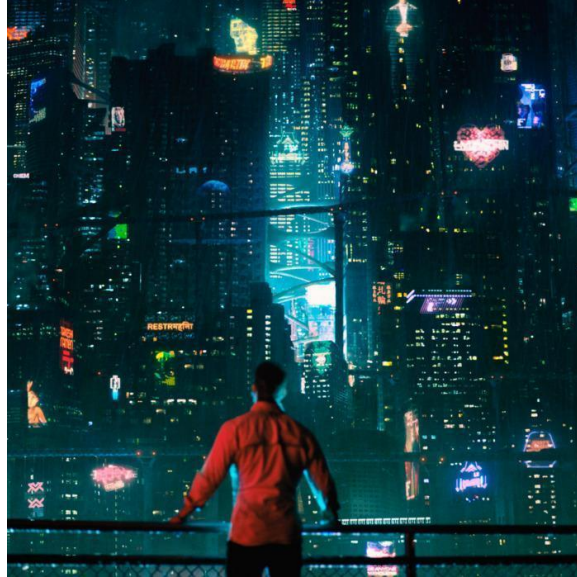


Image from: "Altered Carbon" (Netflix, 2018)<sup>177</sup>

Finally we address the genre's most prominent visual aspect. Acclimating us to the settings of cyberpunk works are the cityscapes that dominate them, referred to by the *Cambridge Companion to Science Fiction* as 'a dense, urban[, and] confusing new world'.<sup>178</sup> These totalising cityscapes sit as a central identifiable SciFi environment that is very distinctive of cyberpunk. As such a visual medium they are iconic of the genre from *Blade Runner* to *Netflix's Altered Carbon*.<sup>179</sup> In the words of Murphy and

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<sup>177</sup> Laeta Kalogridis, *Altered Carbon*, (Netflix, 2018)

<sup>178</sup> Clute, *The Cambridge Companion...* p.67

<sup>179</sup> As can be seen in the image above which directly calls back to the neon-advertisement strewn skyscrapers of *Blade Runner*. Throughout this thesis we will identify this series as *Netflix's Altered Carbon* to distinguish it from the novel of the same name upon which it is based.

Schmeink '[c]ities directly map the intimate relations among commerce, media, and the social life worlds of their inhabitants in cyberpunk explorations.'<sup>180</sup> They 'negotiate fluid boundaries [...] beyond the nation state and as crowded symbols of the ever-growing and ever-flowing waves of the world population.'<sup>181</sup> As these quotes address, cyberpunk cities encapsulate the anxieties of the genre. They eclipse the natural world in their size, obliterating the concept of distinct national boundaries in their unending 'space'. Their buildings move from homes to advertising to vertiginous drops and run-down shop fronts. They are chaos presented on an orderly frame, and this 'fluidity' combines with the recognisability of the urban spaces of the late 20<sup>th</sup> (and early 21<sup>st</sup>) Century to smash the familiar into the unfamiliar in a uniquely cyberpunk way. This is well summarised by Pam Rosenthal, when she writes 'the future in the cyberpunk world, no matter how astonishing its technological detailing, is always shockingly recognizable— it is our world, gotten worse, gotten more uncomfortable, inhospitable, dangerous, and thrilling.'<sup>182</sup> Cyberpunk sprawls visually evoke their contemporaneous urban spaces to emphasise the relationship between what is (in reality) and what could be should the negative trends cyberpunk identifies in its surrounding culture intensify.<sup>183</sup> Importantly though, cyberpunk cities are not purely negative in their representation. Yes, they can be 'inhospitable' and 'uncomfortable', but they are also 'thrilling' and full of potential. Inge Eriksen describes them as 'neither good nor bad, beautiful or ugly. There is too

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<sup>180</sup> Murphy and Schmeink, *Cyberpunk and Visual Culture*, p.xxiv

<sup>181</sup> Murphy and Schmeink, *Cyberpunk and Visual Culture*, p.xxiv

<sup>182</sup> Pam Rosenthal, "Jacked-in: Fordism, Cyberspace, Cyberpunk," *Socialist Review* 21, no. 1 (1991): 85

<sup>183</sup> Cyberpunk's relationship with predicting the future and reflecting its present is discussed in greater detail in Chapter 3 of this Thesis

much of [them] to be put into perspective'.<sup>184</sup> Cyberpunk cities are confusing in that they are all-encompassing; they are designed to provide and conceal everything in their wild scope. They physically present the plasticity of boundaries in cyberpunk works and so embody the fluidity of identity possible in these worlds, contrasted by the intractable power-structures that cement and restrain their occupants in brick and mortar and concrete.

They are so instrumental that William Gibson's famous, early cyberpunk novels are collected under the series title of the *Sprawl*. These cities are foregrounded throughout early cyberpunk works, and the rain-drenched streets of *Blade Runner*, and its proliferation of neon advertisements, set the tone for many cyberpunk cityscapes, such as that of *Ghost in the Shell*,<sup>185</sup> Netflix's *Altered Carbon*, and the 'meaningless streets' of Rudy Rucker's *Wetware*.<sup>186</sup> These landscapes are also often dominated by corporate propaganda, such as the security-measure defended bill-boards of *Moxyland's* futuristic Cape Town, or in the media-conglomerate dominated cities of *Supercute Futures*.

These vast spaces support cyberpunk's focus on the insignificance of the individual in an overpopulated world to shine, with any single person dwarfed by the insurmountable omnipresence of the corporations; Tyrell's arcology in *Blade Runner* is a perfect visual example of the monolithic corporate domination of cityscapes that threads through cyberpunk texts (and with Tyrell himself still eclipsed by the city,

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<sup>184</sup> Eriksen, Inge. "The Aesthetics of Cyberpunk." *Foundation*, vol. 0, 1991, pp. 37. ProQuest, <https://www.proquest.com/scholarly-journals/aesthetics-cyberpunk/docview/1312026586/se-2>. P.39

<sup>185</sup> Mamoru Oshii, *Ghost in the Shell*, Manga Entertainment, 1995

<sup>186</sup> Rudy Rucker, *Wetware*, (New York: Avon Books, 1988), p.15

regardless of his contribution to its form). Cyberpunk is fascinated with the conditions of 'living in a place', i.e. the interconnected relationships to others one must develop in dense cityscapes; whether the possibility of 'life' online can ever truly detach you from your physical environment; how the demands of such a hypercapitalist political system can chew up and smother the world in concrete and iron, etc. Cyberpunk often indulges in a political pessimism in its futures, showing worlds that are stagnant of change and oppressively inescapable. This atmosphere abounds in its cities and is built into their fabric; the crushing familiarity of characters' local districts often function as oases in the unknowable desert of the whole built-up metropolis, constantly reinforcing the idea, to them and to us, that the world has been unable to change.

Large parts, often the majority, of these cities are rundown and dilapidated, providing a space for the fringe-characters so common to cyberpunk to be presented with the potential of a comfortable life whilst, as Larry McCaffery summarises it, 'struggling for survival on a garbage-strewn planet'.<sup>187</sup> Endless dark, grimy streets are a staple representation of this, as seen in *Blade Runner*, as well as in the smog blanketed lower streets of *The Fifth Element*<sup>188</sup> (literally below the pristine excesses of wealth in the spires above), the crumbling city-outskirts of *Chappie*,<sup>189</sup> or the junk-strewn world of *Central Station*.<sup>190</sup> These settings dictate the shapes of cyberpunk narratives, such as the spiritually corrupting influence of the Walled City in *Shadowrun: Hong Kong*<sup>191</sup>

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<sup>187</sup> Larry McCaffery ed., *Storming the reality studio : a casebook of cyberpunk and postmodern science fiction*, (London: Duke University Press, 1991) p.14

<sup>188</sup> Luc Besson, *The Fifth Element*, Columbia Pictures Gaumont 1997

<sup>189</sup> Neill Blomkamp, *Chappie*, Sony Pictures Releasing, 2015

<sup>190</sup> Lavie Tidhar, *Central Station*, (San Francisco: Tachyon Publications, 2016)

<sup>191</sup> Hairbrained Schemes, *Shadowrun: Hong Kong*, 2015



whose terrible architecture becomes a locus for dark magical power. The poor living conditions also extend to the buildings themselves, such as the ramshackle stacks of *Ready Player One*.<sup>192</sup> Cyberpunk's architectures, then, are marked by explicit division and inequality, but these rundown locations also allow the ingenious, unlicensed manipulation of technology championed by its protagonists to shine. One of the most frequently quoted lines from *Neuromancer* is 'the street finds its own use for things',<sup>193</sup> and this ideal has come to represent the creative reappropriation of technology many cyberpunks use to resist their situations or improve their quality of life.

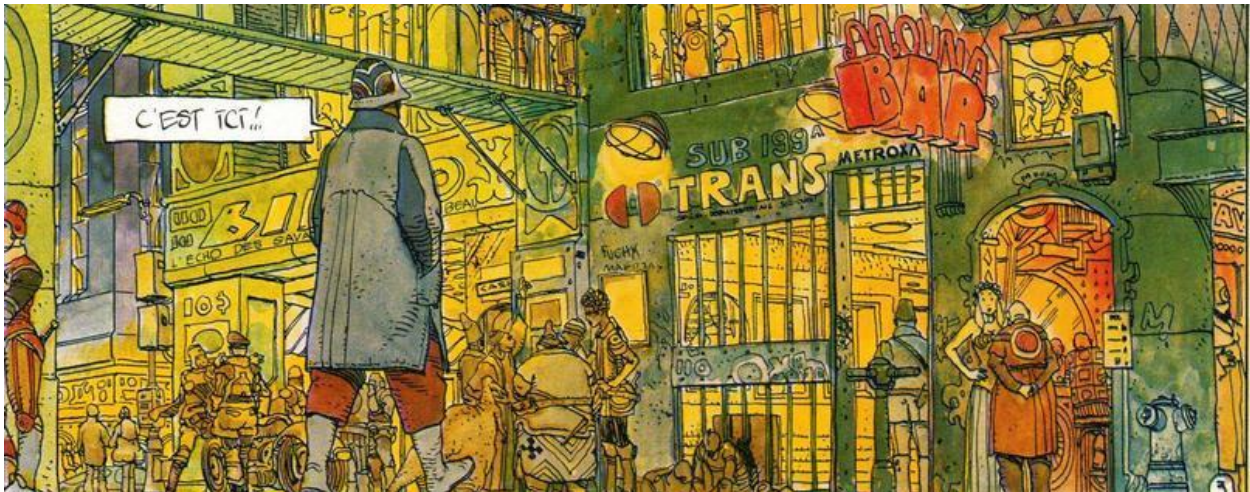


Image from: "The Long Tomorrow"<sup>194</sup>

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<sup>192</sup> Ernest Cline, *Ready Player One*. (London: Random House. 2011)

<sup>193</sup> William Gibson. *Burning Chrome*. (New York: Ace Books, 1987.) p.215

<sup>194</sup> Jean Giraud, *The Long Tomorrow*, (Paris: Les Humanaïdes Associes, 1975)

Frequently, discussion of cyberpunk's influences point back to writers such as Phillip K. Dick and Moebius in reference to the formulations of SciFi that directly precede cyberpunk and its aesthetic.<sup>195</sup> The grimy streets of these urban sprawls are all the more important for the pessimistic, or ironic, reimagining they build onto the established futures of prior works. In the words of Booker, cyberpunk is 'an often dystopian near-future' and the relationships it depicts between humans, technology, and their worlds are 'often uncomfortable'.<sup>196</sup> Cyberpunk responds to the worlds imagined by its immediate predecessors, such as that of the feminist SciFi movement; Samuel R. Delany identifies how in Gibson's urban sprawl you can see a 'protest against [the] ordered social template around which Le Guin organizes her world.'<sup>197</sup> It also approaches similar spaces with differing priorities. Not just responding to Le Guin's organised world, it plays off prior dystopic environments; Eriksen identifies in Gibson's work too, that it 'does not bathe in the aesthetics of decay like more than one trendy writer has done in recent years.'<sup>198</sup> This clearly points to Dick's *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep*<sup>199</sup> where the dilapidation of a city abandoned for interstellar possibilities is central; cyberpunk cities are instead thriving with life. The chaos of over-populated urban spaces which transition seamlessly from run-down gutters to crystal-clean corporate holdings unseats the dreariness of Dick's decaying cityscape.

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<sup>195</sup>Clute (*Cambridge Companion...* p.71) for one makes this connection, acknowledging as well the clear link between *Blade Runner* and Dick's *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep* of which it is a loose adaptation. Similarly in Keith Booker's (2004) *Historical Dictionary of Science Fiction Literature* (see bibliography) he describes that a number of Rudy Rucker's cyberpunk works (another author included in *Mirrorshades*) seem similar to 'cyberpunk forebear Philip K. Dick.' (p.72)

<sup>196</sup> Booker, *Historical Dictionary of Science Fiction in Literature* p.71

<sup>197</sup> Samuel R Delany, *Silent Interviews On Language, Race, Sex, Science Fiction, And Some Comics* (London: University Press of New England, 1994). p.174

<sup>198</sup> Eriksen, *The Aesthetics of Cyberpunk*, p.39

<sup>199</sup> Phillip K. Dick, *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep*, (New York: Doubleday, 1968)

Despite playfully rejecting such a bleak, decaying view of the urban, Cyberpunk also rejects the often-utopic adventures of SciFi's earlier golden age imagery.<sup>200</sup> It borrows more from "New Wave" SciFi than "Hard" SciFi, moving away from detailed scientific accuracy (or its pretence) to speculate about the interpersonal relationships of characters within monolithic, oppressive futures and the impact of political inequality on human beings (as discussed above). Its focus is not on accurately describing the workings of specific technologies, but instead on the responses people might have to a world saturated by future technologies. With this perspective in mind, the influences of Dick's work *Do Androids Dream...* on which *Blade Runner* is loosely based, and Moebius' *The Long Tomorrow*<sup>201</sup> can be seen in their heavily technologised environments. Amongst other similarities, both of these works present similar city structures to those which permeate the later genre. The world of *Do Androids Dream...* varies in its emptiness, filled with garbage (or 'kipple') sullyng the empty spaces surrounding the abandoned humans who struggle to make a living there. This creates an atmosphere of both claustrophobia and isolation, a juxtaposition that would become common to cyberpunk sprawls where overpopulation is rife yet personal connection and individual significance is rare. Contrastingly, *The Long Tomorrow* is a comics short story that offers stylised graphics that blends vibrant colours with a cluttered, maze-like city. This atmosphere lays the groundwork for many cyberpunk graphic works, such as *Transmetropolitan*<sup>202</sup> and *Tokyo Ghost*,<sup>203</sup> whose worlds are not so filled with the

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<sup>200</sup> Although this isn't always the case, and Ada Palmer's *Too Like the Lightning* (2016) is an interesting consideration as an alternative. Full citation in bib.

<sup>201</sup> See image above

<sup>202</sup> Warren Ellis, *Transmetropolitan*, (New York: Vertigo, 1997-2002)

<sup>203</sup> Rick Remender, *Tokyo Ghost*, (Image, 2015)

detritus of life, like *Do Androids...* but are heavily cluttered with the life itself. In general, and importantly for this aspect of my definition, cyberpunk sprawls can vary dramatically in their vibrancy, from lively and colourful riots to grim and rundown streets. Regardless of their specific feel, however, the endless city remains.

As cyberpunk is a sub-genre of SciFi, we must clarify that its urban sprawls are futuristic in nature. For the most part, however, these cities do not reach for the fresh, unfamiliar futurity of more traditional SciFi. Instead, they frequently maintain, or only slightly embellish the looming heights of skyscrapers and cluttered over/underpasses of contemporary cities, rather than the clean and bizarre suspended buildings of, say, *The Jetsons*.<sup>204</sup> This can be attributed in large part to the other major influence on cyberpunk's inception and architectural aesthetic: the hard-boiled detective novel. We see many definitions of cyberpunk mention the influence of Raymond Chandler, a notable hard-boiled author, on the origins of the genre.<sup>205</sup> Delany describes Gibson's writing as a 'bricolage [...] now colloquial, now highly formal, now hardboiled.'<sup>206</sup> Butler also describes how '[t]he cliches of such fiction recur in cyberpunk' and how 'the look of film noir [...] is also an influence, particular in the cinematic nature of much cyberpunk [...] Gibson cites the director Howard Hawks – who made *Scarface* (1932), *The Big Sleep* and *The Thing* (1951, uncredited) – as a direct influence.'<sup>207</sup>

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<sup>204</sup> Hanna-Barbera, *The Jetsons*, Hannah-Barbera Productions, 1985 – 1987)

<sup>205</sup> Andrew M. Butler draws this connection in his chapter in the *Cambridge Companion to Science Fiction* (p.141) and Joe Nazare's article *Marlowe in Mirrorshades: The Cyberpunk (Re-)vision of Chandler* (see bibliography for full details) clearly acknowledges the frequency of this association as he seeks to unpick it.

<sup>206</sup> Delany (1994), *Silent Interviews...* p.174

<sup>207</sup> Butler 2001, *Pocket Essentials*, p.14

The hard-boiled detective genre is summarised by Sean McCann as 'the style most people think of when they refer to the American crime story.'<sup>208</sup> It was 'distinguished above all by its grimly realistic depictions of crime and urban life'<sup>209</sup> and drew elements of the tradition of the western with traditional detective stories to '[imagine] the city as a labyrinthine world of dark and mysterious powers and, at the same time, as an urban frontier.'<sup>210</sup> As a literary form it is invested in the danger and mystery of the urban and it is easy to see how this continues on into the urban sprawls of cyberpunk. The hard-boiled genre predisposes itself to variations on early 20th Century urban landscapes as the backdrop to intrigue. Cyberpunk takes the popularity of these spaces and melds them into the future, meaning its cities remain distinctly recognisable to its audience whilst still benefiting from as-yet-impossible SciFi technologies. The film *Strange Days*<sup>211</sup> by Kathryn Bigelow and Matthew de Abaitua's *The Red Men*<sup>212</sup> are both examples of cyberpunk works set far closer to the present than other central works, such as *The Matrix* or *Altered Carbon*. Both films take contemporary cities and only slightly modify them with the technologies of memory recording and digital personality copying respectively, keeping them futuristic enough to distinguish them as being cyberpunk. The landmark film *Blade Runner* exemplifies this, as Nazare overviews it 'features a bounty hunter cast squarely in the mold of the hard-boiled detective'<sup>213</sup> and 'the persistent rain immediately calls to mind Chandler's

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<sup>208</sup> Sean McCann, "The Hard-Boiled Novel", *The Cambridge Companion To American Crime Fiction*, 2010, 42-57 <<https://doi.org/10.1017/ccol9780521199377.005>>. p.42

<sup>209</sup> McCann 2010, "The Hard-Boiled Novel", p.43

<sup>210</sup> McCann 2010, "The Hard-Boiled Novel", p.44

<sup>211</sup> Kathryn Bigelow, *Strange Days*, Lightstorm Entertainment, 1995

<sup>212</sup> Matthew De Abaitua, *The Red Men*, (Nottingham, Angry Robot Books, 2007)

<sup>213</sup> Nazare 2003, *Marlow in Mirrorshades...* p.384

deluged Los Angeles.’<sup>214</sup> These spaces are characters in and of themselves and are central to cyberpunk stories, just as they are for hard-boiled stories and westerns before them. We can trace this lineage of inspiration through into cyberpunk to understand why they are used to map intimate relations of humans, technology, and power, and negotiate the fluid boundaries of identity and simulation that Schmeink and Murphy speak of in their quote above.<sup>215</sup> These discussions of the permeability of boundaries recur across the elements in this chapter, in particular in the relationship between technology and the human body. Cyberpunk cities supplement these explorations of the body, weaving together to create cohesive narratives of the limits of the human.

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<sup>214</sup> Nazare 2003, *Marlow in Mirrorshades*... p.385

<sup>215</sup> This thesis discusses cyberpunk’s relationship to its hard-boiled heritage in greater detail in Chapter 4



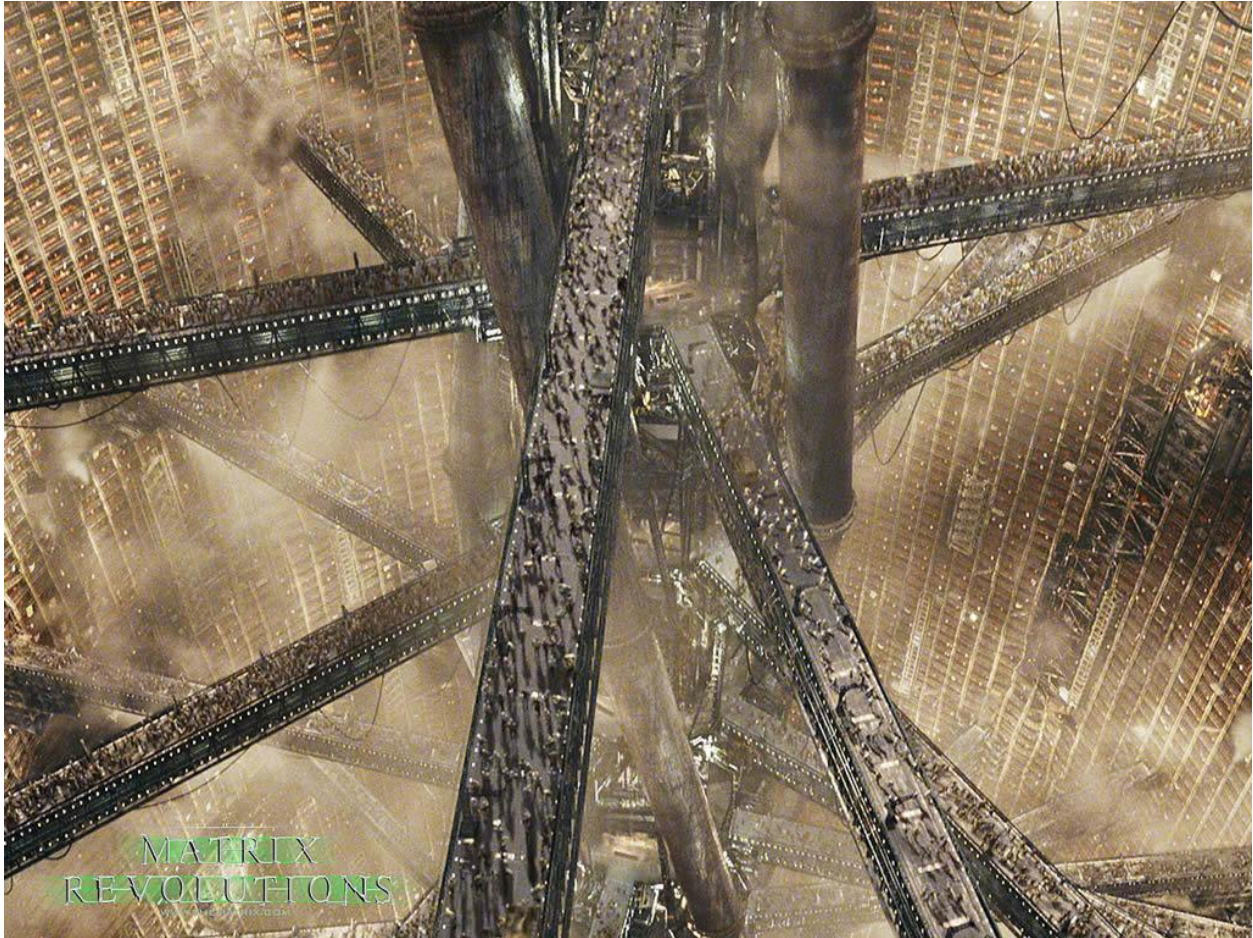


Image from: “The Matrix Revolutions”<sup>216</sup>

It is important to clarify however, that an urban sprawl need not be the only, or even most prominent location in a text to create a cyberpunk work. Most poignantly representing this relationship is the Wachowski siblings’ *The Matrix*, and its subsequent additions. *The Matrix* is a strongly cyberpunk film, its fear of the virtual world replacing the real world<sup>217</sup> is another of the fluid boundaries that cyberpunk violates in alignment

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<sup>216</sup> Lana and Lilly Wachowski, *The Matrix Revolutions*, (Warner Bros, 2003)

<sup>217</sup> A Baudrillardian fear that the film itself acknowledges by including a copy of *Simulacra and Simulation* in its screenplay. See Bruce Isaacs and Theodore Louis Trost (2004) *Jacking in to the Matrix Franchise* (full citation in bib) for more exploration of this.

with the second element of this definition (the devaluation of the human body through technology). *The Matrix*, however, presents its urban sprawl in a different manner to previously discussed examples. It combines the hard-boiled noir cities, such as Gibson's, with the procedurally generated non-space of a videogame, creating a similarly all-encompassing, unending 'space' but within the fresh context of the virtual. This environment plays a similar purpose, only through a differing perspective. It also contrasts this with the physical city of Zion, the final remaining outpost of humanity outside of the Matrix. Zion is a futuristic and overpopulated warren that provides the cluttered slums and gutters of the urban sprawl that *The Matrix's* simulated city cannot. It consists of hectic walkways spanning vertiginous drops, all the while ringed by balconies and windows reminiscent of urban apartment blocks. Densely packed human living spaces recur frequently in other apocalyptic cyberpunk works, such as the apartment building of *Dredd*,<sup>218</sup> the wasteland slum of "the Glop" in *He, She And It*, or the streetways of *Transmetropolitan*. The walkways of Zion, however, whilst calling upon familiar science-fictional imagery of vast city-spanning pathways, are irregularly spaced in the claustrophobic cylindrical city and seem to be holding it erect rather than assisting the ease of its inhabitants.<sup>219</sup> In these ways, Zion, whilst not being a traditional city-shape, creates an atmosphere of a trapped and crowded populace in much the same manner as *Blade Runner's* smoggy streets. Zion and the Los Angeles of *Blade Runner* are similarly colossal in scale and over industrialised to be impractical for the human lives they are made to house. Zion in particular looks like a service hanger for manufacturing, its inhabitants literally forced to live at work, and *Blade Runner's* city,

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<sup>218</sup> Pete Travis, *Dredd*, Lionsgate, 2012

<sup>219</sup> See above image



iconically introduced by flying through flame-spurting chimneys shows a world whose heights are dominated by production. The people in them are just replaceable cogs in a machine. The spaces of *The Matrix* may not exactly reproduce hard-boiled cities, but the purpose behind their use is the same.

It is also important to note that the virtual space in the Matrix itself comprises the recognisable elements often used to acclimatise audiences with the futuristic settings of cyberpunk. The virtual world is designed specifically to represent the world at the end of the 20th Century, when the film was released, and so provides a familiar environment for its audience. It provides a near-future setting very similar to that of *Strange Days*, which is also set in 1999. Therefore, whilst *The Matrix* spreads its action across space-ships, virtual worlds, and underground dystopian landscapes, rather than situating itself entirely within an urban sprawl, it still presents environments that mirror the dehumanising purpose that cityscapes play in cyberpunk. As cogs in the capitalist machine, people are insignificant compared to the production-motivated spaces around them, dominated by marketing and practical corporate factories. Cyberpunk sprawls infantilise the individual, and so drive the community resistance movements discussed in the ‘fringe countercultural element’ at the head of this description. They do this even when they do not exactly replicate an ‘urban sprawl’, which is merely one of the most common depictions of a cyberpunk city. I will point here to Richard Morgan’s *Thin Air*<sup>220</sup> as a final example of variety in this element. This novel borrows its sprawl aesthetic more heavily from a western frontier town than a major metropolitan city, tracing the hard-boiled inspirations back even to their own source material. What is consistent here

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<sup>220</sup> Richard Morgan, *Thin Air*, (London: Gollancz, 2018)

is cyberpunk's use of this space. It overshadows its characters, weakening their agency with its unassailability. Cyberpunk protagonists are caught in these places, struggling against their oppressive environments as much as the villains of their stories.

The examples discussed above are widely acknowledged as cyberpunk works. Though they deviate to different degrees from the urban sprawl as envisioned by Gibson, they each feature a version of that environment to some extent, using its particularities as backdrop for their focus on their own individual interests. Futuristic urban sprawls are important to cyberpunk's flavour of SciFi in how they literalise the overbearing power of systematic inequality that isolates and represses the freedoms of the individual. They reflect a pessimistic view of a future that has sacrificed its environment for its pursuit of progress yet has wholly failed to meaningfully develop past the neoliberal failings of the late 20th Century. These spaces elucidate the precarity of urban life and criticise the neon sheen of futurity with the realistic failings that result from a financial inequality that is wielded to benefit only the most wealthy. They cluster together communities, in which cyberpunk narratives hope to find a measure of resistance. They are a background to stark revolution, or a mire that cannot be escaped despite the notable efforts of cyberpunk's protagonists.

## Conclusion

The definition provided above is important work for the analysis of the cyberpunk genre as a whole for a number of reasons. At its outset, this chapter has addressed why the discussion of genre is a difficult and potentially problematic topic. Establishing a concrete understanding of an entire genre sets a difficult expectation to which not all texts within that body of work will accurately attain. As Cavallaro and Sterling both discussed, genre boundaries are flimsy, and texts can find themselves equally classifiable as works of multiple genres. They often set concrete expectations of theme or representation that can similarly exclude texts of a similar style through too strict an adherence to definitions. Texts and authors alike find themselves stretched, squeezed, or cut to fit predefined positions rather than creating a genre understanding that is flexible enough to accommodate variation whilst recognising connection. Through too strict expectations, genres can splinter unnecessarily, frustrating cross-comparison of texts due to their separation across multiple sub-classifications. In the case of cyberpunk texts themselves, whilst some derivations of this genre, such as Steampunk and Biopunk, may have clear distinctions in their approach to a similar thematic point of origin, many texts are separated from usefully comparative works thus preventing an easy analysis of changing or varying discussion of a unified thematic base. This returns us to the “postcyberpunk” problem, where cyberpunk as a whole becomes fractured into ‘then’ and ‘now’. This is the reason for defining cyberpunk through broad elements and shaping the exploration of these elements around cyberpunk’s many permutations. Cyberpunk as a genre is still a popular frame of reference for understanding SciFi that

tackles the issues above. It is recognisable by its audiences and allowing it to become fractured unnecessarily reduces the pool of texts that can be used to explore the depth of its social critiques and beliefs. Separating some of its texts out as 'postcyberpunk' encourages them to be analysed separately, rather than using their interplay with prior work to unravel how the messages at cyberpunk's heart are being explored and developed as it grows. This definitional strategy rejects rigid categorisation to promote an engaged consideration of the extent to which cyberpunk texts vary in their representation, and more than this to promote thinking about 'how cyberpunk' outsider texts may be. There are open categories to argue connections with texts that might otherwise be excluded from cyberpunk analysis which could further supplement our understanding of the popularity of this movement.

With this being said, genre is still a useful tool for shaping discussion of literature, film, television, and games. Grouping texts in this manner is an easy method for collating texts using either similar techniques, styles, or addressing similar themes, fears, and developments in their surrounding contexts. It also becomes a useful tool for acknowledging the persistent interest in certain social trends, such as cyberpunk's continued importance due to its representation of the systemic exploitation a neoliberal society can set in place to secure its own continuation. Similarly, in this thesis identifying a genre's early works and using them as a comparative source for later iterations of the same genre becomes a useful tool for analysing any changing or persisting perspectives on social issues as recognisably important, and engaging, to a shifting cultural audience. Genre also remains useful for this very audience to identify texts similar to their interests or engaging with topics important to them. It becomes a tool for

recommendation within reading, or viewing, groups; it allows a text's purpose or style to be communicated easily across different parties. Regardless of the engagement of an academic viewpoint, genre also remains important for marketing texts. Audiences seek out specific things, and the genre chosen to market texts is foremost among them. It is important to engage with this cultural conception of cyberpunk so that an academic understanding of genre can still connect to the public's understanding of it.

To address this existing cultural analysis then, a number of existing attempts to classify cyberpunk accurately have been analysed. Within this, we could identify consistent factors, enabling a more accurate assessment of the body of texts itself, however I have also demonstrated the limitations present within these definitions. By attempting to clarify the genre through the specifics of representation, unnecessary limits were placed upon it that therefore caused clashes of understanding between definitions. In listing all forms of technological representations, for example, rather than the implications behind these uses of technology, boundaries are drawn that place any creative variations on this established formula as external to the cyberpunk canon. Similarly, in basing these definitions on an early, foundational, body of 'canonical' cyberpunk texts the idea of high variance in representations at the outset of the genre is elided and surface consistencies between a minority of cyberpunk texts becomes close to a written law of representation. This, in turn, over-historicises the cyberpunk movement to the specific writing conditions of its early authors and allows later variations, encouraged by a shifting historical environment, to be excluded as poorly imitative pieces playing into a conversation long ended by the departure of its founding authors and filmmakers.

The definition established by these means in this chapter will therefore be of great importance not just for this thesis but for future analysis of cyberpunk within academic environments. It enables an understanding of cyberpunk that remains consistent with existing conceptions of a clearly popular genre whilst rejecting the prescriptivist perspectives of its earlier analysis that have led to the pronouncement of its death as a genre. It rejects a historicisation that limits cyberpunk to a finished social moment of the late 20th Century whilst leaving space to acknowledge the significance of both this and ensuing historical moments. It enables a flexible representation of social situation, literary setting, and technological representation so that the intricacies of the impacts these factors have on their respective texts can be considered against each other with ease. With this in place, not only is cyberpunk easier to identify and to broaden as a genre with each new text that is released, but a more inclusive gaze can be spread to existing materials in order to more comprehensively construct an understanding of why this specific genre has risen to popularity, why it has persisted for so many years as a popular iteration of SciFi, and how the specific fears and questions it raises have developed alongside the futures it seeks to represent.

Seeing this problem within existing definitions, this chapter has therefore analysed cyberpunk through its common elements, rather than simply its representations. It has assessed the effect of central identifiable stylistic, aesthetic, and narrative elements to create a flexible understanding of the genre that can be easily applied across narrative variations and historical contexts. It has looked at the chaotic yet empowering social movements that resist dominant and exploitative social structures. How not only violence and criminal behaviour can unsettle repression, but

how music, fashion, and social movements can offer both a freedom from, and alternative to, the isolated and deprived conditions of cyberpunk worlds. It has also looked at the specifics of technology's representation within this form of SciFi, but rather than dictating its instances and types, it has focused on the effect of technologies so inseparable from our beings that the instinctive hierarchy of the flesh over the artificial is called into question. This focus reveals how the repressive control structures that dictate our use of these possibilities can accentuate our dependencies and inseparability from (most commonly) digital technologies. It also reveals how this destruction of a hierarchy can encourage a positive approach to new structures and understandings of the human body and its flexibility. It has explored how the division of resources and finances creates a potentially dystopic social climate and engenders chaotic social rebellion. In particular, it has considered how a commonly capitalist structure for this control places such constraints on the social possibilities of an exploited lower caste that violent and criminal resistance can become a sympathetic pathway. Finally, it addressed the ways environments of cyberpunk texts work to create isolated existences for their inhabitants even in overpopulated environments, how the future landscape can be crowded through manufactured urbanism and digital possibility, and how our surroundings can be created and controlled to reinforce the systems at their head.

Whilst addressing these key points of consistency across the genre, it has offered both attention to the historical conditions of cyberpunk's origins and an analysis of fringe examples for each element which, on their surface, seem to not quite fit. The historical analysis is vital as the tropes of early cyberpunk works have set the frame and expectations which later works either play into or parodically or critically distance

themselves from. Whilst not being concrete factors, understanding the conditions of the genre's conception encourages recognition of the following pattern of cyberpunk works and the key distinctions authors and creators are engaging in dialogue with. It is also vitally important to provide examples of how these elements can be recognised in their least familiar iterations in order to build a stronger understanding of how this definition can be taken to works not mentioned in cyberpunk collections by name. This is why the next chapter will focus on Pat Cadigan's earliest works, *Mindplayers* and *Fools*.<sup>221</sup> By understanding the variety in cyberpunk at its origin, the wider cyberpunk body can be better recognised now and in the future. Through exploration of a text that is underanalysed, and therefore not currently incorporated into the previous view of 'classic cyberpunk canon', yet which arose from the same cultural conditions, we can look at the frame that established cyberpunk's conditions through a fresh lens. We can apply this definition's work in broadening our understanding of cyberpunk to the practice of literary analysis and cyberpunk's love of variation.

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<sup>221</sup> Pat Cadigan, *Pat Cadigan: SF Gateway Omnibus* (London: Gollancz, 2013), pp.201-393



## CHAPTER 2: THE INHERENT VARIETY OF CYBERPUNK

Analysis of cyberpunk must come with an understanding of the conditions of its inception. In Chapter 1 I have advocated for an understanding of cyberpunk that specifically rejected its historicisation as a movement limited to the conditions of the late 20th Century. With that in mind, it is important to understand the inheritances cyberpunk takes from its origins, particularly when tracing the development of the genre. Not the least because the early incarnations of cyberpunk set the expectations that later texts go on to develop or parody, as we explore in Chapter 4. These are also the broad understandings at the core of Chapter 3, where I analyse how the genre expectations cyberpunk laid out for itself came to be wielded by tech entrepreneurs to secure funding for lucrative projects and justify their business practices in the name of a greater, global good. I will also explore how more recent cyberpunk texts build off the expectations set down for them by earlier works to critique its earlier incarnations and suggest its own understanding of the surrounding socio-technological climate in Chapter 4.

To properly assess both these developments of cyberpunk it is therefore important to establish an understanding of the conditions of its earliest texts. We have to set up what these expectations are, before we can delve into how they are used. Importantly though, in so doing, we can unveil how expectations can be incorrectly formed. Expectations thrive on uniformity, but central to this thesis is the idea that cyberpunk was never uniform enough to be boiled down to one particular reading. Instead the energy of its arrival and the rush to identify it as a distinct movement led to an overemphasis of particular voices allowing them to encompass cyberpunk's whole.

In the course of this chapter, we will look at what elements of early cyberpunk have been forgotten or overlooked in the creation of its 'broad understanding'. In Chapter 1 I highlighted how previous definitions have returned repeatedly to the same texts to describe what cyberpunk is. In the discussion following I will disprove the belief that early cyberpunk uniformly agreed with the interpretations of the genre within this previous 'canon' by performing a close reading of Pat Cadigan's *Mindplayers*<sup>222</sup> and William Gibson's *Neuromancer*.<sup>223</sup> Through this comparison I will demonstrate how the differences in their approaches to similar technologies, in particular augmentations of the eyes and interfacing with digital spaces, deepen cyberpunk's social critique. These early texts established cyberpunk as a recognisable variation on SciFi literature and established the tropes that would persist across the genre's lifespan, whether in direct repetition or parodic reinterpretation; however, these tropes are not as all encompassing as might be believed, and to begin to unpick how we can divorce our understanding of cyberpunk from harmful or limiting expectations, as I will demonstrate in Chapters 3 and 4, we have to start at the beginning. Cyberpunk's message should not be constrained to the small canon to which it is commonly reduced, and this chapter demonstrates the critical potential in cyberpunk that has been overlooked due to the limitations of its prior criticism.

Cyberpunk's relationship with its early originators is particularly fraught, as its excessive historicisation has served to deify these first writers in the repeated proclamation of the

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<sup>222</sup> All page references come from the *SF Gateway Omnibus* containing the stories *Mindplayers*, *Fools*, and *Tea from an Empty Cup*. *Mindplayers* and *Fools* were originally published in 1987 and 1992 respectively. Pat Cadigan, *Pat Cadigan: SF Gateway Omnibus* (London: Gollancz, 2013).

<sup>223</sup> William Gibson, *Neuromancer*, (London: Gollancz, 1984)

genre's death. The most infamous instance of this was in Neil Easterbrook's *The Arc of Our Destruction* article,<sup>224</sup> which begins not only with the very words 'cyberpunk is dead' but also with the comments that its 'earliest proponents and practitioners have jumped ship [and] those writers still aboard appear blocked.' Easterbrook's criticism does not solely rely on the fact that many of the early authors of cyberpunk returned to 'the mainstream', and he acknowledges a number of limitations to cyberpunk's proclaimed progressive and authority-defying conception that remain valid criticisms of cyberpunk's own inescapable fascination with corporate power systems. For this reason, his article remains an important piece of criticism and we will return to it later in this chapter to unpick some of the limitations of early cyberpunk. However, this article was published in 1992, 8 years after the publication of *Neuromancer*, a text on which Easterbrook focuses due to its reputation as the quintessential cyberpunk novel. Easterbrook bases his focus on *Neuromancer* both due to the awards it won,<sup>225</sup> and because Sterling claimed it to be quintessential in his *Mirrorshades* anthology.<sup>226</sup> Easterbrook analysis is limited here to Gibson and Sterling as an assessment of the genre's limitations, which is not entirely inappropriate as these two were among the most recognised voices in the genre, particularly at the time of writing. This does, however, highlight one of the major limitations of analysis of early cyberpunk, i.e. that many pieces of criticism tended to focus on a very slim set of texts, with *Neuromancer* serving as the typical candidate for representing the conditions of the genre as a whole. In this manner, the importance of

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<sup>224</sup> Easterbrook, Neil. "The Arc of Our Destruction: Reversal and Erasure in Cyberpunk." *Science Fiction Studies*, vol. 19, no. 3, 1992, pp. 378–94. JSTOR, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4240184>. Accessed 27 Aug. 2022.

<sup>225</sup> This will be covered in more detail below

<sup>226</sup> Sterling, Bruce. *Mirrorshades: The Cyberpunk Anthology*. New York: Arbor House, 1986. Internet resource.

*Neuromancer* becomes self-sustaining; this small group of authors (and editor) perpetuate their own importance in the movement,<sup>227</sup> establishing their own 'canon'. This is a vast part of the reason why more recent cyberpunk is commonly accused of being pale pastiches long past their time, fueled by an understanding that cyberpunk has long since died. Therefore, it is not that the conditions of early cyberpunk must be abandoned in a dehistoricised definition, but that our understanding of early cyberpunk must incorporate the varied representations of the (usually but not always) near future rather than the narrow generalisations that are garnered from over focusing on supposedly 'canonical' cyberpunk texts.

This chapter is designed to promote a more diverse understanding of cyberpunk from the 80s and 90s. For ease of reference for the purpose of this chapter this will be referred to as 'early cyberpunk.' This will establish the expectations later cyberpunk builds upon without categorising cyberpunk as a homogenous movement in both mode and message. One need only look to the release of *Altered Carbon* on Netflix in 2018 to see the inescapable comparisons between it and the now nearly 40-year-old *Blade Runner*.<sup>228</sup> So too in academic work does *Neuromancer* and its particular form of cyberpunk remain a focal point for criticism, as will be discussed in the analysis below. The reasons for this are in part due to the dating of academic interest in cyberpunk:

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<sup>227</sup> Figures who Istvan Csicsery-Ronay rightly criticises for collating early cyberpunk authors with 'more of a friendly endorsement than of truly shared aesthetic aims.' For more on this, see Chapter 1. Quote is from Csicsery-Ronay (1988) "Cyberpunk and Neuromanticism". Full citation in bib.

<sup>228</sup> See Britt (2018) or Virtue (2018) for examples of this. See also Chapter 4 of this thesis where *Netflix's Altered Carbon* is directly analysed in response to these accusations of pastiche.

many of the larger critical analyses are dated to the 1990s and early 2000s,<sup>229</sup> and therefore their focus cannot help but be on earlier texts, with those more contemporaneous to the criticism's authorship date risking slipping under the radar due to lack of time for them to properly influence the genre. Similarly, cyberpunk criticism has been stymied by the deification of 'archetypal' texts as discussed above. As cyberpunk authors and early critics such as Sterling and Easterbrook raise up texts like *Neuromancer*, it solidifies itself as a textual focus for the genre, as to talk about its criticism one must then talk about it. This vicious circle then becomes difficult to break. This is a pitfall that the recent resurgence of cyberpunk criticism has been looking to pull away from. Graham Murphy and Lars Schmeink's collection of essays *Cyberpunk and Visual Culture*<sup>230</sup> does contain a considerable focus on the last 20 years of the 20th Century, but it supplements this with a selection of texts intended 'to track cyberpunk's diversity and far-reaching influence.'<sup>231</sup> The Routledge cyberpunk series, that includes *Cyberpunk and Visual Culture*, does begin to mark a divergence from the predominantly historicised focus on the genre that this thesis criticises. As part of this process of updating the focus of cyberpunk studies, it is therefore also important not just to take previous readings of the genre for granted and solely draw in new, more recent, texts; we must also revisit those readings to understand what expectations they have set in

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<sup>229</sup> Examples of this are Cavallaro's (2000) work *Cyberpunk and Cyberculture*, Featherstone and Burrows' (1995) collection *Cyberspace/cyberbodies/cyberpunk* and Butler's (2001) pocket essentials *Cyberpunk*. Whilst this is not an exhaustive list these are among some of the most prolific pieces of Cyberpunk criticism prior to the revivification of interest in the genre starting around Murphy and Vint's (2010) text *Beyond Cyberpunk*

<sup>230</sup> Murphy, Graham J, and Lars Schmeink, *Cyberpunk And Visual Culture*, 1st edn (New York: Routledge, 2018)

<sup>231</sup> McFarlane, Anna, Graham J Murphy, and Lars Schmeink, *The Routledge Companion To Cyberpunk Culture* (London [i.e.] Abingdon: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2020) p.2

place for cyberpunk. This process reveals how we can refresh the messages of older cyberpunk texts for contemporary analysis and comparison.

The reason for taking this chapter to focus analysis on the conditions of early cyberpunk then is twofold. First and foremost, it will shed light on the historical context that gave rise to the genre. As discussed previously, cyberpunk should not be defined only in terms of an extension of the socio-technological climate of the 1980s,<sup>232</sup> however it is important to acknowledge how those conditions came to influence the broader tropes of the genre. This element cannot, and should not, be abandoned as it is formative for the genre's identity. This chapter serves to solidify an understanding of the ways in which cyberpunk reflected and engaged with the world around it at its most famous point; the point to which most critical reflection returns. In so doing it establishes a baseline understanding of cyberpunk, which is critiqued in the following chapters.<sup>233</sup>

Secondly, and perhaps most importantly, this chapter aims to diversify the existing body of critical cyberpunk study by decentering discussion from the traditional focal authors within that time period. Taking the same stance as the recent renaissance of cyberpunk criticism, this chapter aims to diversify a traditional understanding of the conditions of early cyberpunk to provide a base of comparison. It is not my desire to criticise a focus upon texts such as *Neuromancer* or *Blade Runner*, as this is not entirely undeserved due to their respective commendations. *Neuromancer* itself was the first

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<sup>232</sup> The reasoning and influences of this are described in greater detail in Chapter 1. Also in Chapter 3 I discuss further the particular economic and neoliberal impacts of this historical period on cyberpunk expectations.

<sup>233</sup> In chapter 3 it is discussed how this baseline is oversimplified and depoliticised, and in chapter 4 it is this baseline that becomes the subject of parodic subversion.

novel to win the Nebula, Hugo and Phillip K Dick award<sup>234</sup> and it featured in *Time* magazine's list of the 100 best English-language novels written since 1923 where it was commended for:

prov[ing], not for the first or last time, that science fiction is more than a mass-market paperback genre, it's a crucial tool by which an age shaped by and obsessed with technology can understand itself.<sup>235</sup>

These works are in no doubt hugely influential and deserving of discussion even to this day. Unfortunately, the effect of their reputation on the surrounding genre can be damaging to cyberpunk discussion as a whole. In limiting discussion of cyberpunk's influence and its interpretation of its surrounding conditions to only certain authors, the breadth of dialogue within the scope of cyberpunk is severely restricted. The vast spectrum of representation of socio-technological environments alluded to by the first chapter of this thesis is then left underappreciated by its academic references. For example, whilst Gibson's cyberspace, a term he coined, is a fascinating study of addictions to networked information technologies, it is also a very specific representation of this idea. This chapter counteracts the limitations of previous academic work by centering its analysis not on one of the commonly used authors, but on a recognisably important author who is less frequently the focus of cyberpunk

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<sup>234</sup> "Sfadb: William Gibson Awards", Sfadb.Com, 2022 <[https://www.sfadb.com/William\\_Gibson](https://www.sfadb.com/William_Gibson)> [Accessed 27 August 2022]

<sup>235</sup> Lev Grossman, "Is Neuromancer One Of The All-TIME 100 Best Novels?", TIME.Com, 2022 <<https://entertainment.time.com/2005/10/16/all-time-100-novels/slide/neuromancer-1984-by-william-gibson/>> [Accessed 27 August 2022].

discussion, Pat Cadigan. Cadigan holds an important position of being both central to 'traditional' cyberpunk and an author who receives less attention than those names that have already appeared above. As the lone female author in Sterling's *Mirrorshades* collection, she is undeniably part of the early movement, but her writing and exploration of cyberpunk concerns diverges in important ways from what might otherwise be expected of the genre. In exploring her earliest work, we can bring this variety to light, celebrate cyberpunk's early diversity and dislodge ideas that 'the movement' belonged solely to the masculine viewpoints of Sterling, Gibson, and Scott.

It is important to note here, that these same groups that choose which texts are 'exemplary' had (and have) great swing too in publication, and in the awards themselves. We can look to Jeanette Ng's speech at the 2019 Hugo Awards wherein she criticised the editor John Campbell (having won the award in his name)<sup>236</sup> for his actions in excluding non-white, male authors from publishing SciFi. Influence such as this is an active part of how SciFi, and cyberpunk, has come to be conceived. However, this chapter does not have the space to tackle the full implications of this systematic control alongside demonstrating how diversifying expectations of cyberpunk stylings can impact our readings of the genre across its lifespan. This chapter focuses on the latter for how it feeds into the impact of limited readings of cyberpunk later in this thesis, but this contextual influence on SciFi publication is incredibly important to note for how these expectations came to be so prevalent.

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<sup>236</sup> Cory Doctorow, "Read: Jeannette Ng's Campbell Award Acceptance Speech, In Which She Correctly Identifies Campbell As A Fascist And Expresses Solidarity With Hong Kong Protesters | Boing Boing", Boing Boing, 2019 <<https://boingboing.net/2019/08/20/needed-saying.html>> [Accessed 20 September 2022].



In performing a close analysis of Cadigan's writing, this chapter will re-establish the methods cyberpunk uses to introduce and critique developing technological trends to further cement the value of analysing it to this day. Cyberpunk reflects concerns that remain relevant even since its inception, therefore returning to these original texts can supplement our understanding of the importance of cyberpunk today. However, it is the intent of this chapter to present methods of doing so that avoid reinstating assumptions made about the genre as a whole that have clouded academic response to cyberpunk works. Using Pat Cadigan, this chapter rejects the unified expectations of early cyberpunk. It reinforces the variation in representation at cyberpunk's core and reveals how this variation is important to draw audiences into understanding and grappling with contemporary socio-technological fears; this further cements the importance of analysing any and all cyberpunk by demonstrating the value in exploring cyberpunk's diverging perspectives. Another important aspect to choosing Cadigan as the focus for this chapter's analysis of early cyberpunk, is that she encourages direct engagement with one longstanding criticism of the cyberpunk genre as a whole, and one set up by these early texts, i.e. the masculinist focus of cyberpunk and its elision of prior feminist SciFi. This is a longstanding concern,<sup>237</sup> wherein cyberpunk texts suggest a return to prototypical hyper-masculine protagonists conquering feminised spaces. This argument does recognise a number of problems with cyberpunk's potentially progressive formation, and what this highlights is how accepting traditionally regarded 'canonical' texts can reinforce harmful practice into the blueprints of the genre. As Karen Cadora

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<sup>237</sup> This is explained in greater in the next section of this chapter, for an example see: Nicola Nixon "Cyberpunk: Preparing the Ground for Revolution or Keeping the Boys Satisfied?" *Science Fiction Studies*, vol. 19, no. 2, 1992, pp. 219–35. JSTOR, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4240152>. Accessed 27 Aug. 2022.

writes in her well-known piece *Feminist Cyberpunk*, '[f]eminist SF cannot afford to dismiss the potential of cyberpunk'<sup>238</sup> and breaking the expectation that cyberpunk is hostile to feminist concerns is a positive move. What this chapter will add to analysis of early cyberpunk then, is a recognition of the diversity present in the genre in its early days, that has become increasingly elided in later attempts to streamline and categorise it. In so doing it will highlight how cyberpunk represented social concerns at its time of writing, but how the variation in their representation has been a driving force behind the genre's persistence. Its flexible approach to the near future has enabled it to mutate and adapt to its differing historical contexts and the lack of recognition of this flexibility is one of cyberpunk's greatest failings, for how it risks homogenising its message. The implications of which are explored in Chapter 3.

### Who is Pat Cadigan, and why is she important?

Pat Cadigan is an American SciFi author, who began writing in 1980, becoming a full-time author in 1987 and a UK citizen in 2014 after moving in 1996. She is known in the most part for her novel *Synners*,<sup>239</sup> which along with *Fools* won the Arthur C. Clark award in 1992 and 1995 respectively. As Lisa Yaszek commented in her assessment of feminist cyberpunk, Pat Cadigan was 'one of the few women writers regularly associated with pioneering cyberpunks'<sup>240</sup> such as William Gibson, Bruce Sterling and

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<sup>238</sup> Karen Cadora. "Feminist Cyberpunk." *Science Fiction Studies*, vol. 22, no. 3, 1995, pp. 357–72. JSTOR, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4240457>. Accessed 27 Aug. 2022., p.358

<sup>239</sup> Pat Cadigan, *Synners* (New York: Bantam Books, 1991).

<sup>240</sup> Mcfarlane, Murphy, and Schmeink, *Companion to Cyberpunk Culture* p.34

other early contributors to the genre. As can be seen, she writes contemporaneously to Gibson, for example, with the first two parts of *Mindplayers*, one of the texts analysed here, being published in 1982 and 1983. This puts its composition prior to *Neuromancer's* but similar in date to Gibson's own short cyberpunk stories later collected in *Burning Chrome*.<sup>241</sup> Cadigan is in fact the sole female author in the previously mentioned *Mirrorshades* anthology. This is one of the major limitations of using Sterling's collection as a basis for understanding the nature of cyberpunk in its early days, as it is often used as a snapshot into the demographic and style of the first cyberpunks. The *Mirrorshades* anthology has come under criticism for its intentions and execution, and one part of this criticism is how it, whether intentionally or not, excluded the feminist SciFi tradition that preceded cyberpunk in the texts it chose to highlight as inspirations for the genre. In a Science Fiction Eye interview in 1987, Samuel R. Delany, who Sterling names as a precursor author to cyberpunk in the *Mirrorshades* preface,<sup>242</sup> mentions how the feminist SciFi of the 1970s was overlooked in Sterling's assessment of where cyberpunk had originated from. He mentioned how female characters, like Molly in *Neuromancer*:

would have been impossible to write without the feminist science fiction from the seventies—that is, the feminist SF whose obliteration created such a furor when Bruce Sterling (inadvertently of course ...?) elided it from his introduction to

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<sup>241</sup> Gibson, William. *Burning Chrome*. New York: Ace Books, 1987. Print.

<sup>242</sup> Sterling, *Mirrorshades*, p.xi

*Burning Chrome*. Sometimes it seems as though these male writers were trying to sublimate the whole feminist movement unto themselves<sup>243</sup>

Delany views early cyberpunk's relationship with feminist SciFi differently. Rather than excluding it entirely, Sterling in particular overlooked it in his description of cyberpunk's origins. By not mentioning the importance of those works, cyberpunk risked, from the outset, erasing the work done within SciFi as a whole by feminist authors in diversifying representation away from a more traditionally heavily masculinist genre. When Sterling speaks for all cyberpunks and attempts to categorise and define it in his terms, these missed admissions of influence can be cemented in wider understandings of the genre. Importantly, Delany went on to say that one of the great losses of 'obliterating' 1970s feminist SciFi from cyberpunk's heritage was in the dialogue that early cyberpunk opened up as reflections on, and discussion of, those very preceding texts. Delany recognises these influences that cyberpunk is later criticised for ignoring. In taking Sterling's definition as 'the' definition of cyberpunk, its masculinist traits become magnified<sup>244</sup> and it is for this reason that this chapter returns to early cyberpunk to dislodge these expectations of the genre.

Delany identifies responses to feminist SciFi in cyberpunk when he talks about Gibson constantly rewriting Russ and Le Guin, drawing attention in particular to how one might look to 'Gibson's *Urban Sprawl*, and you can suddenly hear the shrill—one yearns to say "hysterical"—protest against that ordered social template around which Le

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<sup>243</sup> Samuel R Delany, *Silent Interviews On Language, Race, Sex, Science Fiction, And Some Comics* (London: University Press of New England, 1994). p.173

<sup>244</sup> These are the criticisms discussed in further detail in Chapter 1,

Guin organizes her world.<sup>245</sup> What is put forward here is not how the early cyberpunks attempted to 'sublate' feminist SciFi, but how their writing responded to it, offering contrary imaginings of the future; in this given example, the trash-cluttered sprawls of cyberpunk complicate the order of some previous SciFi futures. This is a key element that gets lost in this elision. As Delaney also puts it, 'in science fiction, the intertextual dialogue has always been all.'<sup>246</sup> With this connection missing, cyberpunk's deviations reject what has come before, rather than reflect upon it. In this manner, the perspectives of early cyberpunk can be seen to be critical, or otherwise pessimistic, reflections on a society that despite its rapid technological progression has remained socially stagnant and disorganised. This particular relationship to feminist SciFi is important for Cadigan's approach to cyberpunk in her early writing and we will return to it with more specific textual evidence later in this chapter.

Delany's perspective aside, an understanding of early cyberpunk as a return to a masculinist SciFi format has been pervasive across a lot of its criticism. When early descriptions of cyberpunk failed to acknowledge its connections to feminist SciFi, this interplay that Delaney points out becomes a more aggressive rejection of what has come before. This forms one of the prevailing assumptions about early cyberpunk that this chapter seeks to diversify through jointly emphasising Cadigan's importance to the formation of cyberpunk alongside Gibson. It is the perspective that cyberpunk reinstates masculinist forms to which Nicola Nixon's discussion of cyberpunk responds in her 1992 piece *Cyberpunk: Preparing the Ground for Revolution or Keeping the Boys*

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<sup>245</sup> Delany, *Silent Interviews...* p.174

<sup>246</sup> Delany, *Silent Interviews...* p.174

*Satisfied?*<sup>247</sup> In this she reviewed the preceding trends of cyberpunk storytelling as a reinstating of a traditionally envisioned American Hero, and her arguments resurface across cyberpunk criticism. Its frequent rejection of female actors, placing predominantly males in positions of power or agency, and pessimistic rejection of greater social change in favour of personal wealth or freedoms limited its potential to critique the social systems it presented. As she summarises, these established power structures 'do not present the arena for the hero's potential subversion of or assault on them, for it is [they] which provide the means by which [the hero] can succeed.'<sup>248</sup> In a similarly problematic way, Nixon identified ways in which cyberpunk gendered cyberspace as feminised spaces that male hackers penetrate and triumph over.<sup>249</sup> This becomes most apparent in Nixon's reference to *Count Zero* (Gibson's sequel to *Neuromancer*), where women are directly equated to cyberdecks, used for 'jacking into' the matrix, through mysticism and allusions to voodoo rituals where spirits may possess or 'mount' ritualists.

Nixon's criticism is limited, however, in its focus on the writing of Gibson, just as Sterling and Easterbrook above held him as exemplary of cyberpunk as a whole. It must be acknowledged that Nixon's focus is appropriate, as she explains he was at the time, and even to this day, thought of as the 'king of cyberpunk.'<sup>250</sup> Her criticism, whilst acknowledging an issue with the cyberpunk of Gibson (and other writers who emulated his perspectives), continues to place him as the decider of what cyberpunk has to say

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<sup>247</sup> Nicola Nixon "Cyberpunk: Preparing the Ground for Revolution or Keeping the Boys Satisfied?" *Science Fiction Studies*, vol. 19, no. 2, 1992, pp. 219–35. JSTOR, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4240152>. Accessed 27 Aug. 2022.

<sup>248</sup> Nixon, "Cyberpunk: Preparing the Ground...", p.230

<sup>249</sup> Nixon, "Cyberpunk: Preparing the Ground...", p.229

<sup>250</sup> Nixon, "Cyberpunk: Preparing the Ground...", p.222

(and how). Karen Cadora picks up on this three years later. She agrees that cyberpunk suffered from ‘masculinist conventions’ in particular conflating technology and masculinity’ but argues that writers such as Cadigan do seek to diversify the genre for feminist perspectives.<sup>251</sup> Cadora references Cadigan early into her piece as ‘the sole woman novelist in the cyberpunk canon.’<sup>252</sup> In particular she cites her as the location for strong female characters to counter the otherwise male focus in the genre, but laments that she ‘never fully engages with feminist concerns.’

Allie, and Mercine, the protagonists of the stories that are discussed in this chapter, are both examples of the feminist protagonists that Lisa Yaszek identifies in Cadigan’s writing, who ‘are usually women whose efforts to do good in the world are compromised by men who make bad choices that enmesh them in corrupt and uncontrollable social, political, and legal systems.’<sup>253</sup> Cadigan centralises the female perspective, which countermands the current expectation of the most technologically skilled characters in cyberpunk being male; her representation of cyberpunk does not replicate that of Gibson and it is therefore already apparent at the outset of cyberpunk how he does not encapsulate the movement. We do see Cadigan’s influence continue on into later cyberpunk works that actively diversify their casts and perspectives to attempt to move genre expectation away from this idea. Both Greg Bear’s *Queen of Angels*<sup>254</sup> and Lauren K Beukes’ *Moxyland*<sup>255</sup> mix both male and female protagonists, as examples. The video game *Technobabylon*<sup>256</sup> can be seen as a more recent

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<sup>251</sup> Cadora, “Feminist Cyberpunk”, p.358

<sup>252</sup> Cadora, “Feminist Cyberpunk”, p.358

<sup>253</sup> Mcfarlane, Murphy, and Schmeink, *Companion to Cyberpunk Culture* p.34

<sup>254</sup> Greg Bear, *Queen of Angels*, (New York: Warner Books, 1990)

<sup>255</sup> Lauren Beukes, *Moxyland*, (Nottingham: Angry Robot Books, 2009)

<sup>256</sup> *Technobabylon*, (Technocrat Games, 2015)

example of pushing inclusivity with a transgender character among its central cast. For cyberpunk, male characters do remain the most common, and are still the overall expectation of the genre, in part because of this lasting reputation it has of being hyper-masculine. Cadigan shows that from the outset this was not a universal fact of cyberpunk and emphasising her work as an influence for texts that came later helps to solidify that these later texts aren't 'just' refuting expectation; they are building on work that was always there.

Yaszek and Cadora's analyses of Cadigan identifies her engagement with feminist SciFi as unique to what Yaszek identifies as a 'first-wave feminist cyberpunk movement.'<sup>257</sup> These pieces of her early work are also not to be taken as encapsulating other feminist cyberpunk fictions, but they are important to contrast the masculinist assumptions of the genre above.<sup>258</sup> She notes in particular how Cadigan is 'even more grittily dystopian than many of her male peers.'<sup>259</sup> This is in contrast to the liberatory, and celebratory representation of female agency and bodily flexibility that Yaszek sees in other feminist writing. She does, however, in these early pieces of fiction, experiment with those concepts, and often genders exploration of transhuman, cyborg bodies to represent the differing extropian desires from the masculine-directed expectation of disembodied consciousness to the more feminist perspective of distributed consciousness:

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<sup>257</sup> Cadora, "Feminist Cyberpunk", p.33

<sup>258</sup> They are also not necessarily the strongest feminist approaches to the genre. Yaszek suggests Marge Piercy (author of *He, She, an It*) and Laura J Mixon (who wrote cyberpunk texts such as *Glass Houses*) as good examples of 90s feminist cyberpunk. We can also look to more contemporary authors exploring this, such as Larissa Lai's *The Tiger Flu* (2018). Full citations in bib.

<sup>259</sup> Mcfarlane, Murphy, and Schmeink, *Companion to Cyberpunk Culture* p.34



Male characters either abandon their physical bodies for the virtual world or insist on holding the former completely apart from the latter (usually with disastrous effects), while female characters experiment with a range of messier, more complex relations that include sharing real-world memories by digital means and using human bodies to power, reboot, and even radically restructure the technological and economic arrangements of their world<sup>260</sup>

In this manner, Cadigan can be used to show that the previously expected hegemony which privileged the mind over the body was under critique from the outset of the genre and never widely accepted as the universal message of cyberpunk even in the 1980s.<sup>261</sup> Contrasting Nixon's analysis of a genre overrun with feminised digital spaces for the masculine mind to penetrate and master, Cadigan continues with the conception of fragmentary or distributed selves from feminist SciFi into early cyberpunk writing. Yaszek is complimentary of Cadigan's representation of cyborg bodies here, however it is important to note Cadigan's suspicion of this human-machine relationship particularly when it comes to the, often unpleasant, representation of machine interfacing. This aspect of her work will be returned to later in this chapter to highlight the importance of her contributions to cyberpunk fiction. In representing the 'messier, more complex relations' that female characters experience in Cadigan's work, the specifics of these interactions are often styled to be disorienting to the reader. *Fools* demonstrates this very strongly, where the conflicting personalities inhabiting Mercine's head are

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<sup>260</sup> McFarlane, Murphy, and Schmeink, *Companion to Cyberpunk Culture* p.34

<sup>261</sup> It is important also to note that Cadigan's approach to these topics develops over time, but particularly for this chapter her work in the 80s and 90s supports these perspectives and thus reveals the diverse interrogations of these topics at that time.

represented as aggressively warring with each other, attempting to steal control over their shared body, or eradicate the others for sole possession of it.<sup>262</sup> The technologies that offer this restructure of a sense of self retain Cadigan's dystopian perspective on the relinquishing of the body to technology.

In the discussion above, then, it becomes apparent that critics have had a complicated time situating Cadigan's writing in the cyberpunk 'canon'. Her position as the only female author in *Mirrorshades* positions her as an important and recognised player in the early representation and development of the genre, and if early cyberpunk proposed a return to masculinist SciFi it is important to understand how Cadigan's writing fits into this expectation. The expectation, that Cadora suggests, is that she 'failed' to address the dominance of masculinist perspectives in her cyberpunk writing. But as we have explored above (and will do so further below), Cadigan does disrupt this, therefore it is more that work is overlooked by the surrounding authors with which she was compared and thus limited in its impact by forces outside of her writing. The nuances of Cadigan's early writing are lost beneath a focus on Sterling's description of cyberpunk, and a critical focus on *Neuromancer*. We will return to this discussion of how Cadigan's exploration of the body's relationship to technology rejects the above masculinist assumptions surrounding early cyberpunk in the close reading below; this approach will

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<sup>262</sup> At points of stress Mercine's personalities surface outside of each other's control: 'I hadn't blacked out that time but Marya came up, didn't notice me, and went away again. That wasn't supposed to be possible.' (p.356) There are also moments where personalities force themselves to dominance, where Cadigan describes this pressure as '[i]t's like my head's clamped in an invisible vise and I have to – let her in.' (p.295)

allow us to unpick Cadigan's contributions to the genre in greater depth using specific examples from her early work.

To best analyse Cadigan's writing in the context of existing academic materials on cyberpunk writing, this chapter will move to a specific close reading of her first novel, *Mindplayers*. Its contemporaneity with *Neuromancer* makes it a prime candidate to explore the varieties of early cyberpunk. I will supplement this analysis with her later novel *Fools* due to its shared setting and differing character perspectives as it assists us in more broadly interpreting the social and technological issues at play in Cadigan's early cyberpunk writing. Whilst Cadigan's most commonly referenced work is her novel *Synners*,<sup>263</sup> her earliest worldbuilding is most useful for this chapter in order to assess cyberpunk at its first inceptions, before the movement attempted to categorise itself in identity. *Mindplayers* and *Fools* therefore meet these requirements, with *Fools* taking precedence over *Synners* (despite their close publication dates) as it shares a world with *Mindplayers*. These texts help to identify the variety between the early cyberpunk texts whilst still enabling recognition of similar desires in authorship.

### *Mindplayers* and *Fools*

The first of these two texts, *Mindplayers*, was written in 1987 but consists in part of short stories written in the years previous. It is followed by *Fools* in 1992, a story which explores a different cast within the same world. The premise establishes a society

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<sup>263</sup> Pat Cadigan, *Synners* (New York: Bantam Books, 1991)

where recreational activity and personal psychiatric development and care is achieved through direct brain to brain connection. To enable this, 'mindplay' machines are commonplace. These machines connect to the visual cortex of the brain via the optic nerve, prompting users to either have the machine lift their eyes slightly out of their sockets to pass cables behind them, or to replace their eyes completely with removable prosthetics called 'biogems'. These machines act as intermediaries; frames for the visualisation of thoughts and for direct brain to brain contact with others. They create a society wherein every aspect of a person's mind is manipulable, duplicatable and erasable. Replacing one's personality with a template of another is commonplace, and neuroses such as paranoia are the new drug addictions.

The story of *Mindplayers* follows the character of Allie, who progresses from petty mindcriminal, using illegally obtained mindplay devices to give herself psychoses for fun, to a professionally licenced mindplayer, offering therapy to rich clients. Allie begins in the typical 'punk' position of the outsider, but this position is compromised, and in her discovery she is appropriated into the society she initially resists; a mindcriminal forced by threat of arrest into legitimacy so that mindplay businesses may prosper from her talent. She becomes a 'pathosfinder', someone who 'work[s] with artists, helping them find what was basically the soul in their work.'<sup>264</sup> From this point, the novel follows Allie through episodic tales of her work with different clients, and her eventual breakdown and recovery. Cadigan uses the episodic structure of *Mindplayers* to explore different representations of technological dependency, with a specific focus

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<sup>264</sup> Cadigan, *SF Gateway Omnibus*, p.38

on loss of creativity in artists of varying profession, from an actor emptied of the capacity for emotion to a composer who has had their mind erased and rebuilt. This allows her to represent a spectrum of concerns surrounding creative bankruptcy in the wake of simulation, and the obsolescence of non-technologically focused professions. With Allie acting as a connection between these encounters, Cadigan provides a fallible guide to reflect upon these encounters alongside her readership, and when Allie comes to experience her own crisis of identity, she can represent first-hand how these doubts can arise in a subject.

*Fools* follows a different area of focus, rather than exploring one character's journey from criminal to corporate professional and the psychiatric issues of creatives trying to work alongside mindplay technology it follows one victim of the chaos of identity created by personality templates. The main character is either Marceline, Marva or Mercine depending on how the reader accepts the authenticity of her competing personalities. *Fools* is interested in the empty authenticity of a person's identity when imprints and copies of other personalities are brought into conflict in one person's mind. It follows an escort memory-junkie attempting to escape the punishment of a crime boss; it follows a method actor trying to become famous by becoming the characters she acts; and it follows a Mind Police officer going deep undercover to root out an illegal personality copying business. Each of these is a distinct identity within the same protagonist's mind, and the tension of the novel revolves around their competition over absolute authenticity whilst simultaneously introducing further victims of personality play that she comes in contact with on her journey.

Despite being set within the same world, and therefore exploring the same technology and social structure, Cadigan uses both of these short stories to tackle different aspects of her cyberpunk future, in particular the implications of the intimacy with which its society's populace has given itself to its technology. Allie treats different patients whose problems range from those of Marty Oren to Kitta Wren, the former an actor whose mindplay training left him emotionally void and dependent on mimicking the feelings of others, the latter a deceased poet whose brain is plundered for a final posthumous work. Through treating these clients, Allie becomes increasingly uncertain of the sanctity of her own mind, becoming convinced that those with whom she has mindplayed have penetrated it, threatening to overwrite her and assume dominance within her own body. Finally, after suffering from a breakdown, Allie comes to the realisation that her suspicions were wrong, the parts of others she found within herself were the impact they had had upon her experience. She recognises that she cannot remain unchanged by her experiences and that resisting this change is ultimately a self-damaging process. Allie's specific doubts reflect the extent to which the dissolution of boundaries enabled by increased technological experimentation gives rise to fears about the penetrability of the mind as well as the body and as the protagonist, these fears are placed to the fore of the text.

It is this fear that is extended in *Fools*, where the reader experiences the breakdown of these boundaries in the rapid switching perspectives the novel provides paragraph by paragraph. In so doing, *Fools* recontextualises relationships and situations frequently throughout its fast-paced plot, with strangers becoming friends

becoming enemies as Mercine switches control between her personality templates. This instability likewise gives rise to suspicion and paranoia. When you cannot trust what personality is behind anyone's head, everyone becomes a potential threat. This is amplified by the proliferation of the Mind Police's agents, of which two of the competing protagonist personalities (Marceline and Marva) are afraid. By the very end of *Fools*, Cadigan takes this creeping, horror-like uncertainty to a ridiculous, almost comic ending where it is revealed that everyone in the city is unknowingly an agent for the Mind Police (or at least, might be if Mercine's paranoia can be believed). Cadigan lifts the weight of tension she has built throughout *Fools* in one great, ludicrous swoop allowing the chaotic dystopia she has created to lift in tone at the very end, therefore detaching herself from the 'gritty dystopia' that she is otherwise known for creating. Other than this detachment, however, Cadigan retains her bleak reputation. What is interesting about the dystopian world of *Fools* in particular is how the 'chaos' often portrayed in cyberpunk worlds, such as in Delaney's words about how the urban sprawl of *Neuromancer* protests and the socially ordered worlds of Le Guin's fiction, is not found solely in the physical environments so often strewn with *gomi* (litter) but in the mindscape of its inhabitants. The challenges of Allie's clients in *Mindplayers* build from isolated cases into the disordered and confused mental uncertainty of everyday life in *Fools*. Despite their outward differences, both contribute to similar feelings of disorder and oversaturation but through different lenses (that of the physical or emotional environment).<sup>265</sup>

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<sup>265</sup> This echoes the definitional work of Chapter 1, in particular the discussion of cyberpunk's urban sprawls. The way each of these representations here reflect the poor living conditions of cyberpunk citizens, the filth they live amongst and the mental turmoil to which their worlds subject them.

This reassignment of physical chaos to mental chaos will be an important divergent strategy to identify the importance of Cadigan's writing as an extension to the stereotypical analysis of classic cyberpunk. Therefore, whilst this chapter will focus on these works by Cadigan, it is important to compare these texts above to other examples of more commonly analysed cyberpunk. We can then better identify the seeds of cyberpunk formations that have grown into later variations on the genre<sup>266</sup> For the purpose of this chapter, William Gibson's *Sprawl* texts are the most convenient point of comparison as they are the most frequently cited encapsulation of the tendencies of early cyberpunk. Both Gibson and Cadigan respond to their contemporary environment and the broad themes of cyberpunk establish familiar anti-corporate and anti-neoliberalist representations in each of their works. The specifics of each representation creates a dialogue around cyberpunk topics which, when analysed individually rather than as a generalised whole, rejects some of the sweeping statements about the sentiments of cyberpunk, for example about the fear of, or enthusiasm for, bodily augmentation. In the past, this has created an impression of a universal message within the genre, which is not the case in all regards. This sentiment will form the starting point of this discussion and using the question of whether bodily augmentation is a boon or a sacrifice, we will unpick how Cadigan and Gibson offer different perspectives to a readership which thus encourages personal evaluation. Alongside this, we will bring in other early cyberpunk works as points of comparison to emphasise the variety in

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<sup>266</sup> To use an example mentioned above, we can see the focus on psychiatric therapy in *Mindplayers* reflected in Greg Bear's 1990 novel *Queen of Angels*. Diversifying our understanding of early cyberpunk helps this to be identified as a pattern developing across cyberpunk. Otherwise Bear's interest in psychiatric care in cyberpunk futures may be mistaken as an isolated addition to the genre.



cyberpunk around which this chapter centres. However, these supplementary texts will not be discussed in as much detail as Cadigan and Gibson as they are the focus of this close comparison.<sup>267</sup> Through this analysis I will present how their differing depictions of human/machine interfacing complement each other. How they both demonstrate the vulnerability of the human body; in Gibson through its replacement, and in Cadigan through its irrelevance to the technologies required for day-to-day life.

### Molly and Allie: Implants, power-dynamics, and feminist SciFi

To begin comparing the worlds of Gibson and Cadigan, bodily augmentation through cybernetic enhancement is a clear way to demonstrate how both authors engage with a similar element of cyberpunk in distinct ways. Namely they explore the vulnerability of the body to different ends. Augmentation is both commonplace and varied from user to user within the works of both of these authors. Characters in *Neuromancer* sport a range of varying prostheses and implants from widely manufactured commodities such as Ratz's cybernetic arm, to personalised tools such as Riviera's hologram projectors. Molly Millions is a key emblematic figure of Gibson's particular approach to cybernetics. Beneath her nails are lethal claws that cement her femme fatale reputation, and over her eyes are the implanted shields of mirrorshades. In stark contrast to this, *Mindplayers* and *Fools* present a world wherein the commodification of implants has

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<sup>267</sup> As we have discussed, Gibson's early work is representative of the overgeneralised reputation of what cyberpunk should be. It is this idea that I am placing Cadigan in contrast too, therefore Gibson is the strongest source to represent these 'expectations' in order to unseat them.

penetrated to a broader degree, the personal styles of Gibson are absent, with a character's choice of cybernetic being purely aesthetic, not practical. Biogems are the key augmentation, a replacement of the biological eye that better allows mindplay machines access to the visual cortex and from there the brain. Each user is, mostly, free to select biogems of style and appearance to suit their desires, however none possess any more capability than the industry standard. What is essential to the difference in these authors' writing, is the representation of augmentation as strength and self-expression, or weakness and vulnerability.

To open this comparison then, it is best to return to the image of Molly from *Neuromancer*, as she best exemplifies the idea of augmentations as strength. Her most striking feature is the silver inset eye-lenses that have become an emblem for cyberpunk as a whole, in no little part due to Sterling's *Mirrorshades* anthology. For him it encapsulated the counter-cultural 'punk' style of the genre, where in his words 'Mirrorshades, preferably in chrome and matte black, the Movement's totem color appeared in story after story, as a kind of literary badge.'<sup>268</sup> In the case of Molly, she is not simply taking on this emblem, she is the emblem. She is described as such:

the glasses were surgically inset, sealing her sockets. The silver lenses seemed to grow from smooth pale skin above her cheekbones, framed by dark hair cut in a rough shag.<sup>269</sup>

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<sup>268</sup> Sterling, *Mirrorshades*, p.xi

<sup>269</sup> Gibson, *Neuromancer*,p.36

In this image, the shades are part of a seamless fusion of technology and flesh. The body's vulnerability is protected by the fashionable shield of technology. Molly's lenses not only protect her eyes from physical damage, but they obfuscate her emotions. They hide the eyes that, traditionally, have been seen as betraying the inner workings of the mind (windows to the soul as the saying goes); Molly's windows are safely shuttered from the prying eyes of others. The emotionless wall these mirrorshades create literalise her detachment from the world around her. As Molly reflects in *Neuromancer*, due to these lenses she no longer cries, she spits.<sup>270</sup> The emotional weakness presented by tears becomes scornful disdain at the behest of her augmentation. Not only this, but they are mirrored, and thus reflect the searching gaze of the reader. She is described by Neil Easterbrook as such: 'her eyes have been walled off by implanted lenses-those totems of cyberpunk, mirrorshades-which mimetically reflect the diegetic while walling-off the wearer.'<sup>271</sup> For him they reflect back the social ladder of her fictional world, her corporate foes approving of her supposedly rebellious implants. However this is because in these silicon shields they see only themselves and their own beliefs, while Molly remains uncompromised beneath. Molly murders the 'corporate patriarch' that complements her '[t]hree pages later [...] by shooting a toxic dart into his eye.'<sup>272</sup> He is vulnerable where she is not.

They reflect, too, attempts for readers to engage with her emotionally. The reader cannot see the emotions in her eyes; to look at her face is to be directed to the technology of her implants; any description that would feature her eyes becomes the

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<sup>270</sup> Gibson, *Neuromancer*, p.183

<sup>271</sup> Easterbrook, "The Arc of our Destruction..." p.380

<sup>272</sup> Easterbrook, "The Arc of our Destruction..." p.380

language of technology; a reader's gaze is reflected from the human character to the fiction's technology. Mirrorshades reflect the technofetishistic cyberpunk society, where the powerful femme fatales of their Noir influences are intimately laced with implanted technology. In these ways, the eyes of the cyberpunk are depicted as a site of strength for the cybernetic body,<sup>273</sup> an augmentation that protects both emotionally and physically; as Easterbrook discusses, Molly is strong until her lens is broken, and only then is she brought near death.<sup>274</sup>

The strength that the character of Molly finds in her augmentations can be linked to a character, Jael, in an earlier piece of fiction by Joanna Russ, *The Female Man*.<sup>275</sup> Carlen Lavigne discusses this comparison in her work on feminism and SciFi, noting that Molly serves as a 'loose tribute' to Jael.<sup>276</sup> She discusses however, how early, cyberpunk, female characters such as Molly fall short of continuing the subversiveness of these previous feminist SciFi novels; 'Molly is eventually co-opted as a mother figure' she points out, referring to how she appears in Gibson's third *Sprawl* novel, *Mona Lisa Overdrive*.<sup>277</sup> Molly is also criticised by Nicola Nixon as being 'depoliticized and sapped of any revolutionary energy [...] Molly's ambitions are to make as much money as

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<sup>273</sup> This conception of augmentation as a route to strength recurs in a lot of famous SciFi works, solidifying this part of its reputation. It can be seen in the character of Cowboy, from *Hardwired*, who is wired up to an armoured vehicle, or Raven from *Snow Crash* who connects himself to a nuclear bomb for defence. Further examples of cyberpunk's depiction of augmentations as strength are discussed in Chapter 4 alongside *Cyberpunk 2077* as this conception is strongly reinforced in video games such as that, *Deus Ex*, or the *Shadowrun* series. Full citations in bib.

<sup>274</sup> Easterbrook, "The Arc of our Destruction..." p.380

<sup>275</sup> Joanna Russ, *The Female Man*, (New York: Bantam, 1975)

<sup>276</sup> Carlen Lavigne, *Cyberpunk Women, Feminism and Science Fiction: A Critical Study* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland Publishing, 2013) p.27

<sup>277</sup> William Gibson, *Mona Lisa Overdrive*, (Victor Gollancz Ltd, 1988)

possible [...] and to bed Console Cowboy Case, the tough-guy hero of *Neuromancer*.<sup>278</sup>

Nixon contrasts this directly with Jael:

who describes matter-of-factly how her cybernetic boy-toy, Davy, can be “turned off or on” as she desires, and how her nails and teeth have been cybernetically enhanced for use as lethal weapons against men<sup>279</sup>

For Nixon, Molly is stripped of Jael’s role as an ‘allegorical figuration of feminist struggle.’<sup>280</sup> However, the centre of her argument is Molly’s appearance in *Mona Lisa Overdrive* where she detracts from her imposing presence and displays maternal instincts; before this Nixon admits the comparison between Molly and Jael works in Gibson’s earlier stories “Johnny Mnemonic” and *Neuromancer*.<sup>281</sup> The issue with Molly’s reflection of Jael in these stories, is her predominantly distant and dispassionate demeanour. Molly inherits the cool, emotionally closed-off traits of the Noir femme fatale, as has already been discussed, over the ‘ruthless and productive rage’<sup>282</sup> of Jael. Part of this comes from her stylish augmentations that close her off from the world. Molly is enviable for her capability and self-confidence, particularly in comparison to the self-loathing Case.

Herein lies the problem, Molly is an aspect of the world to contrast Case. Gibson is more interested in Molly’s ‘coolness’, and how she represents someone who has

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<sup>278</sup> Nixon, “Cyberpunk: Preparing the Ground...”, p.222

<sup>279</sup> Nixon, “Cyberpunk: Preparing the Ground...”, p.222

<sup>280</sup> Nixon, “Cyberpunk: Preparing the Ground...”, p.222

<sup>281</sup> Nixon, “Cyberpunk: Preparing the Ground...”, p.223

<sup>282</sup> Nixon, “Cyberpunk: Preparing the Ground...”, p.222

chosen their identity and solidified their sense of self through their bodily augmentation. Delany, when he comments on Molly and Jael, highlights that '[w]ith both. You see something troubling when you look directly at their eyes - though in Gibson the irony is that those eyes are replaced with mirrors.'<sup>283</sup> The potential is still within Molly, but it is shifted from the revolution of Jael to, as Lavigne describes it, 'the alienation caused by new technologies and postmodern identities.'<sup>284</sup> Molly's mirrorshades encourage others to reflect on themselves, seeing themselves in her and often seeing in this comparison what they are not. This approach is one of the elements limiting engagement with a feminine perspective, as Nixon discusses when comparing Gibson to Russ' *The Female Man*. This is one of the repercussions of Gibson's depiction of augmentations. Whilst it does situate her augmentations as an expression of her individuality and a reclamation of her agency from her troubled past, it risks supporting views, such as Nixon's, that early cyberpunk only reinstates masculinist fiction.

To dislodge this criticism from cyberpunk as a whole, it is vitally important to devote comparable energy into analysing alternate depictions of cyberpunk augmentation. Rather than accepting a sweeping view inherited from close readings of Gibson, we can contrast this with other contemporaneous cyberpunk writing. Nixon does gesture to *Mindplayers* in her article, following her comments comparing Molly to Jael. Allie, to Nixon, is a 'strong female character' that can be seen as an alternative to Molly<sup>285</sup> but as her article, by necessity, focuses on Gibson this comparison is unexplored. Carlen

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<sup>283</sup> Samuel Delany, "Is Cyberpunk a Good Thing or a Bad Thing?", *Mississippi Review*, vol. 16, no. 2/3, 1988, pp. 28–35. p.32

<sup>284</sup> Lavigne, *Cyberpunk Women...*, p.26

<sup>285</sup> Nixon, "Cyberpunk: Preparing the Ground...", p.223

Lavigne devotes more time to unpicking feminist representation in cyberpunk work and expands eloquently on this relationship. For the purpose of this chapter we will be doing a deep dive into *Mindplayers*, as discussed above it is the intent here to closely compare the specifics of cyberpunk imagery and ideas to dislodge misassumptions surrounding the genre through revisiting its earliest works. For this reason this chapter's discussion will remain centred on augmentations, but before continuing it is important to briefly address some of Lavigne's discussion of Cadigan to cement her relationship to feminist SciFi.

Lavigne, in her discussion of Cadigan's early work, writes that 'her portrayal of strong female characters provides one of the first glimpses of feminism within the genre.'<sup>286</sup> The first way she identifies this is by comparing the sexualisation of Molly to Cadigan's not asexual, but not 'adolescent/weapon-sleek' controlling and resourceful female protagonists.<sup>287</sup> In referencing the 'weapon-sleek' nature of Molly we can see again that the 'cool', controlled augmentations Gibson gives her brings the potential for sexual objectification. Much like noir femme fatales that we have already discussed are an influence on cyberpunk, female characters risked being introduced to cyberpunk as 'sleek sex objects'<sup>288</sup> not rounded characters. Allie however tackles the issues of physical relationships through the breakdown of her marriage due to her insensitive, 'deadpan' nature in contrast to her more emotionally available husband.<sup>289</sup>

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<sup>286</sup> Lavigne, *Cyberpunk Women...*, p.34

<sup>287</sup> Lavigne, *Cyberpunk Women...*, p.34

<sup>288</sup> Lavigne, *Cyberpunk Women...*, p.34

<sup>289</sup> Although as Lavigne suggest these ideas find deeper exploration in later additions. Shira in *He, She and It* is a good example for how corporate cyberpunk futures and technologies can have ramifications on personal relationships.

Lavigne acknowledges that Molly does, in some ways, break feminine/masculine binaries in her soldier-like personality and her importance as a protagonist for Gibson; but it is problematic to argue this perspective strongly due to this sexual objectification.<sup>290</sup> She ties this into other early cyberpunk women, such as Laura from *Islands in the Net* by Bruce Sterling himself who is also flawed in comparison to Allie as she is 'punished for venturing outside the bounds of domesticity'<sup>291</sup> through maternal responsibilities (as Nixon criticised in Molly's later appearances).<sup>292</sup> *Mindplayers* is more committed to a role reversal, through Allie and her husband's emotional states, but 'that sort of exploration is the first step toward subversion.'<sup>293</sup> This ties in to Cadigan's criticism that Cadigan never fully engages with feminist concerns. Lavigne approaches this same idea but frames Cadigan's writing as foreshadowing that of female authors in the 1990s 'not by abandoning cyberpunk's tenets, but by exploring their implications in a more feminist-oriented fashion.'<sup>294</sup> Whilst these ideas are explored in greater depth in these later additions to the genre, analysing Cadigan identifies that these elements exist within cyberpunk from its first arrival. Even Gibson and Sterling's characters (such as Molly and Laura) contain this potential but it is Cadigan's female protagonists like Allie and Mercine<sup>295</sup> that best reveal this potential within cyberpunk fiction by working clearly with 'cyberpunk's tenets.' Or as Chapter 1 categorised them, elements.

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<sup>290</sup> Lavigne, *Cyberpunk Women...*, p.37

<sup>291</sup> Lavigne, *Cyberpunk Women...*, p.37

<sup>292</sup> We can see the sexualisation of female characters in other cyberpunk from Miriam Bancroft's pheromonal implants in *Altered Carbon* (Morgan, 2001), to the naive Leeloo of *The Fifth Element* (Besson, 1997), back to the wild Bandita in *Dr Adder* (Jeter, 1984). Full citations in bib The spread of these examples shows this is an issue still topical for cyberpunk.

<sup>293</sup> Lavigne, *Cyberpunk Women...*, p.37

<sup>294</sup> Lavigne, *Cyberpunk Women...*, p.37

<sup>295</sup> It is also important to note here the character of Gina from Cadigan's novel *Synners* and her short story "Rock On" from the *Mirrorshades* anthology. I do not have the space to fully unravel these stories as



We can then take this connection between Allie and Molly that is recognised across the discussion above and push it further to explore more than just the characters themselves. Our opening discussion of Molly focused on the effect of her implanted mirrorshades. Turning to Allie we can see Cadigan uses the similar idea of eye augmentation to offer a different perspective on cyberpunk worlds. Her depiction of cyberpunk augmentation in *Mindplayers* (and later extended into *Fools*) assesses the ways in which eyes are often presented as weaknesses; how they are permeable access points for technologies, addiction to which exacerbates the neoliberal working conditions of people in Cadigan's world. Her playful engagement with eyes in particular, whether removing, replacing, or augmenting them, subverts the perspective Sterling is establishing in his comments on Molly and mirrorshades. Their sockets are open wounds snaked with mindplay cables and their eyes are replaced by designer biogems. In *Mindplayers*, eyes are not augmented with protective lenses containing holographic displays, such as Molly's. Instead, biological eyes are worn out and damaged through invasive penetration they have not evolved to expect; biogems become a necessity for 'normal' life, a new base level to which biology is insufficient. The characters' original, human eyes are lost to the needs of their society. Both *Mindplayers* and *Fools* centre around characters for whom their biogems are vulnerabilities. For Allie in *Mindplayers*, the design of her biogems represent those of someone from her past who she fears has compromised the sanctity of her identity through their interactions; the biogems are a symbol of this fear from which she cannot escape. Mercine in *Fools* represents this

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well but they are also picked up on by Lavigne in her analysis of Cadigan's early writing as further examples of this type of female character.

vulnerability in a different way, in one of her personas she struggles to remove her own biogems by hand due to cosmetic changes to her face. The protagonist in *Fools* is not in control of her own augmentations and it is others who are most commonly removing her eyes at their whims not her own.<sup>296</sup> Molly presents eye enhancement and augmentation, whereas *Mindplayers* envisions a world where the eye is bypassed and replaced, suggesting an increasing obsolescence of the physical body. Through this parasitical exploitation of eyes and eye sockets, Cadigan presents characters who willingly blind themselves to the dangers of their technology in pursuit of leisure and relinquish their agency, allowing machines to dictate their own biological requirements.

Through mindplay connection, the eye socket becomes a repeatedly violated orifice. As a 'socket', it too has a literal double role acting as a connection point for both the eye and the mindplay machines which repeatedly penetrate it. The specific depiction of technological interfacing through the eye socket which Cadigan utilises importantly varies from traditional Gibsonian representation. Matrix connection in Gibson's *Neuromancer* is through 'dermatrodes'<sup>297</sup> placed on the forehead like a sweatband; this connection is entirely external (it does not break the skin), and thus the sanctity of the body is preserved. *The Matrix*, another frequently discussed cyberpunk work, complicates the nature of connection as the user is penetrated in the back of the neck by a data probe. This image is previously related to disturbing body relations in discussions of *The Matrix*, best summarised in the line 'the computer jack embedded at the base of their skulls – and the abjection of that image (human penetrated by

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<sup>296</sup> See pages 287 and 340 for examples (Cadigan, *SF Gateway Omnibus*)

<sup>297</sup> Gibson, *Neuromancer*, p.68

machine) carries the fear and distrust for technology'.<sup>298</sup> Whilst this is a significantly invasive penetration it differs to Cadigan's representation in that it happens to an unnatural orifice in the body; the data probe connection is an artificially created socket to a body part otherwise devoid of them. Therefore, all of these texts complicate the integrity of the body in different ways. *Mindplayers* in particular highlights the body's innate vulnerability to penetration. Rather than an artificially created socket, mindplay machines exploit an existing orifice drawing attention to the permeability of the body as it stands. This connects with Kaye Mitchell's writing, when she discusses the '[p]ermeability of the body signifying openness to invasion, violation and mutation.'<sup>299</sup> This is reflected in how mindplay connection appears to violate existing bodies more so than other fictional interfacing technologies. It bears the strongest similarity to *The Matrix*, as both viscerally exploit the body. What sets *Mindplayers* apart is the relatability of the action to the reader as it is an invasion into an existing bodily vulnerability. Eyes in *Mindplayers* are particularly vulnerable. They are as easy to remove as 'melon seeds' and the mindplay cables creep under 'flaccid eyelids'<sup>300</sup> to latch onto the optic nerve. What is key to this relationship is that the machines are given agency, the cables seeking their destination independently. This gives rise to a parasitic image of wires that are seen 'snaking'<sup>301</sup> into the host's body.

This parasitic invasion of the body by digital hardware is a potentially gruesome visualisation of technological dependency, and the relocation of agency from the user to

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<sup>298</sup> Stacy Gillis, *The Matrix Trilogy: Cyberpunk Reloaded*. (London: Wallflower, 2005) p.112

<sup>299</sup> Kaye Mitchell, "Bodies That Matter: Science Fiction, Technoculture, and the Gendered Body." *Science Fiction Studies*, vol. 33, no. 1, 2006, pp. 109–128. p.119

<sup>300</sup> Cadigan, *SF Gateway Omnibus*, p.152

<sup>301</sup> Cadigan, *SF Gateway Omnibus*, p.139

the machine is a powerful statement of concern. This is a perfect example of how Cadigan opens exploration of contemporaneous issues. The mindplay machines lie at the epicentre of both texts; even if they appear infrequently in *Fools*, it is the possibilities they enable that initiates the conditions of the narrative. Mindplay machines serve, in these texts, as a stand in for digital information storage. They act in a similar way to Gibson's *Matrix*, or Stevenson's *Metaverse*, but with particularly important differences.

The first is as above: in traditional cyberpunk understandings, digital space is a location for intellectual mastery on behalf of the user. Gibson and Stevenson's hackers are action heroes, jetting around virtual environments for their own purposes. This is common in cyberpunk, even in the 1982 film *Tron*,<sup>302</sup> where a computer programmer is trapped within his own creation at the mercy of its programs, he possesses the skill and intellect to control the world around him. In the *Mindplay* series, this is not the case; mindplay machines are not a space for exerting power over the system, but for demonstrating the mental fortitude to preserve your sense of self as users risk their personalities fracturing or emptying into the digital space slipping in behind their eyes. Allie herself is the closest to a 'hacker-protagonist' within these novels, as a trained professional with mindplay technology, yet even she is hard pressed even to survive these encounters unscathed. She enters others' minds to guide them to self-healing, and yet in many cases is nothing but a witness to their inevitable downfall. The key distinction to Cadigan's exploration of information technology here is the scepticism toward user control. Cadigan presents technology with immediate transparency, and the conditions of *Mindplay* are laid bare in numerous episodes within these stories. The

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<sup>302</sup> Steven Lisberger, *TRON*, Walt Disney Productions, 1982

ways they constitute virtual environments to reflect the inner turmoil of its users is explained to the reader through Allie's training and the reflections she shares with her employer. It is the impact mindplay has on its users and the extent to which mindplay technologies exploit and exacerbate minor weaknesses in character that is more mysterious. The social and emotional repercussions of the technology are the unpredictable element here, phrasing dependency on technology as a damaging character trait rather than a legitimate path to prestige and glory, as it is in traditional hacker-protagonists whose hatred of the biological drives them to great importance in the realm of the digital.

The 'parasitical' phrasing of Mindplay machines solidifies the reading of the prevailing relationship between people and machines in the *Mindplayer* series as dependent; in this instance one in which the machines 'control' the relationship. Once Allie connects with her first client, Marty, she discovers that due to poor mindplay experiences whilst training, he is too dependent on professional mindplayers imprinting emotions on him during sessions. He is incapable of producing his own feelings and Allie sees this is not restricted to his acting but bleeds into his whole life; his love for Sudella, for example, is just a mirror of the love she projects onto him. Marty's eyes are cats-eye biogems, an unusual choice and a mirror of Allie's own. This is another embodiment of the shallowness of what lies within Marty, his eyes and mind are both mirrors. He is a further victim of his society, alongside Kitta; the desire for society to train and churn out actors for public entertainment led to haphazard early mindplay training, ruining Marty's later chances at becoming a star and even experiencing things for himself. He is an

example of the damage improper use of mindplay causes. Mindplay therefore becomes the outside, damaging force in this novel. It could be argued that all of Allie's clients suffer at the hands of their technology rather than villainous action; Coor and Lam are robbed of distinct identities by continual mental connection until they fuse permanently. Similarly, Allie's third client, Gladwell, is, like McFloy before him, a victim of mindsuck, but as a consequence of someone else 'pirating' and cloning his personality, rather than as a consequence of himself committing crimes. A fan's desire to be him is his destruction. All of Allie's clients are artists, and high demand from the society of Mindplayers transforms them and their bodies into commodities, and once they can no longer gratify their audience their spent bodies are discarded. They are all used up by the exaggerated capitalist society common to the cyberpunk genre. A society which appropriates strategies of resistance; Allie's nature as a mindcriminal turned professional mindplayer suggests a cycle where mindplay culture weaves those who break the system back into itself. Implicitly then, all mindplay is stained by the suggestion of illegality and exploitation where even professionals may be re-educated criminals. Mindplay is therefore implicitly dangerous, or manipulative. However, in Cadigan's representation of the technology which enables their exploitation, the weaknesses inherent to the human are emphasised through the invasion of the eye socket by the key element of her cyberpunk society, mindplay machines. Her focus on eyes allows a different, intimate portrayal of an exploited population through their literal penetration that also compensates for the role technology plays in this relationship when agency and control is willingly submitted to it.

Cadigan's exploration of augmentation expresses concern about what might be sacrificed in embracing an intimate dependence on technology much more vividly than Gibson's. It must be said that both authors do engage with either side of this argument to some extent; they are not opposites, but they approach this topic from different angles. Gibson's augmentations do bring to light the weaknesses of the human body in how easily replaceable it is with superior technology, but it primarily presents strength, style, and self-expression through characters such as Molly. Cadigan contrasts this, by putting this vulnerability at the fore; yes biogems are fashion items and Allie's choice of cats-eyes allows her to hold onto the importance of a past relationship, but their purpose is tied inseparably to mindplay, an activity that penetrates the body and draws agency from its users. By embracing both authors' approaches as equally central to cyberpunk, their differing priorities complement each other's ideas and deepens cyberpunk's exploration of the body and its relationship to technology. This is the importance in decentralising cyberpunk's prior focus on texts such as *Neuromancer*. Even at its outset, cyberpunk consisted of variety such as this, and when read together we can build a more nuanced interrogation of its central themes (such as human/machine intimacy). In Chapter 4 I discuss criticisms that cyberpunk replicates the same forms over and over again, and it is key to see here how that expected uniformity in representation has never been the case.

## Cadigan's Cyberspace: emotional wellbeing and neoliberal burnout

There are multiple repercussions of this imagining of human/machine interfacing as a parasitical relationship of machines penetrating the human rather than the inverse. For one it stages digital space as mental space, resituating the 'frontier' of Gibsonian virtuality as psychological and emotional exploration. This shift in focus supports her more feminist approach to cyberpunk by turning attention to the 'messier, more complex' relationship between the digital and the virtual that Yaszek, above, identified in Cadigan's work.

In the more traditional cyberspaces, such as Gibson's, hackers penetrate behind the screen of the computer, pushing their presence into the wires and circuit boards of the technology before them. In this manner, they become explorers into, or invaders of, the unknown. This sort of abstract representation can be seen in the 1992 film *The Lawnmower Man*, or more contemporaneously to the earliest works of Cadigan and Gibson, in *Tron* (1982). It is this representation that Wendy Chun criticises<sup>303</sup> when she writes that 'cyberspace - unlike the physical landscape - can be conquered and made to submit'.<sup>304</sup> However, Cadigan's digital spaces, in the *Mindplay* series, invert this expectation and take place in the mindscapes of mindplay users. There is no space to conquer, other than one's own mind. As Lavigne writes, *Mindplayers* 'does not follow an overarching plot of hacker heroes and gun battles, but rather concentrates [on characters'] inner mental workings.'<sup>305</sup> Just as the cables of mindplay machines snake

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<sup>303</sup> See in Chapter 1 where we discuss the devaluation of the human body through technology for more on Chun's analysis of the orientalisation of cyberspace

<sup>304</sup> Chun, 2013, "Orienting Orientalism..." p.92

<sup>305</sup> Lavigne, *Cyberpunk Women...*, p.36



behind one's eyelids, so too is the environment it creates found behind the eyes. In the *Mindplay* series, the focus shifts towards exploration of the internal emotional state of the user, rather than external computational perspectives, as acknowledged above. Allie, when first being introduced to professional mindplay, is presented standing on the edge of a country field.

Perfectly ordinary blue sky [...] the field went as far as I could see in front of me. Behind me was more countryside but it was different, unbounded, grass grown up freely, the land rolling, the horizon obscured by haze. *This is what your mind looks like from this angle*, Segretti said.<sup>306</sup>

This is very different from Gibson or Stephenson's more famous digital environments, wherein their characters are enabled to step literally 'behind the screen' and inhabit the digital pathways of information circuitry, bodilessly 'surfing the crest of [an] invading programme'<sup>307</sup> as Gibson describes. They presented a much closer interpretation to that of *Tron*, for instance, which famously solidified the idea of stepping 'into' a machine environment to mass cinema audiences. This concept is not entirely absent from Cadigan's writing, and her most famous addition to the cyberpunk canon, *Synners*, includes a representation of this desire. However, in these first pieces, Cadigan imagines digitality to be personal and uses it masterfully to represent how technology could enable self-exploration and analysis. Its 'lack of a crusading masculine hero

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<sup>306</sup> Cadigan, *SF Gateway Omnibus*, p.18

<sup>307</sup> William Gibson, *Burning Chrome*, (New York: Ace Books, 1987), p.200

creates an exploration of self/Other rather than win/lose.<sup>308</sup> In particular, through combining parasitical imagery with psychological analysis of cyberpunk characters, she directs her readers' attention more overtly towards how neoliberal conditions destroy the lives of everyday people.

Taking the previous quote from *Mindplayers* wherein Cadigan depicts her first digital environment, we can begin to note key differences to the more stereotypically expected cyberpunk digitalities. The clearest distinction is in how the environment is pastoral. It rejects the ordered geometrical structures of other digital environments. Allie is relaxed into the simulation by swirling colours 'a few steps away from watching patterns on the back of your eyelids'<sup>309</sup> and eased into a calming, rural setting to release her stress at experiencing proper mindplay for the first time ever. The freely growing, unbounded land behind Allie signifies promise and potential, setting her future as potentially optimistic, particularly considering her teacher Segretti's positive expectations of her talent. This conceit is consistent throughout the *Mindplay* series, although most prominent in *Mindplayers* due to its particular focus on psychiatry. In the manner that Allie interacts with her clients, she takes a traditionally stereotypical approach to psychiatric help that focuses on encouraging her subjects to relive memories, restaging parts of their lives or elements of their identity that is central to their character and their current struggles.

Her first client, the failing actor Marty Oren, is a prime example for how these encounters play out, and of Cadigan's criticism of neoliberal desires. Marty's problem is the inability to create or produce anything original; he is the perfect mirror, an 'emotional

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<sup>308</sup> Lavigne, *Cyberpunk Women...*, p.36

<sup>309</sup> Cadigan, *SF Gateway Omnibus*, p.17

cripple'<sup>310</sup> capable of perfectly reflecting and mimicking any emotions he's given. Allie's mindplay with him begins in '[t]he Infamous White Room.'<sup>311</sup> This blank, empty cell in which Marty's 'marionette' body appears lifelessly slumped serves to create a sense of wrongness, and reflects emptiness that is later revealed to be his central issue. After his initial forceful beg for reassurance from Allie, which she refuses to give, we are led on a short journey through his memories. Marty repeatedly attempts to feed Allie memories of his greatest performances, whilst she focuses on his childhood, family, and very early mindplay training. Eventually, she forces him to try to visualise an environment, and his attempt to recreate the luscious green pastoral scene we had seen before with Allie's first mindplay attempt is, again, empty: 'all he could manage was bare earth under a colourless, sunless sky, none of it feeling terribly real [...] He strained a little and I felt the ground against my feet, like cardboard.'<sup>312</sup> The only environment where he shows any control is in his imaginary theatre, where he attempts to overwhelm Allie into providing him with the emotions he craves from her in the one setting where he's ever felt comfortable.

This pathway shows the major stages of mental environments in *Mindplayers*, the conditions of which Cadigan re-uses in *Fools* although often in more wild and disturbingly metaphorical ways as she experiments with her rules. Cadigan's digital spaces divorce themselves further from directly representing electronics, as Gibson's geometrical cyberspace does, and in so doing supplements the expectation that cyberspaces are intended to be mathematical (and therefore the field of hackers and

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<sup>310</sup> Cadigan, *SF Gateway Omnibus*, p.96

<sup>311</sup> Cadigan, *SF Gateway Omnibus*, p.94

<sup>312</sup> Cadigan, *SF Gateway Omnibus*, pp.96-97

computer experts) and are instead also emotional. Both representations demonstrate important methods of navigating new, digital environments and it is important that cyberpunk criticism accepts this innate flexibility of the genre.

The latter images of Marty's treatment are the most metaphorical of them all, with the theatre showing Marty's inflated sense of ego and desperate need for attention and support, and the lifeless countryside preceding it letting us see how creatively bankrupt he is in comparison to Allie. These settings reinforce the digital world of the *Mindplay* series as metaphorical representations of the characters' mental states. They boil characters down to their fears and desires and through our protagonist, the importantly 'deadpan' and detached Allie, we discover the negative effects mindplay can have on different people when it is used inappropriately or maliciously. Marty Oren's issues arise from an overworked pathos-finder who, instead of teaching Marty how to find the soul in his work himself, had merely taught him 'by example' providing him a template to mimic. In the years since he had encountered similarly overworked pathosfinders whose pressures to 'turn out performers in a hurry'<sup>313</sup> had compounded his problem into an unbreakable habit.

For Cadigan, these digital spaces reveal what people are like through their perceptions of themselves, and their use has the potential to reach in and damage emotional and creative growth. This buys closely into the longstanding concern that excessive consumption of screen media damages creative development. A version of this concern can be identified even back in the early 1930s, in Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World*,<sup>314</sup> where one element of Huxley's futuristic dystopia is the manner in which

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<sup>313</sup> Cadigan, *SF Gateway Omnibus*, p. 95

<sup>314</sup> Aldous Huxley, *Brave New World*. New York: Harper Brothers, 1932. Print

the people of his society are inundated with technological means of distraction to keep them placid and content at the expense of their creative expression; one of the criticisms the novel levels at this society is the emptiness of its people due to their ease of access to distraction. Fears around the developmental impact of technology on young people in particular continues through to today, we can look to a vast number of articles that perpetuate this concern<sup>315</sup> which focus predominantly on the effect the proliferation of screen media has on children. On outset, Marty Oren supports this concern, putting forward a subject who, due to his early experiences with information technology, is stunted in his creative growth and therefore emotionally crippled in both his work and his relationship. However, as it is through mindplay that he is unmasked, not through the knowledge of his wife who is seduced by the desire to believe the love he mirrors back to her. As it is not purely the use of mindplay that causes this problem, but malpractice as an anomalous occurrence, Cadigan uses Marty to indulge the suspicion that technology stunts development whilst reflecting on it as a consequence of inappropriate use.

More traditional cyberpunk relationships with technology also support this admission of danger in the overdependence on technology; one can see Case's self-destructive tendencies at the outset of *Neuromancer* as indicative of how techno-addiction can lead a majority of 'console cowboys' to ruin. However, the effectiveness of this criticism in

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<sup>315</sup> See the following as examples of this: "The Negative Effects Of Technology On Children", National University, 2021 <<https://www.nu.edu/blog/negative-effects-of-technology-on-children-what-can-you-do/>> [Accessed 31 August 2022]. Sarah Prager, "Is Technology Bad For Kids? Here's The Truth | Newfolks", Newfolks, 2022 <<https://www.newfolks.com/stages/effects-of-technology-on-children/>> [Accessed 31 August 2022]. Keyede Erinfolami, "6 Negative Impacts Of Technology On Children (And What You Can Do)", MUO, 2021 <<https://www.makeuseof.com/negative-impacts-of-technology-on-children/>> [Accessed 31 August 2022].

*Neuromancer* is weakened by the dynamic and masterful digital talents these cowboys demonstrate.<sup>316</sup> Cadigan also presents self-destructive tendencies in mindplayers, but in a more pessimistic manner. Marty attempts to overwhelm Allie with his mindplay mastery, but he is defeated by her emotional maturity. All his skill leaves him with nothing, abandoned to an uncured condition to be forgotten. It is not technical expertise that undermines him here, it is his mental and emotional fortitude. Cadigan uses this contest not to show how Marty was simply weaker than Allie, but instead to criticise the systemic failings of Marty's profession in his development. It is 'overworked' coaches that breed this problem in Marty, not his own self. His industry prioritised mass production of high-quality actors and refused to support its staff to the extent that multiple pathosfinders reinforced destructive, addictive habits into their actors. She brings to light an industry whose focus on production is dangerous to its workers, but in her traditionally pessimistic way she offers no solution. Through this representation, we can see Cadigan's direct engagement with the neoliberal tendencies we have already discussed are integral to cyberpunk fiction.<sup>317</sup> Cadigan differs from other cyberpunks here by not showing the precarity of neoliberal individuals by showing them at their lowest (on the streets, on the breadline). She instead unpicks how a work ideology geared towards production of content (or in this case, actors) overlooks vital wellbeing and care that burns out its workers even as they seemingly succeed within the neoliberal engine.

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<sup>316</sup> Another failing in the representation of tech addiction in cyberpunk (that Cadigan avoids) can come from under-exploration. Texts such as Richard Morgan's *Broken Angels* (cite in bib) do feature incidental characters who are worn away by an addiction to 'jacking in' to machines, but are throwaway references to solidify a cyberpunk atmosphere rather than a focus of the text. This does, however, show how central to cyberpunk's identity addiction is, which ties back to the discussion in Chapter 1.

<sup>317</sup> See Chapter 1 for more of an overview on neoliberalism, or Chapter 3 for a more in depth analysis of this relationship

This criticism extends further into another of Allie's clients, Kitta Wren. On this job, Allie is hired to mindplay with the preserved brain of the now-deceased Kitta to mine it for any final poetry that might be salvaged and sold to her audiences. Marty and Kitta's value is entirely based on how well they can compete in their respective creative marketplaces. Just as Caroline Alphin identifies in neoliberal systems, individuals practice this ideology when they 'calculate their worth based on their ability to compete.'<sup>318</sup> For Marty, his own recovery is unimportant compared to his need to continue performing; he chooses to try and assimilate Allie, rather than accept her support in healing his issues in order to use the only method he knows to stay on top. For Kitta, even death is no escape from marketisation. During Allie's mindplay session we see how she was hounded by her producers and her audiences for more and more material, as her dead mind repeats: 'All they want is the show. Give them what they want, but never ask anything of them. Something from nothing.'<sup>319</sup> We discover that Kitta disembowelled herself, '[t]he woman who could never open up finally did, and thirty years of misery poured out. She didn't even moan.'<sup>320</sup> The incessant need to compete and provide new content for her 'invisible, hungry multitude'<sup>321</sup> drives her to destruction and pursues her even after death. Cadigan here demonstrates the brutally cynical outlook of her early work, showing a neoliberal subject literally tearing themselves apart.

Marty Oren too is left desperately bullying and begging others for mindplay imprints, and Allie is forced to move on with her career. In this bleak vignette, Cadigan

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<sup>318</sup> Caroline Alphin, *Neoliberalism and Cyberpunk Science Fiction: Living on the Edge of Burnout* (Routledge, 2020) p.2

<sup>319</sup> Cadigan, *SF Gateway Omnibus*, p.120

<sup>320</sup> Cadigan, *SF Gateway Omnibus*, p.120

<sup>321</sup> Cadigan, *SF Gateway Omnibus*, p.120

highlights the systemic failings of her society, and in the ensuing epilogue, Allie lays the blame on the pathosfinders that bred this tendency in Marty, attempting to arrest this issue before more can be affected. Her employer then dismisses her comment entirely, before admitting that he had flagged their names up to the Mindplay Bureau but he didn't expect much of a response as '[b]ureaucracy stinks.'<sup>322</sup> Stagnancy plagues Cadigan's world as it does many early cyberpunk settings, and the digital spaces she uses to explore the inhabitants of her worlds' inner thoughts helps reveal how that stagnancy penetrates the wider populace. It is not purely financial or physical decrepitude that sullies the world of the *Mindplay* series, the problem persists deeper in psychological damage and apathetic hopelessness. In reintegrating Cadigan's cyberpunk perspectives into our understanding of the genre's early years, we can see how cyberpunk criticises the controlled stagnancy of a neoliberal, corporate-owned future on both the physical and emotional lives of its people. Cyberpunk has always done more than show how cities become run down, it shows how people become run down and burned out. A message it is vitally important to explore in our contemporary society once we acknowledge that cyberpunk can help those discussions take place. This is why it is necessary to dislodge restrictive definitions and understandings of cyberpunk.

We see this idea of 'burning out' in other cyberpunk works.<sup>323</sup> Again looking to Gibson we see Case at the outset of *Neuromancer* is financially and occupationally ruined and almost waiting to die in the street, or other characters in his early short stories

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<sup>322</sup> Cadigan, *SF Gateway Omnibus*, p. 99

<sup>323</sup> Also discussed further in Chapter 1 as a key element of cyberpunk fiction



scrabbling to find any minor successes to make money to live and their lives feel worthwhile.<sup>324</sup> Whilst there are professionals in mindplay, the vast majority of subjects are artists or others not in techno-focused careers. Mindplay infiltrates music-making, performance art, sex work, and even criminal activity, making itself a universal necessity that supplants traditional career experience. What is particularly strident about *Mindplayers*, is how all of Allie's clients are artists.<sup>325</sup> We have discussed above how these clients' stories criticise neoliberalism and this focus on artists reinforces the idea that creatives suffer heavily under this ideology. This depiction resonates with the degrading support received by the arts today. As Wendy Brown addresses it:

Today, this status for liberal arts education is eroding from all sides: cultural values spurn it, capital is not interested in it, debt-burdened families anxious about the future do not demand it, neoliberal rationality does not index it, and, of course, states no longer invest in it.<sup>326</sup>

Art, such as Kitta's poetry, Marty's acting, or the music of Coor and Lamb are casualties of the world of *Mindplayers*. Whilst Brown discusses the refocusing of education on job training over 'broad and deep'<sup>327</sup> education, Cadigan here foresees the competitive demands of the same system driving existing artists to destruction.

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<sup>324</sup> A strong example of this is Deke in "Dogfight" (a short story in Gibson's *Burning Chrome* collection) who is 'watching himself starve' (p167) before he sabotages all his personal relationships to win a video game tournament in a run down travel-station.

<sup>325</sup> A repeated area of interest for Cadigan's cyberpunk. Her stories "Rock on" in *Mirrorshades*, her novel *Synners*, or "The final remake of *The Return of Little Latin Larry* with a completely remastered soundtrack and the original audience" in Kelly and Kessel's *Rewired: The Postcyberpunk Anthology*

<sup>326</sup> Wendy Brown, *Undoing the Demos: Neoliberalism's Stealth Revolution* (New York: Zone Books, 2015) pp.180-1

<sup>327</sup> Brown, *Undoing the Demos*, p.181

We discussed in Chapter 1 how human bodies are devalued by their replaceability, how flesh becomes obsolete compared to cybernetic augmentations, and how workers live in precarity due to overpopulated workplaces. The cyberpunk of *Mindplayers* supplements this discussion by presenting the emotional precarity of these neoliberal lives. How the necessity of competition affects not only the very bottom, but even those who have experienced success. If Gibson's cyberpunk remains the sole representative of the genre, these connections in Cadigan's cyberpunk risk becoming lost. Emotional wellbeing in hyper-capitalist systems is incredibly important in our (2020s) contemporary context,<sup>328</sup> as I will explore more in the next chapter, and it is important to recognise how cyberpunk has a history of speaking to this issue. It is not only the extremes of the hyper-wealthy and downtrodden homeless, but all individuals attempting to keep pace with this ideology. Then when this criticism appears in later cyberpunk texts it can be properly identified and explored through cyberpunk imaginings, and not be written off by audiences presuming cyberpunk still replicates only Gibson's ideas. This is the discussion explored in greater depth in Chapter 4.

## Conclusion

By looking at these specific examples of Pat Cadigan's work, then, we can explore how the focus of cyberpunk texts at their time of inception was not as uniform as their

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<sup>328</sup> See the following for more discussion of this issue: Zeira A., "Mental Health Challenges Related to Neoliberal Capitalism in the United States." *Community Ment Health J.* 2022 Feb;58(2):205-212. doi: 10.1007/s10597-021-00840-7. Epub 2021 May 25. PMID: 34032963; PMCID: PMC8145185.

reputation may suggest. What rises further to the fore is how the eagerness of authors, or critics, to identify cyberpunk as a discrete movement overly restricted its reception. As discussed in Chapter 1, there are numerous advantages to recognising cyberpunk by the conditions that distinguish it from other SciFi products. However, instead of allowing this recognition to develop, the excitement and energy of cyberpunk's growth exacerbated issues with genre recognition in overemphasising particular interpretations of the movement and allowing them to encompass it as a whole. Instead of allowing audiences to easily recognise cyberpunk through their own connections, proclamations such as claiming Gibson to be the 'king of cyberpunk' instead allowed his work to *become* cyberpunk; this in turn means that his limitations become the genre's, and not only are new texts only considered to be cyberpunk if they share in these limitations, but new authors could come to expect his areas of interest to be necessary to the construction of cyberpunk texts. Criticism and new additions to the genre fall prey to restricted understandings of what it is to be cyberpunk, as I will demonstrate in Chapter 4.

What looking in depth at Cadigan's early world-building and story writing highlights is how digital technologies come to signify different relationships between users and tech whilst still writing with the same genre conventions as more recognised early cyberpunk. Cadigan uses her digital spaces to actively criticise the effects of neoliberal ideologies on individuals, specifically highlighting the dangers faced by artistic creators of all forms in a hypercompetitive, market-focused society. Her human-machine interfaces reject the otherwise masculinist form of which early cyberpunk is criticised; in so doing she suggests new areas of boundary violation which comment on dependency

and fears of replacement that surround the rise of widespread technological accessibility. Her concern with the obsolescence of users, of the seductive addiction of technology that can risk overtaking the establishment of ethical practice in the adoption of new technologies, continues the cyberpunk concerns identified in Chapter 1 but in different ways to general expectations. Importantly too, whilst her work does not directly replicate the feminist writings of the SciFi texts that preceded her, she still integrates them into her writing whilst offering her own cynical rejection of them; just as Delaney suggests Gibson and other early cyberpunks did. With this in consideration, the influence of feminist SciFi can be better brought into cyberpunk dialogues, rejecting the oversight of its early proponents.

Whilst the conditions of the 80s should not come to define the entirety of cyberpunk, it is important to understand what prevalent concerns set the expectations that the genre will explore. We will see in the following chapter how simplifying cyberpunk messages can open it up to supporting exploitative work practices among other issues, therefore engaging with early cyberpunk to destabilise these limited expectations is important to prevent this. The work in this chapter is an important part of the critical action that needs to take place to lessen the prominence of problematic, transmissive processes in Chapter 3. With directed attention towards less commonly analysed early cyberpunk texts, we can diversify the tropes that are purported to be inseparable from the genre. It is then easier to chart the dialogues and interplay between cyberpunk texts as they play off each other parodically or critically offering different futures, or fresh angles on the same ones.<sup>329</sup> However, these expectations

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<sup>329</sup> As discussed further in Chapter 4

have a firm hold on the current, widespread understanding of 'what cyberpunk is' and although this chapter, and our definition in Chapter 1 has begun to break this down it is important to address the impact it has already had. For this reason, we will follow this close analysis with a more cultural topic; we will move from looking at what the conditions of the literature actually were, to what can happen when we allow the over-generalised 'expectations' of cyberpunk to overtake this variety.

### CHAPTER 3: TRANSMISSION

This chapter explores how cyberpunk, and SciFi more broadly, is *used*. How its technologies become detached from their contexts and incorporated into real-world projects, and how its stories are wielded to support or resist corporate and neoliberal ideologies. In Chapter 1 of this thesis, I established a diverse understanding of cyberpunk that emphasised its key, constituent parts. This definition was put to work in Chapter 2 in demonstrating how subsequent re-readings of the genre can refresh outdated expectations. This chapter will continue exploring the broad expectations of ‘what cyberpunk is’ that previously dominated discussion of the genre, by turning this analysis towards how cyberpunk influences the real-world. Below, I demonstrate how the imagery of this genre is put to active work by individuals, communities, and companies in order to change the shape of what might be developed.

However, the manner in which cyberpunk is drawn upon to encourage the shape of the future is wide open to manipulative and exploitative practices due to the expectations we have already discussed, i.e. those that this thesis is designed to dislodge. As a genre, SciFi has helped to develop how its readers and viewers can imagine the world, and worlds to come, and it has often mounted trenchant political and ethical critiques. This is particularly the case with cyberpunk. However, there is an inherent danger to this use of SciFi when this critique is stripped away and it is reduced to the promise of delivering the shiny objects of our fiction to our door. Here, I establish how the vulnerability of cyberpunk to interpretive exploitation forms an important part of the continued relevance of analysing cyberpunk works today. When cyberpunk falls out

of the focus of analysis, it risks becoming a generic part of the cultural milieu. This, in turn, opens the way for it to become a familiar point of reference for a wide audience but lacking the detail and clarity to give a depth to this understanding. It is therefore open to manipulation by the interpreter.

The following analysis focuses on the methods of literary transmission that cyberpunk is most commonly subject to. "Transmission," here, refers to the methods in which literary texts influence and are influenced by the world around them. To begin an analysis of how cyberpunk is called upon to shape the future, I begin by reviewing how cyberpunk authors (and creators) view the predictive capacity of their work. This discussion will explore how some science fictional technologies can be created to inspire investment in them in the real world and how effective this process can be. Moreover, this section focuses on how SciFi can be used to critique, or inspire, new ways of thinking about the contemporary environment and where our actions might be leading. I will also discuss how cyberpunk often does 'predict' social and political environments, yet these are the very elements frequently stripped away in the promotion of new technologies.

Despite the intentions behind the perspectives outlined above, whenever fiction looks to the future, it provides the capacity for comparison. Even if it is intended as a critique of the present, cyberpunk is still used to signify our potential future. It therefore remains important to assess the ways that this dialogue is used because of its capacity to cement business and research practices in problematic structures. In order to unpick

this relationship further, this chapter introduces the project 'Better Made Up'<sup>330</sup> by Caroline Bassett, Ed Steinmuller, and Georgina Voss. This essay breaks down the concept of transmission into distinct methods and using these denominations this chapter can better break down the specific ways that cyberpunk is transmitted. I will extend these writers' work by applying it to a specific form of SciFi and building an understanding not only of what types of transmission to which cyberpunk is particularly vulnerable, but also why that is. In doing so I will propose my own new term, 'active transmission', which refers to transmission that is being consciously performed, by whatever party and for whatever reason. I suggest this term to differentiate it from 'passive transmission' (i.e. transmission that occurs not entirely unintentionally, but gradually and naturally through mutual interest in technologies and topics across broad groups). This differentiation helps to understand the methods of transmission that are consciously encouraged, and how this contributes to the appropriation of cyberpunk narratives.

It is this idea that will then be explored in the most detail, with particular attention paid to the way cyberpunk is read and interpreted for broad audiences. In this manner, the definitional work of Chapter 1 is invaluable as the general expectations of cyberpunk that were discussed there are key to recognising what parts of cyberpunk are overemphasised or removed entirely to shape the narratives speakers wish to 'actively transmit'. By looking at those in the tech elite, such as Silicon Valley CEOs like Elon Musk and Jeff Bezos, this chapter details how cyberpunk narratives have become co-

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<sup>330</sup> Bassett, C., Steinmueller, E. and Voss, G., 2022. "Better Made Up The Mutual Influence of Science Fiction and Innovation." [online] *nesta*. Available at: <<https://www.nesta.org.uk/report/better-made-up-the-mutual-influence-of-science-fiction-and-innovation/>> [Accessed 27 April 2022].



opted, through active transmission, to support the exploitative practices that lead to the success of these figureheads. I will begin by addressing cyberpunk's relationship with neoliberal ideology, and how this fascination has left it vulnerable to appropriation that supports rather than criticises these beliefs. Then, focusing more specifically on neoliberal, and capitalist, ideals of exceptionalism, I will demonstrate the effects of active transmission and the processes cyberpunk can be used to further when wielded in support of these CEO figureheads.

To contrast the appropriation of cyberpunk's rebellious, and liberatory, perspective, this chapter closes by exploring ways that transmission of cyberpunk can be used to instead support its original intentions. The act of transmission itself is not a problematic process, and it must be highlighted that it is the active shaping of transmission that this chapter aims to bring to light. The discussion of the first half of the chapter represents some of the more troubling implications of this process, such as prioritising the speculative technological artefacts of SciFi over their ethical representation. But in the second half, I turn to the company OpenBionics and the Biopunk movement to provide real-world examples of transmission used to support direct engagement with the ethical implications of cyberpunk morality. In these ways, these examples provide a valuable contrast that exemplifies how transmission need not be purely how SciFi texts show us the material nature of the future, but instead how they can encourage positive social and ethical consideration with regards to emergent technologies. The positive ways SciFi's ethics are also transmitted are an important contrast to emphasise how the powerful misappropriate what could be a tool for good.

This analysis reflects on how the misunderstandings of previous cyberpunk definitions have led to misappropriation of the genre's messages,<sup>331</sup> and how revisiting cyberpunk to dislodge these expectations of the genre<sup>332</sup> is important work for its reception and impact into the future. Seeing how cyberpunk can be actively transmitted for positive, or exploitative, purposes sets the stage for the final chapter of this thesis wherein I will explore how cyberpunk texts have evolved to critique their previous forms, but also how they can fall short and reinforce problematic messages such as discussed here. To understand this relationship between cyberpunk texts and the real-world then, we must begin by understanding conceptions of it as predictive of the future.

### Does Cyberpunk Predict the Future?

As introduced above, the central purpose of this chapter is to assess the methods of transmission that SciFi, specifically cyberpunk fiction, undergoes. This is a varied process, as its sphere of influence plays out differently across audiences and contexts. The first topic to address when considering SciFi, however, is the predictive purpose of its world-building and representation. This issue is central to this genre of fiction, as whilst its principal focus is 'the general impact of actual or imagined science upon society or individuals,'<sup>333</sup> this is commonly enacted through depictions of futuristic

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<sup>331</sup> Such as in Chapter 1

<sup>332</sup> See Chapter 2

<sup>333</sup> Taken from the Britannica entry on Science Fiction: *Encyclopædia Britannica*. 2022. science fiction | Definition, Characteristics, Books, Movies, Authors, Examples, & Facts. [online] Available at: <<https://www.britannica.com/art/science-fiction>> [Accessed 27 April 2022].

spaces. The act of imagining such futures opens the consideration of ‘what could be’ to the mind of the reader, and whether or not the initial intention was to extrapolate the tendencies of the present to accurately predict the future, the potential for prediction remains. This relationship is the one we see in Rose Eveleth’s article for *Wired*,<sup>334</sup> wherein she discusses the growing approach of companies approaching SciFi writers to help imagine and predict futures for these businesses to plan and prepare for what might come to be. Cyberpunk in particular is a sub-genre that commonly looks to stage its exploration of science in futuristic settings; whilst not limiting itself to this, as we discussed in Chapter 1, it commonly makes use of near-future settings wherein it can weave the trappings of contemporaneous places and societies into the familiar but different contexts of similar urban, often terrestrial, locations. Its tendency to depict ‘our immediate future’, or at least a future that is recognisably similar to our present, opens it up to the assumption of a predictive potential even more readily than those looking to alien worlds in the far-distant future. The potential for prediction therefore remains a key element to understand the reception and cultural response to cyberpunk fiction.

An important place to begin analysing how SciFi gets used as an aspirational roadmap of the future, is to look at how it gets drawn into conversations about authorial intentions to accurately predict the world of the future. The innate contrast of whether SciFi is written to predict the world to come or exaggerate and reflect its time of writing is a commonly debated topic for this genre.<sup>335</sup> One frequent answer to this question is that

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<sup>334</sup> Nast, C., 2022. “Can Sci-Fi Writers Prepare Us for an Uncertain Future?”. [online] *Wired*. Available at: <<https://www.wired.com/story/sci-fi-writers-prepare-us-for-an-uncertain-future/>> [Accessed 27 April 2022].

<sup>335</sup> For recent interest in this question see: Samuel, A., 2022. “Can Science Fiction Predict the Future of Technology?” - *JSTOR Daily*. [online] *JSTOR Daily*. Available at: <<https://daily.jstor.org/can-science->

SciFi should not be read predictively. Ursula K. Le Guin, for example, famously wrote in her introduction to *The Left Hand of Darkness* that it is not the purpose of thought experiments to predict the future, but instead to describe reality, the past and the present day: ‘Prediction is the business of prophets, clairvoyants, and futurologists. It is not the business of novelists. A novelist’s business is lying. SciFi is not predictive; it is descriptive.’<sup>336</sup> Le Guin’s signature sense of humour shows through in this quote, with her reflection on her own work, and the work of her peers in the SciFi community, as the business of lying. It is apparent from her following sentence that SciFi is meant to be descriptive, i.e. that it isn’t “lying” that she is interested in, but deceiving those who think they are looking forwards into recognising and reflecting on what is around them. There is an innate dichotomy implied here, that if a novel is taken to be ‘an accurate prediction of the future’ then it will fail to communicate to its readership any commentary it might offer about its present. SciFi, for LeGuin, is either predictive *or* descriptive, not both. Having to champion SciFi’s critique of the present is a perspective that resurges fairly commonly, particularly from authors themselves. Anthony Burgess also raises it with regards to *1984* in his own book *1985*, where he discusses at length how Orwell’s writing reflects his present and is not predictive.<sup>337</sup> There is a danger, however, in assuming SciFi can only fulfil one of these purposes. Whilst it is within reason to accept that Le Guin may speak so dismissively of SciFi’s predictive potential in order to

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fiction-predict-the-future-of-technology/> [Accessed 20 May 2022]. And Hauser, K., 2022. “Science fiction doesn’t predict the future. It inspires it.” [online] *Big Think*. Available at: <<https://bigthink.com/the-present/sci-fi-predict-inspire-future/>> [Accessed 20 May 2022]. Although we can also look to older examples of this conversation, such as: Marcus, A., Soloway, E., Sterling, B., Swanwick, M. and Vinge, V., 1999. “Opening plenary: sci-fi @ CHI-99: science-fiction authors predict future user interfaces.” *CHI ’99 Extended Abstracts on human factors in computing systems*, 1999-05-15., pp.p.95-96.

<sup>336</sup> Le Guin, Ursula K., (1987). *The left hand of darkness*. (New York: Chelsea House Publishers) p.8

<sup>337</sup> Burgess, 1985. In his section “1948: an old man interviewed” he talks about how 1984 reflects ‘London at the end of the second world war’ and the elements of Orwell’s present he identifies in the novel.

champion her desire to critique the present, seeing these interpretations of SciFi's transmissive potential set against each other can create unnecessary conflict.

The implication of this argument's commonality then is that the predominant understanding of SciFi becomes about its capacity for predictions. Tim Maughan, for example, writes about SciFi's capacity to correctly envisage the future in his *Medium* post 'How Science Fiction Imagined the 2020s'.<sup>338</sup> In this, he breaks down a number of works from the 80s and 90s and how elements of them echo concerns of the 2020s, but he ends by writing: 'Making accurate predictions about the future is not only an impossible task for SciFi but also one of its least interesting aims.' For Maughan, 'it is impossible to remove art from the time in which it was created,' and it will therefore reflect the concerns of its time. What he concludes is that the recognisable elements of this older SciFi, when encountered in the 2020s, represent well established fears and concerns; it's not the specifics of SciFi's imagined objects that matters, but rather authors tapping into trends and changes in the world around them. These features of life, in themselves, offer a more reliable prediction of social, and potential technological, change than anything an author might devise from their imagination. What this also highlights is a common authorial disinterest in the specifics of the technologies that they represent, despite an outside assumption to the contrary. For cyberpunk in particular, William Gibson is a good representative and has said in interviews that he believes 'the

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<sup>338</sup> Maughan, T., 2022. "How Science Fiction Imagined the 2020s". [online] *Medium*. Available at: <<https://onezero.medium.com/how-science-fiction-imagined-the-2020s-f8e98a5bc729>> [Accessed 27 April 2022].

least important thing about science fiction for me is its predictive capacity.'<sup>339</sup> He has spoken about his technical understanding of the specifics of his technologies, for example computer processes, being superficial. Gibson famously knew little of the computational processes about which he was writing and is quoted as such in his interview with Larry Mcaffery, saying: 'I'm looking for images that supply a certain atmosphere. Right now, science and technology seem to be very useful sources. But I'm more interested in the language of, say, computers than I am in the technicalities.'<sup>340</sup> In many ways, then, the objects of SciFi are unimportant; it is the conditions, processes, and narratives that authors tend to value, and that in turn reinforces how SciFi can reflect the authors' contemporary world, the processes and conditions they design, extrapolate from, and muse over, and what is currently perceived in the world about them.

Importantly though, as briefly suggested above, this too might be thought of as a method of prediction, though a prediction not of the physical or technological, but the social. Cory Doctorow writes about using SciFi to identify the concerns of the present, particularly with regards to cyberpunk texts and the danger of corporations and unrestrained capitalism.<sup>341</sup> Of interest in this particular article is how he rehomes the concerns surrounding the creation and domination of Skynet, an AI from the *Terminator*<sup>342</sup> franchise that seeks to eradicate humanity, against the exponential rise in

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<sup>339</sup> Nast, C., 2022. "William Gibson on Why Sci-Fi Writers Are (Thankfully) Almost Always Wrong". [online] *Wired*. Available at: <<https://www.wired.com/2012/09/interview-with-william-gibson/>> [Accessed 27 April 2022].

<sup>340</sup> McCaffery, Larry. *Storming The Reality Studio*. Duke University Press, 1991. "Interview with William Gibson", pp.263-285 [http://project.cyberpunk.ru/idb/gibson\\_interview.html](http://project.cyberpunk.ru/idb/gibson_interview.html)

<sup>341</sup> Doctorow, Cory. "Cory Doctorow: Skynet Ascendant". *Locus Online*, 2022, <https://locusmag.com/2015/07/cory-doctorow-skynet-ascendant/>.

<sup>342</sup> The first films of which are: Cameron, J. (1984). *The Terminator*. Orion Pictures. and Cameron, J., Wisner, W., Schwarzenegger, A., Hamilton, L., Patrick, R., Morton, J., Furlong, E., ... Artisan Home

power of corporations. He connects the distributed consciousness of a globe-spanning AI to the 'autonomous, transhuman, transnational technologies whose bodies are distributed throughout our physical and economic reality' and sees similarities between Skynet's physical destruction of humanity and the hostile, 'impersonal viciousness' of corporations' disdain for the individual. This comparison is particularly striking because it recognises a 'predictive capacity' within ScFi for the social structures that threaten to grow out of a work's contemporary situation and represents them through futuristic technology such as that of AI.

This is the same argument as put forward by Maughan: that prior SciFi reflects concerns that persist into the near future and so can 'predict' the future by understanding where it is going. The reason I am drawing attention to this specificity, is to emphasise how it is not necessarily the desire to make real these technologies that is problematic, but the detachment of them from their context. The most predictive elements of SciFi, following Maughan's analysis of Skynet, is how it predicts the social structures of the future, and how the technologies of these SciFi texts come about through, or support the continuation of them. It is not the objects that specifically cause the social issues at the heart of these texts. The production of these technologies is not directly what concerns a number of these authors, but the conditions of life that surround them. It is that these items can be vital to illuminating those social issues, to make them digestible and easily accessible to their audience. Therefore, when the technologies are removed from these situations, they become dangerous, as they lose

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Entertainment (Firm). (2003). *Terminator 2: Judgement day*. Santa Monica, Calif: Artisan Home Entertainment.

their futuristic new-ness upon creation, and therefore lose their use in SciFi to reveal problematic social structures and behaviours.

One potentially unintended side effect of this interpretation of SciFi, is the historicisation of its futures. Within cyberpunk itself, the very forms its technologies take are unfamiliar to our contemporary environments, not because of their futurity, but because of their pastness. Despite futuristic depictions of technologies of digital embodiment and custom-modifications for the physical body, the foundational texts of the genre remain rooted in the technological structures of the late 20th Century. Its computer terminals and hardware are comprehensively wired together, as is their access to online facilities, their data is stored on laser discs, and so on. The idealisation of cyberpunk cool is wedded to the 1980s (and even when newer works (such as e.g. *Altered Carbon*) escape the specifics of that technological milieu, a number of its logics remain, with physical interfaces and glitchy screens abounding as the cyberpunk aesthetic).<sup>343</sup> Features such as these can be seen as a reinforcement for reading cyberpunk, or other SciFi, as an extended speculation on the present. It would be unlikely for the public to now imagine that the future will be wired or stored on discs, as our present technological development has outpaced that expectation. But this can be seen as a freeing element to cyberpunk: the specifics of a futuristic technology's representation is less likely to be read predictively if it is grounded in outdated hardware, or at the least, it is less likely to be read as a trove of potential R&D projects. Cyberpunk's objects, due to the persistence of this historicised generalisation of itself,

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<sup>343</sup> *Ready Player One* the novel remains a perfect example of this due to its inescapable obsession and idolisation of the 1980s. See chapter 1 of this thesis for further analysis of cyberpunk's historicization, or Chapter 4 for a stronger breakdown of the shortcomings of *Ready Player One*.



become nostalgically outdated in their nature, or presentation. And whilst that may lead to the expectation that they are less likely to be recognised as our future, this is not the case. What we are seeing is that this historicisation of style is no hindrance to the appeal of the technologies. If anything, the nostalgia for this bygone future helps support cyberpunk.<sup>344</sup> The artefacts are still vulnerable to the decontextualisation of active transmission, and that process is what this chapter is exploring.

These readings of cyberpunk, and SciFi more broadly, as interrogations of the present are frequently encountered in critical writings on the topic, and Fredric Jameson's interrogation of SciFi, in his book *Progress vs Utopia*, is particularly important as a scholar who has stated that cyberpunk is 'the supreme literary expression if not of postmodernism, then of late capitalism itself'.<sup>345</sup> For this reason, it is important to understand what his perspective on the role of SciFi is, to understand why he believes cyberpunk reflects this particular moment so strongly. Jameson suggests that SciFi does not intend to imagine a "real" future, but, instead, 'its multiple mock futures serve the quite different function of transforming our own present into the determinate past of something yet to come.'<sup>346</sup> For Jameson, the process of reading SciFi defamiliarises the present for the reader, reconstituting it as a past that can then be responded to as one might with historical detachment. Imagining our future lets us more objectively understand our present. It is not that the future depicted necessarily

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<sup>344</sup> There is sadly little space in this chapter to pursue this angle, which intersects with the concept of "Hauntology", a term coined by Derrida in 1993. See *Spectres of Marx* for its original appearance, but most importantly for this idea of retrofuturism and a nostalgia for lost futures, see Mark Fisher's *What is Hauntology*.

<sup>345</sup> Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, (Duke University Press, 1991) p.419

<sup>346</sup> Jameson, Fredric. "Progress versus Utopia; Or, Can We Imagine the Future? (Progrès Contre Utopie, Ou: Pouvons-Nous Imaginer L'avenir)." *Science Fiction Studies*, vol. 9, no. 2, 1982, pp. 147–158. JSTOR, [www.jstor.org/stable/4239476](http://www.jstor.org/stable/4239476). Accessed 16 Sept. 2020. p152

resembles the world of the present, as for him '[t]he present is in fact no less a past if its destination proves to be the technological marvels of Verne or [the worlds] of P.K. Dick's near future.'<sup>347</sup> This perspective is indicative of Jameson's literary critical background; as Robert Briggs identifies, 'Jameson tends to organise the novels he refers to according to their location within a rather respectable literary tradition.'<sup>348</sup> He is familiar with analysing literature with regards to its historical contexts, the process of defamiliarizing the present into the past is familiar to him. As a critic, his skills in historiographically situating the texts he is analysing more easily lend themselves to considering their reflections on their present, rather than their beliefs about the future. It enables a process of reading that makes the conditions of the present interrogatable and smooths this process of analysis across the genre shift from previous literary traditions. This is not to say it is solely the practice of academics however, as at its heart this is the basis of using 'difference', such as the difference of an imagined future, to highlight the present.

What is key to this perspective is that it is the relationship between 'a' future, and 'the' present that Jameson puts forward as key to this process. The different futures of texts are less important than the fact they are futures. We see this contrast when we compare this idea to that of an authorial point of view as it is not the only method of interrogating imagined futures. Building on this but prioritising different elements of SciFi worlds rather than viewing them solely as the conditions that might arrive after the 'end' of our present, are the ideas of Bruce Sterling. Briggs contrasts Jameson's words with

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<sup>347</sup> Jameson, *Progress versus Utopia*, p.153

<sup>348</sup> Briggs, Robert. "The Future Of Prediction: Speculating On William Gibson's Meta-Science-Fiction". Taylor & Francis, 2022, <https://doi.org/10.1080/0950236X.2012.738702>.

Sterling's, an author who is inescapably tied to the rise of cyberpunk with his foundational *Mirrorshades* anthology.<sup>349</sup> Briggs sees Sterling's account as a supplementary analytical perspective on the purpose, or impact, of SciFi:

Sterling's account underscores SF's saturation of the material reality which shaped cyberpunk's very birth. For Sterling, in other words, it is not that SF 'fails' to reach the real, but rather that there is no 'real' that has not already been suffused by the attitudes and processes of SF.<sup>350</sup>

It is impossible then, to speak to a reality that is not already intimately interwoven with science fictional ideas and attitudes. By the time Sterling is writing, SciFi as a body is too encompassing, and has been too influential for too long for him to reach fully outside of this. We are not looking at a measurable progression of literary traditions, like that which Jameson uses to organise his analysis, but a reality that is already invested in SciFi ideology, and can't be easily divested from it; objects, for example, already have futuristic potential and there isn't an objective real beneath that anymore for SciFi to expose to its audience. In this writing, Briggs is drawing upon Sterling's "Preface" in the *Mirrorshades* anthology, which reflected on a cyberpunk corpus very early into the genre's lifespan. What is important to extrapolate here however, is not just the conditions of cyberpunk's birth, but an author's perspective on SciFi's environment. For Sterling, it is not the purpose of the genre to interrogate the present to enable

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<sup>349</sup> Sterling, Bruce. *Mirrorshades: The Cyberpunk Anthology*. (New York: Arbor House, 1986) Internet resource. p.xv

<sup>350</sup> Briggs. "The future of prediction..."

philosophical reflection, but rather to experiment with the limits of the customs and habits of the present. 'SF's attempts to imagine the future never function at such a grand scale as to plot the path of progress, but rather seek merely to experiment with ways of thinking things anew.'<sup>351</sup> As Briggs summarises here, Sterling is encouraging a varied approach to our interaction with the present and our understanding of the paths that lead into possible futures. Whilst greatly enthused with what he saw as cyberpunk pushing boundaries of SciFi into new and exciting locations, he understands this desire to explore the concept of the new across SciFi's long history. In his *Mirrorshades* preface, he writes 'As writers, we owe a debt to those before us, those SF writers whose conviction, commitment, and talent enthralled us and, in all truth, changed our lives.'<sup>352</sup>

Repeatedly throughout this pseudo-manifesto, he recognises how prior periods of SciFi, such as the New Wave and 'the harder tradition' are key to cyberpunks who are 'steeped in the lore and tradition of the SF field'; the field of experimentation and reimagination of the potentials of our present. A variety of experimentation is central to the new definition of cyberpunk put forward in this thesis. Jameson's futures, in contrast, do not need to prioritise uniqueness from each other for the sake of offering distinct perspectives, as their importance focuses on how they historicise the present. For Sterling, the varieties become the focus from the non-academic perspective, an encouragement of mutable progression and experimentation over deeper philosophical analysis that can, ironically, obfuscate potential.

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<sup>351</sup> Briggs. "The future of prediction..."

<sup>352</sup> Sterling, *Mirrorshades*: p.xv

Both of these readings offer valuable insight for analysing how SciFi reflects on the present rather than speculates about the future, and they are useful tools for a critical understanding of the potentials of the genre.<sup>353</sup> Sterling's method arguably stretches further from the critical environment to encourage the enmeshing of technology with counterculture in habit-challenging experimentation, but both are tools that prove useful in unpicking the varied permutations of cyberpunk texts, particularly in their development across the genre's history. Whilst Sterling sees the 'real' as inescapably interwoven with an ongoing trajectory of SciFi, Jameson suggests a method that can potentially reach past this to understand deeper historical influences; his method creates a central difference between future and present, that turns whatever present the texts in question would have, into an artefact that can be analysed and understood in the same manner as the fictional future.

They both have important perspectives on SciFi's reflections on the conditions of its present which can help audiences better understand their contemporary worlds. Jameson looks to SciFi to understand where we stand, whilst Sterling looks to the same texts to understand that there are many routes before our feet. However, these interpretations and analyses of SciFi do not permeate too successfully outside of the critical environments of academia and expert and established fan communities; regardless of the critique of the possibility of their doing so, these texts are often

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<sup>353</sup> Importantly they are not the only perspective on SciFi's predictive capacity. In 2011 Neal Stephenson (the author of cyberpunk text *Snow Crash*) founded Project Hieroglyph, joining with other authors (including a number of known cyberpunk authors such as Bruce Sterling, Rudy Rucker, and Elizabeth Bear to name a few) to write SciFi with the intention of inspiring real-world research. Their website can be found here: *Project Hieroglyph*, <https://hieroglyph.asu.edu/>. It is also worth noting here Stephenson's involvement with Jeff Bezos' space-faring project Blue Origin where he was a part-time advisor, so he is particularly enmeshed with this perception of SciFi as an agent for inspiration. See here for further information: "Geek's Guide to the Galaxy, 2022. How Star Trek and Sci-Fi Influenced Jeff Bezos." [online] *WIRED*. Available at: <<https://www.wired.com/2019/01/geeks-guide-jeff-bezos/>> [Accessed 27 April 2022]

interpreted as road-mapping scientific progression or anticipating our future directly. Whilst it is important to challenge this expectation, we also need to deal with the fact that this reading of SciFi still exists, is widespread, and is put to work by a number of people and companies in the public eye. Sterling's understanding of the genre remains the most useful, accessible, and communicable lens for analysis: SciFi's imaginings can encourage experimentation with the paths of progress into the future, and therefore evoking these imaginations as inspiration can be a productive pursuit. But where this becomes problematic is with the expected unified understanding of broad science fictional technologies existing across diverse works. When this occurs one of the multiple strands of a potential future that Sterling sees in fiction becomes dominant over the others, erasing the interplay that encourages active engagement with the themes of cyberpunk.<sup>354</sup> Sterling's conception of the predictive role of fiction is very important for how cyberpunk becomes vulnerable to active transmission, and we can see this through the following methods.

### Cyberpunk's Vulnerability to Active Transmission

Cyberpunk's particular vulnerability to active transmission can be seen through combining Sterling's conception of cyberpunk as a multitude of variations and imaginings on the present, with the concept of 'lines of flight',<sup>355</sup> proposed by Giles

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<sup>354</sup> Such as has been discussed already in this thesis, where presenting multiple approaches to similar themes and ideas opens them up for deeper analysis

<sup>355</sup> Deleuze, Gilles, and Guattari, Félix. *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota. 1987) Press. p.xvii

Deleuze and Felix Guattari. In this comparison we can understand how when a singular understanding of cyberpunk becomes overemphasised in the public's general understanding of the genre, the criticisms and alternatives suggested by cyberpunk as pathways out of an oppressive, neoliberal and corporate-dominated future are weakened.

This is best elaborated through how cyberpunk presents its futuristic technologies. As mentioned above, early cyberpunk has a veneer of 'cool' overlaying the messy potential of the technologies in their worlds. Cyberpunk technology is 'cutting edge', 'exciting', and unpredictable. The high-octane stance that, particularly, early cyberpunk focused on with its punk-ness showed street-level experimentation and re-appropriation of technologies that were used by 'the man' to oppress a mass public. As we saw in Chapter 1, this is the generally accepted essence behind cyberpunk writing, and it interacts with transmission in a very particular way. As the punk rebels of cyberpunk writing twist the technologies of their oppressors back against them, using them as their own strengths, we see two sides to this technology: how technologies are used to ossify the status quo of cyberpunk worlds is criticised, but we also see how each major technology can be an escape vector in direct contrast to their function as tools of stagnation or oppression.

This evokes a Marxian perspective on technology, wherein those in control of capital produce the means of their own overthrowing; '[w]hat the bourgeoisie, therefore, produces, above all, is its own grave-diggers.'<sup>356</sup> It is what Giles Deleuze and Felix Guattari designate as a 'line of flight', wherein all social systems contain multiple

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<sup>356</sup> Marx, Karl, and Friedrich Engels. *The Communist Manifesto*, Lerner Publishing Group, 2010. ProQuest Ebook Central, <https://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/bham/detail.action?docID=5444456>. p.20

pathways running through it and out, seeking escape vectors to new systems. These lines of flight do not necessarily successfully escape their situations, as Edward Thornton reflects '[m]ore often than not, lines of flight are blocked or are recaptured by the assemblage from which they escape.'<sup>357</sup> Technology then is not entirely a route to overcoming cyberpunk societal problems, but a means of creating multiple lines of flight through that social system in the hopes that some make it through.

In this manner we can view cyberpunk technology as a neutral medium.<sup>358</sup> One which is often controlled by those in power and used to maintain the status quo, showing lines of flight that are recaptured,<sup>359</sup> yet frequently contains unique vectors of resistance that might overcome it. As these lines of flight are the most unique, they are often the focus of stories, but they have to contrast an overwhelming expectation that the 'hero's' path is doomed to fail. It is important to recognise this potential to reduce the chance of reading technological determinism into cyberpunk's core. Naturally, in a future so cluttered with technological gadgets and systems that control much of daily life, it is easy to see this technology as responsible for the poor living conditions of its inhabitants. This is not the intent of the vast majority of cyberpunk. As discussed in our definition in Chapter 1, whilst technology often undermines the sanctity of the body, it also enables self-expression and discovery. What remains to be resisted, for its punk element, is the corporate hegemony that controls distribution and implementation of these new technologies. The technology is the medium through which power, and

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<sup>357</sup> Thornton, Edward. "On Lines Of Flight: The Theory Of Political Transformation In A Thousand Plateaus". *Deleuze And Guattari Studies*, vol 14, no. 3, 2020, pp. 433-456. Edinburgh University Press, <https://doi.org/10.3366/dlgs.2020.0411>. Accessed 31 July 2022.

<sup>358</sup> This not universal across all cyberpunk, but is a very common approach to the representation of technology in the genre. This is discussed in greater detail in Chapter 1.

<sup>359</sup> Just as Capitalism appropriates and corrupts the tools of resistance developed against it.



rebellion, enact their control, it does not impose its own conditions. The idea of technology as a medium supporting multiple lines of flight works perfectly with Sterling's desire to 'experiment with ways of thinking things anew.'<sup>360</sup> It holds multiple pathways and connections through the social system of cyberpunk and experiments with how we might grow alongside our technology, considering potential ethical downsides and steering us away from, or towards its dangers depending on the creator's outlook. Cyberpunk has made the exploration of this relationship its own over the years.

One of the key parts of Chapter 1 of this thesis was drawing upon multiple examples of cyberpunk works for each definitional element to emphasise that there is no unanimous vision of the future. However, for those reaching into cyberpunk for their next project, there are narrative angles to both condone and condemn the ideas within them. Therefore, when we find ourselves confronted by people who draw upon cyberpunk's imagery without its context to help to legitimise their vision of the future, it is important to have a robust understanding of this experimental multiplicity at cyberpunk's heart. Particularly when cyberpunk champions 'coolness' as Sterling also promotes in *Mirrorshades*; the technologies and people who interact with them are often cool and exciting. The context of these characters is vitally important as it is who uses the medium of technology that conveys cyberpunk's political stance. Whilst corporate hegemony enforces static, oppressive conditions, our rebels are part of subcultures and countercultures. When those high up in the corporate (real) world appropriate these voices, we lose the punk that strives to find a better life for those at the bottom of the ladder. Cyberpunk's nuanced discussion of technology's implementation contains within

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<sup>360</sup>Briggs 2022

it different perspectives on these varied social conditions that are vital to maintain; therefore reducing our understanding of cyberpunk to the appropriations we are often pitched risks damaging its revolutionary potential. Whilst cyberpunk does often criticise its worlds, it offers angles of approach that sing their positive potential, and if these stories are being disseminated to a fresh audience, for instance, they are ripe to be pitched however the speaker so desires. Lines of flight that might lead cyberpunk protagonists out into new freedoms are open to being caught and curtailed by those who would benefit from the hypercapitalist worlds from which cyberpunk tries to lead its audience away. When the CEOs at the head of corporations place themselves into the narrative position of the workers and rebels who seek to repurpose the technology of their oppression, their revolutionary energy is repurposed into supporting those same structures of oppression. Then to unfamiliar audiences, this potential line of flight is lost. Cyberpunk's criticism lives in its context more than the technologies themselves, and so devoting the time to understand its nuances protects it from decontextualization and appropriation.

These are the ideas we will return to in the analyses of specific instances of active transmission below. This chapter breaks down how the 'coolness' of the cyberpunk technologies that suffuse their worlds opens them up to decoupling from their original ethical critique, and how appropriation of cyberpunk's rebellious heroes funnels its counter-cultural energy into supporting the very systems cyberpunk rails against. To perform this analysis, I will first establish a language for analysing transmission. For this we turn to Bassett et al's *Better Made Up*.

## Modes of Transmission

Despite the intentions of the authors and critics above to view cyberpunk as a reflection on the conditions of the present, the use of SciFi as inspiration for manufacturable technologies continues. Therefore, to understand the process of how SciFi technologies ‘crossover’ from fiction to reality<sup>361</sup> the work of Bassett et al is incredibly useful. They identify six distinct methods of transmission that chart how SciFi products pass into, or otherwise influence, the realities of tech development<sup>362</sup>. To begin with, I will give an overview of these six methods as a whole, after which we will review those most relevant to cyberpunk.

1. The relatively rare examples of SF technologies being more or less directly translated ‘into the real’ as products or in industrial applications.
  - The key example for this is Arthur C. Clarke and the emergence of geospatial satellites. One of Clarke’s proudest legacies<sup>363</sup> is that he published an article speculating about the potential of geospatial satellites 12 years before Sputnik and 20 years before Comsat was launched.<sup>364</sup>

Bassett et al. note that this form of transmission is overwhelmingly rare. Notably though, this sits in first place in the list due to its being the primary definition of “transmission,”

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<sup>361</sup> Bassett et al. p.42

<sup>362</sup> All 6 methods can be found on p3 of “Better Made Up...”

<sup>363</sup> See Tweney (2022) wherein Arthur C. Clarke is quoted as ‘being “father” of the COMSAT’ as important to him. Tweney, Dylan. "May 25, 1945: Sci-Fi Author Predicts Future By Inventing It". *Wired*, 2022, <https://www.wired.com/2011/05/0525arthur-c-clarke-proposes-geostationary-satellites/>.

<sup>364</sup> See also Bassett et al p.2

categorised by Basset et al as 'direct linear transmission', which they review as a 'commonplace assumption [that is nevertheless] the exception rather than the rule.'<sup>365</sup> Despite being relatively rare in actuality, it is important to consider this understanding of transmission first, as even if it actually happens rarely, the expectation that this occurs frequently means it remains an argument in many contexts to support research projects. If the audience assumes this form of transmission is common, then claims that SciFi technology can, and should, be made real are much more likely to garner support. This embodies an ideal use of SciFi inspiration wherein those reading SciFi texts directly benefit through discovery of a profitable concept which can be lifted, or pursued, directly into financial success. Whilst this is an incredibly common expectation of SciFi's transmission into the real, it is the later methods that Bassett et al identify which prove more impactful. This is still an important method to emphasise however, as it sets the expectation that the Silicon Valley magnates later discussed play upon.

2. The far more numerous instances of fictional 'technologies' that have influenced the ways in which on-going technical or scientific initiatives/objectives are framed.
  - The invisibility cloak in Harry Potter is the example provided, where the fictional object is used as a useful metaphor for describing or provoking work on invisibility/stealth technologies.

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<sup>365</sup> Basset et al. p.1

In this method, SciFi becomes a framing mechanism with less direct semblance between the fictional and the real. As described, this is more of a metaphorical comparison, where an understanding of an initiative's 'end state/intention' is communicated through a more unrealistic representation, i.e. the invisibility of stealth technologies is not as literal as the transparency of the invisibility cloak. What this promotes is a much more speculative relationship between the two sides, wherein the differences between fiction and reality are acknowledged and used loosely to respond to each other's potential, rather than there being an attempt to dictate what new form should be taken.

3. SF works that have clearly inspired or launched particular innovation industries.
  - Cyberpunk appears in Bassett et al's work here with reference to Gibson and fellow authors' portraits of cyberspace. Their influence on the development of digital industries is brought up, in particular with regards to the virtual world of *Second Life*<sup>366</sup> and the inspiration it took from Neal Stephenson's *Snow Crash*<sup>367</sup> (1992).

This form of transmission is easier to 'generally' apply to progressing cultural trends. Whether a text is picking up on an existing trajectory of development, or whether it is 'launching' said innovation can be arguable in some circumstances, such as the

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<sup>366</sup> "Official Site | Second Life - Virtual Worlds, Virtual Reality, VR, Avatars, And Free 3D Chat". Secondlife.Com, 2022, <https://secondlife.com/>.

<sup>367</sup> Stephenson, Neal. *Snow Crash*. New York: Bantam Books, 1993. Print.

relationship of *Star Trek's* communicators to the mobile phone; whether this is progressing telecommunication trends or helping to launch a new direction. Sometimes, however, this mode of transmission can be more overt. One recent example can be found in Tim Sweeney's, the CEO of Epic Games, sincerely held belief in the future of the 'metaverse' he wishes to create with his company, a belief that was established by the US district court in a recent case where Epic attempted to sue Apple for excising too strict rules over apps using their operating system.<sup>368</sup> The metaverse is an area of development also being highly publicly engaged by Mark Zuckerberg, as reflected in Facebook's name-change to "Meta," but it originates, in name and possible form, as the digital matrix from *Snow Crash*. What Stephenson describes as 'a computer-generated universe that [your] computer is drawing onto [your] goggles and pumping into [your] headphones.'<sup>369</sup> .

4. SF works have also influenced certain groups disproportionately.
  - Texts being used as gatekeeping tools, such as in gendered hacker cultures, is the example provided for this entry.

This form of transmission is less important for our purposes within this chapter. Whilst the expectations that western cyberpunk can reinforce imbalances in accessibility to

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<sup>368</sup> See Tyler Wilde's articles for good breakdowns of this legal case: Wilde, Tyler. "Court Rules That Tim Sweeney Really Means All That Stuff He Says About The 'Metaverse'". Pcgamer, 2022, <https://www.pcgamer.com/uk/epic-games-metaverse-court/>. AND Wilde, Tyler. "Epic V Apple Explained: What The Trial Is About And What Happened In Court". Pcgamer, 2022, <https://www.pcgamer.com/epic-v-apple-trial-recap-explained/>.

<sup>369</sup> Stephenson, *Snow Crash*, p.22

certain cultures and groups, particularly with regards to gendered computer science cultures, this chapter is focused on objects rather than social groups. Therefore, whilst it is an important area for research in cyberpunk, and SciFi as a whole, it takes a lower focus in this chapter for the sake of brevity and consistency in discussion.

5. There are many SF works influencing how science and technology are understood beyond specialist areas.
  - For example, surveillance controversies that draw on George Orwell's *1984* for context and to exemplify severity of issues at stake.

This mode of transmission bears much resemblance to the final method below. The important distinction between the two is that this mode refers to how a text is understood by other experts in a similar field, but outside of the narrowest specialisation into, in this case, cyberpunk fiction. This type of transmission is namely a more refined spread of understanding wherein fictional texts can be used between areas of specialism for the likes of debate; for our example, this is how cyberpunk might become a referent for SciFi study, helping better understand the broader category it belongs to. Likewise, in Basset et al's definition, the specifics of SciFi texts would influence the analysis of a broader selection of researchers within schools of literature. The affected audience are still experts, and used to the discussions of fiction that SciFi and cyberpunk specialists commonly have, but are not specifically within that particular specialisation.

6. SF works may influence how science and technology are publicly understood.
  - For example, *Jurassic Park*<sup>370</sup> and its representation of gene editing.

Following the above mode, is how SciFi or cyberpunk affect the general public's understanding of science and technology. This particular example is very common, as fictional examples of real-world techniques are often drawn upon in media commentary for real-world technological advances. It shares several similarities with number 5, as stated, but the particular difference is that the affected audience for this form of transmission is not specialised into this topic at all. This would be how the general public might interpret or understand the ethical discussions raised by SciFi in academic settings, or the particulars of computational technologies function scientifically; how the broadest audience would use these as a reference to understand those unfamiliar topics. This is particularly important for our discussion in this chapter, as it is how the unfamiliarity of this broad audience can be exploited for personal gain that is the issue for active transmission. SciFi and cyberpunk can be accessible, often very visual, representations of complex systems, both scientific and social, yet if these elements are omitted or reinterpreted then what has been changed from the original text or from specialist discussion will not make it to public audiences. This is the form of transmission that recurs throughout the following analysis; whilst under the pretence of suggesting objects may directly travel from fiction to reality (number 1) it is most common that fiction technologies are more generally evoked to familiarise an audience

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<sup>370</sup> Spielberg, Steven. *Jurassic Park*. Universal Pictures, 1993.



with the function of a proposed technology (number 6), one which is divorced from key elements of its original, fictional context. It is also important to highlight the difference between this, and mode number 2; in number 2 the connection between the fictional item experiencing transmission, and the real-world analogy is much more metaphorical. The invisibility cloak is metaphorically related to stealth technology, it is the potential and effect that is transmitted, not the form. For this point, the item can be connected directly, bionic limbs and brain implants are presented directly from texts, to show their exact parallels (or potential parallels) in reality.

An important addition to this, is that fictional referents can also become tiringly overused to the extent that their initial intellectual or ethical or explanatory value can become diluted and lost in the process. The example of ‘Orwellian’ surveillance stands out as an example; *1984* has become such a shorthand for any surveillance developments that it has lost all subtlety in its impact. It can be too easy an example to give, incorrectly communicating a new development’s purpose, such as using *1984* to refer to non-invasive system monitoring systems, or being co-opted as a method of lazy rejection, where “Orwellian” simply means “government intervention” or simply “bad.”<sup>371</sup> In this manner, overuse of particular texts as referents slowly dissolves the specifics of those texts in the public eye. This is how the way these texts are presented impacts their legacy, as it sets what they can become synonymous with, allowing their specific details to fade from memory. For this reason in this chapter, and the thesis as a whole, it is important to draw attention to these too commonly denoted ‘cyberpunk referents’,

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<sup>371</sup> See Rachel Klein as an example. Klein, Rachel. "Please Stop Comparing Things To "1984" - Electric Literature". *Electric Literature*, 2022, <https://electricliterature.com/please-stop-comparing-things-to-1984/>.

as the frequency with which they are called upon dilutes the variety that should intrinsically be part of understanding this genre.

The above taxonomy of transmission methods from Bassett et al's work will be important for the following discussion about the nature of SciFi and cyberpunk being deployed as tools for familiarisation and persuasion. As is unavoidable when separating anything into so many variations, not all will be applicable in all situations. This is true of these denominations, and not all are as applicable to cyberpunk as they are to other SciFi genres. In particular, what these different methods clarify, is that transmission is not purely about the literal translation of fictional objects into the real (ie in method 1), but also about how fiction influences public understanding of real world research and technology, as it is this method of transmission that is most valuable to how cyberpunk stories become appropriated. As I introduced at the outset of this chapter, how cyberpunk's social contexts are divorced from its technologies is key to this appropriation. Bassett et al propose a reasoning for this, that it is important to introduce now, as it applies for the specific case studies of active transmission that will be analysed later.

### Narrative Take and how Cyberpunk Technologies are Decontextualised

In *Better Made Up*, Bassett et al, raise an important point for understanding how cyberpunk technologies and hero-narratives are appropriated, and how negative implications are elided. They identify the abstraction of technologies from their 'narrative

take.<sup>372</sup> By this they refer to the moral implications or pejorative narrative representation of the artefacts being transmitted. As they discuss it, ‘the “mood” and its object do not [always] easily decouple.’<sup>373</sup> This is done through active transmission, wherein transmission is encouraged to translate a particular message or interpretation. The examples used by Bassett et al to demonstrate this detachment of technologies from their ‘narrative take’ are the touchscreens in *Minority Report* and surveillance technology in *1984*. These are the two given as the latter of these technologies retains a cautionary, dystopian mood through transmission, whereas the former divorces more clearly from the dystopian ‘mood’ of the film from which it is taken. In taking these examples from *Better Made Up* we can put Bassett et al’s processes into practice and understand how cyberpunk is appropriated through active transmission. How this process applies to specific technologies is the clearest example of this practice, which we can then extend later into the appropriation of hero narratives, and the effect that this process has on the working climates of futuristic technological research.

In this discussion of ‘narrative take’, Bassett et al’s paper reaches a limitation. *Better Made Up* undertakes a broad analysis of SciFi to identify the processes of transmission to make them visible and understandable. They do not, however, have the time to devote to textual analysis that would better elaborate on why these differences occur between their highlighted examples. That is what this chapter is exploring, some next steps for analysis of these astutely identified variations in transmission processes. It is important to show the applicability of Bassett et al’s research, and how their

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<sup>372</sup> Better Made Up, p32

<sup>373</sup> Better Made Up, p.32

framework supports deeper exploration of the relationship between fiction and reality, and cyberpunk is perfectly placed to elaborate on “why” these occur, due to its contemporary relevance to technological research. Looking at the two examples given, then, a key distinction between them is that the narrative weight given to these technologies is vastly different in both texts.

This distinction plays a key part in each of their transmissions. In *1984*, the overwhelming focus of the story is on the inescapability of surveillance technologies and Winston’s inability to escape the electronic eye of surveillance cameras drives his downfall. It is a camera hidden in his believed sanctuary that eventually betrays him to the thought police. It is not just that his neighbours cannot be trusted not to turn on him if he speaks out of turn, but it is impossible to find privacy from the cameras littering his world. In contrast to this, *Minority Report* does not focus on the role touchscreens play in the surveillance of its dystopia. The text has a similar leaning to *1984*, wherein surveillance technologies oppress the public. However, the central attention for how the public is surveilled is the precogs.<sup>374</sup> Arguably the precogs themselves are reduced to a technology through their exploitation; they effectively become computer banks that predict future behaviour, and in this way they carry the equivalent narrative weight to the cameras of *1984*. In so doing, the touch-screen interfaces for the precog’s vision database loses the narrative focus as an element of exploitation and oppression, and for this reason, it is easier to detach touch screen technologies from the morality of predicting criminal activity. This possibility may have been significantly more difficult

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<sup>374</sup> The precogs are humans with psychic capabilities enabling them to see events in the future. They are placed in a ‘photon milk bath’ where they remain for decades with the sole purpose of envisaging murders so that the pre-crime division may prevent them from happening.

depending on the technology's relation to the central plot, but it stands as an example where a mostly Dystopian text can positively represent futuristic developments.

For *1984*, there are many elements to the surveillance state in which Winston lives such as the cameras and ideological and even linguistic control<sup>375</sup> but it is cameras that literalise 'being watched'. They embody the loss of privacy and omnipresence of the state. They are not just objects, but metaphors. Touch screens are tools, particularly ones which communicate futurity not this metaphorical weight. We can even compare this to the metaverse from *Snow Crash*. As the metaverse is a currently funded push to a broad virtual space, backed by Meta<sup>376</sup> it fits the bill of the touch screens of *Minority Report*. It is a technology that has been divorced from its narrative take; the criticisms Stephenson levels at the monetisation of metaverse avatars stripped from it,<sup>377</sup> which is unsurprising supported by a company already known for malpractice such as poaching website traffic<sup>378</sup> and failing to protect the personal data of users.<sup>379</sup> It is this misuse of cyberpunk technologies that will be returned to later in this chapter when looking at the specifics of Silicon Valley's active transmission of cyberpunk. Similarly, the metaverse of *Snowcrash* is not specifically the danger that is being explored there, which is the

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<sup>375</sup> Social activities such as the "Two Minutes Hate" wherein all people are made to scream hatred at an image of a political figure daily to cement their rejection of him, and the attempt at neutralising resistive thought through development of a new speech "newspeak" also contribute to the control systems of Orwell's world.

<sup>376</sup> Mark Zuckerberg's company famous for the development of Facebook. Interestingly though, as discussed above, Tim Sweeny of Epic Games also wanted to build a "metaverse" specifically and the two are competing with each other to bring this into reality.

<sup>377</sup> Avatars in the metaverse are purchasable with real world money, and there are even 'jerky, grainy, black and white' avatars of people who cannot afford their own consoles and have to access the metaverse through public terminals. See *Snowcrash* p.38. Full citation in bib.

<sup>378</sup> Adi Robinson, "Facebook Employee Warned It Used 'Deeply Wrong' Ad Metrics To Boost Revenue", *The Verge*, 2021 <<https://www.theverge.com/2021/2/18/22289232/facebook-ad-revenue-proposed-reach-inflation-lawsuit-unredacted-filings>> [Accessed 16 September 2022].

<sup>379</sup> Cristina Criddle, "Facebook Sued Over Cambridge Analytica Data Scandal", *BBC News*, 2020 <<https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/technology-54722362>> [Accessed 16 September 2022].

linguistic virus that can be transmitted both digitally and physically. The metaverse is a technology that provides a futuristic environment for the story to unfold. It, like the touchscreens, is a tool to communicate that the story is futuristic, not the its focus. The pattern we can see here then is that when texts are boiled down to quick summaries, certain technologies are an inescapable part of that. *1984* is about being watched constantly. *Minority Report* is about predicting the future. To gesture to a story, we can gesture to its summary, and if the story is not as widely known, as cyberpunk risks becoming as it gets dismissed, the nuanced implications of its technology becomes lost. The metaverse opening a specific vulnerability to the virus is lost when we summarise the story too heavily, as is its financial hierarchy of access. The more integral to the main narrative arc the technology is, the harder it is to decontextualise from the ethical and other interrogations and explorations that its story subjects it to. Cyberpunk, with its proliferation of futuristic technologies offers multiple options for products that feature in these SciFi futures, but do not directly communicate the central fear of those stories. When a generic understanding of cyberpunk prevails, and its stories are boiled down to fit into these expectations, the social critiques built into the details of cyberpunk technologies are easy to be stripped away. Once these are stripped away, as we will see below, leading capitalist figures like those in Silicon Valley can use them to cement the unequal social structures of which cyberpunk warns us into place, with themselves firmly on top.

It is worth taking a moment to acknowledge that active transmission does not only take place from the 'reader' but also from the creator. Interestingly, the computer screens of *Minority Report* were in fact carefully planned to support real-world

development of this technology.<sup>380</sup> Up til now our examples of active transmission have come from external parties who have read or seen certain technologies in fiction and decided they want to create them. Zuckerberg and the metaverse, for instance, is someone who knows Neil Stephenson's *Snowcrash* and wants to take their idea and make it reality for whatever purpose. In this instance we are looking at a cyberpunk creator themselves. In this case it is not an author or director, but a consultant. They are filling a similar purpose for the purposes of this discussion; they are designing the visuals of a movie to encourage the creation of a particular technology in reality. The primary science consultant for *Minority Report*, John Underkoffler, has worked on multiple films with the intention of encouraging certain technologies.<sup>381</sup> As David Kirby's article explains:

Underkoffler is well aware of cinema's ability to instil public desire to see the real-world development of fictional technologies. In fact, he approaches every consulting opportunity with the explicit goal of creating cinematic technologies that enter into the 'technological imaginative vernacular' of actual scientific discourse.<sup>382</sup>

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<sup>380</sup> See David Kirby: for further elaboration into John Underkoffler's representation of gesture-based computer-interface technology. Kirby, David. "The Future Is Now: Diegetic Prototypes and the Role of Popular Films in Generating Real-World Technological Development." *Social Studies of Science*, vol. 40, no. 1, 2010, pp. 41–70. JSTOR, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/27793341>. Accessed 12 Aug. 2022.

<sup>381</sup> A goal that connects with Neal Stephenson's Project Hieroglyph in actively intending to inspire real-world research. Underkoffler is however pitching a specific technology more than Stephenson's broader mission statement suggests where he discusses providing not just ideas for specific innovations but also 'a coherent picture' of their integration into society, economy, and people's lives. Quote from "About", *Project Hieroglyph*, <https://hieroglyph.asu.edu/>

<sup>382</sup> Kirby, "The future is now...", p.50

What this example in particular highlights is how multiple voices in the construction of a text can influence the transmission of its content. Underkoffler is not the author, or the director, but has shaped the diegetic believability of its technology to great success, and he was approached multiple times after filming about bringing this technology into reality.<sup>383</sup> This is important to highlight as it further influences our understanding of active transmission when it comes to what technologies are more easily divorced from their narrative contexts, or narrative take in Bassett et al's terms. The cameras of *1984* are designed to encourage suspicion and revulsion; the screens of *Minority Report* are designed to show functionality and achievability.

Therefore, if we take Bassett et al's initial comparison, where they select *Minority Report* and *1984* as examples of texts which do and don't 'de-couple' from their 'mood' we can see how textual and genre differences impact their transmission. *Better Made Up* moves from introducing this comparison, to discussion of transmission through 'reading', or particularly what an audience may take away when experiencing the text for themselves. They discuss 'the relationship between the reader/viewer and the "text"',<sup>384</sup> drawing attention to how SciFi filmmakers and consultants shape their stories around certain technologies to support them in securing adequate funding for development;<sup>385</sup> this is their *Minority Report* example. Likewise, they introduce *1984* as an example for how 'fictional portrayals of science influence public apprehensions, often by cultivating and reinforcing pre-existing fears and concerns.'<sup>386</sup> Bassett et al uses

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<sup>383</sup> Kirby. "The future is now...", pp.52-3

<sup>384</sup> *Better Made Up*, p.36

<sup>385</sup> *Better Made Up*, p.37

<sup>386</sup> *Better Made Up*, *ibid.*



these texts as examples of the different receptions and transmissions that they identify earlier in their work. It enables them to delve deeper into how their differentiations of transmission work, and support that with evocative examples.

The analysis in this chapter aims to supplement this by looking at why these texts specifically may have experienced their separate modes of transmission. What is it about each that opens it up to its particular kind of influence? We can take their categories, and with specific examples understand what features of a text make it most likely to experience what transmission. The answer to this lies both in the construction of the technology's presentation, and in the broader familiarity of the text across audiences. We have looked at this to explore active transmission because the vulnerability of a technology to being decontextualised is a vital contributing factor in why certain texts fall into Bassett et al's categories. Some stories are innately tied up in their technologies, like *1984*, whilst others include technology that supports a futuristic atmosphere without directly influencing the main narrative focus, in this example like *Minority Report*.

This distinction is particularly important when applying Bassett et al's frameworks to a subgenre such as cyberpunk, which is innately vulnerable to technologies that support a futuristic atmosphere but do not directly drive its story. Likewise, the lack of critical attention cyberpunk texts receive in comparison with the real-world technologies that build out of its ideas opens it to reinterpretation that decouples its technology from its 'narrative take'. Lines of flight that run through these technologies in cyberpunk's multifaceted perspectives are suppressed through the dominance of a reductive reading of cyberpunk, arresting its criticisms of these technologies. Bassett et al's framework

enables us to understand how cyberpunk has been failed by its interpreters, but also how its format, its messy worlds stuffed with easily engaging action plots and the myriad technologies of its cluttered futures has left it so vulnerable to active transmission. Once we understand what these processes are, we can understand how these processes come to pass and look to amend these vulnerabilities in our readings and in fresh cyberpunk authorship moving forwards. It is for this reason that revisiting our definitional understanding of cyberpunk is so vital to updating its critical potential.

### Neoliberalism and Cyberpunk

What the previous analysis of technologies and their 'narrative take' exposes then, is how cyberpunk is actively transmitted in order to cement one interpretation of it as dominant over the others. It overstates the presence of one particular line of flight through the genre to decouple criticisms of (in the above case) chosen items and enable them to be unproblematically pitched as desirable technologies to be brought into the real. These examples from Bassett et al's paper best represent their 1<sup>st</sup> method of transmission (which focuses on technologies that have directly 'made it into the real'). We can further extend this analysis to understand how some speakers, namely those high up in tech research such as Musk and Bezos, further suppress cyberpunk's lines of flight to appropriate the role of its rebellious protagonists for themselves. This method of transmission more closely resembles Bassett et al's 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> methods (i.e. how SciFi influences understanding of specialist areas to other audiences, including general

publics) by overemphasising the importance of lone ‘hacker-heroes’ in cyberpunk stories and combining it with their own, neoliberalist ideology of exceptionalism. This trajectory of exceptionalist narratives that idealise self-made billionaires triumphing through their marketable skills is a key feature of contemporary capitalist ideology and it combines very strongly with the cyberpunk narratives we have already discussed.<sup>387</sup> This is in a large part due to how cyberpunk, from its outset, has responded to the rise of neoliberal politics in the late twentieth century. It is important, therefore, to take a moment to address the relationship between these two. Whilst it is beyond the scope of this thesis to fully unravel the connections between cyberpunk and neoliberalism<sup>388</sup> there are key elements of this relationship that tie into our understanding of the dangers in how cyberpunk narratives are being appropriated. We have talked a lot about how active transmission looks to omit elements of its source material to better suit its speaker’s purposes and as cyberpunk responds to 1980s neoliberal ideology, which benefits Silicon Valley CEOs. Now we have to explore what criticisms, which are inherent to cyberpunk, are being omitted in order to best understand this process.

First, I will establish a definition of what neoliberalism is, in order to understand how cyberpunk is both responding to it, and now being threatened by it. After this I will unpick more specific examples of this narrative appropriation of cyberpunk, and its effects. For many years, neoliberalism was a term that was very difficult to pin down to a

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<sup>387</sup> Particularly in Chapter 1, where I established neoliberal ideology as part of the key element of extreme inequality in wealth or resources.

<sup>388</sup> For a more thorough breakdown of this, see Carline Alphin’s book *Neoliberalism and Cyberpunk Science Fiction*. Alphin, C. (2020). *Neoliberalism and Cyberpunk Science Fiction: Living on the Edge of Burnout* (1st ed.). Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003044505>

specific definition, but in light of recent historical work it has been identified as a distinctive political theory. In the words of Wendy Brown:

In popular usage, neoliberalism is equated with a radically free market: maximized competition and free trade achieved through economic deregulation, elimination of tariffs, and a range of monetary and social policies favorable to business and indifferent toward poverty, social deracination, cultural decimation, long-term resource depletion, and environmental destruction<sup>389</sup>

Neoliberalism then, takes the individual freedoms that are so valued in classical liberalism, and applies this ideology to an economic framework. It is the trade market being free that is emphasised in this instance. The belief is that reducing the regulations governments held on the economic market would promote an ideal, competitive environment that would self-regulate to the benefit of all. As Jeremy Gilbert summarises it, neoliberalism:

advocates a programme of deliberate intervention by government in order to encourage particular types of entrepreneurial, competitive and commercial behaviour in its citizens, ultimately arguing for the management of populations with the aim of cultivating the type of individualistic, competitive, acquisitive and entrepreneurial behaviour which the liberal tradition has historically assumed to

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<sup>389</sup> Wendy Brown, "Neoliberalism and the End of Liberal Democracy," p1 of chapter 3 of Edgework, 2005

be the natural condition of civilised humanity, undistorted by government intervention<sup>390</sup>

Government intervention on the free market should be, in this idea, relegated to preventing corporate monopolies, as that would stymie the competitive element that drives this system, and collusion, for similar purposes. What we begin to see, then, in these two definitions, is a system that is not intended to support the individual as much as the market itself. It is 'favourable to business' and it 'encourages particular types of [...] behaviour in its citizens', therein forcing the people within a neoliberalist system to adapt themselves to match a system that demands a constant bettering of one's monetary value. Caroline Alphin describes this as 'a reality whereby humans are driven by competition rather than exchange.'<sup>391</sup> The shift towards this prioritisation of marketability is something that came to a stark head during Margaret Thatcher and Ronald Reagan's governance in the 1980s, and therefore is a distinctly important part of the political landscape when cyberpunk first arrived. I focus on these figures in particular, as they are particularly tied to the origins of cyberpunk in the United Kingdom and in the U.S, where a lot of these more famous cyberpunk texts that we have been discussing originate. It also ideologically connects to the beliefs of the Silicon Valley magnates we have already been discussing due to their Western, capitalist perspective.

The politics of Thatcher and Reagan can be seen to contrast what was otherwise a more socialist environment preceding them. Socialism is, according to the Stanford

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<sup>390</sup> Jeremy Gilbert, 'What Kind Of Thing Is Neoliberalism?' *New Formations*, 80 and 81 (Winter 2013): 7-22.

<sup>391</sup> Carline Alphin, *Neoliberalism and Cyberpunk Science Fiction*, p.1

Encyclopedia of Philosophy, 'best defined in contrast with capitalism'. Most importantly here:

Both socialism and capitalism grant workers legal control of their labor power, but socialism, unlike capitalism, requires that the bulk of the means of production workers use to yield goods and services be under the effective control of workers themselves<sup>392</sup>

This can be seen in the lead up to the 1980s in an increase in the powers of Trade Unions; this was particularly prominent in the UK, where during the 1960s and 70s Unions held a great deal of power through public sector strikes, contributing to economic trouble in those years. This entrenchment of power in the people is an element of what these leaders sought to address when they came to power, such as seeing union power decreasing drastically under Thatcher. What is changed then, is that power is no longer accumulated in mass movements but instead is handed to the individual as the responsible agent for their own success. Brown again addresses this situation of responsibility:

All are tasked with enhancing present and future value through self-investments that in turn attract investors. Financialized market conduct entails increasing or

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<sup>392</sup> Gilabert, Pablo and Martin O'Neill, "Socialism", The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy (Fall 2019 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), URL = <<https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2019/entries/socialism/>>.

maintaining one's ratings, whether through blog hits, retweets, Yelp stars, college rankings, or Moody's bond ratings<sup>393</sup>

What we see here is that once putting this neoliberal ideology into practice by reducing government intervention in market regulation, individual behaviour is directly impacted. When competition is put at the fore, we create champions out of those who are successful in this system through an image of personal dedication and achievement. This is a conception of the individual that crosses very strongly into those we see in cyberpunk and so it is this element that we will focus on for this chapter. Not only is cyberpunk particularly engaged with criticising this aspect of neoliberalism, but it ties in very closely with the exceptionalist hero narratives that are part of the active transmission we are discussing in this chapter.

After having covered what neoliberalism is, and some of its broader conditions, we will now narrow the focus for this chapter to this part of its connection; summarised well by Caroline Alphin again, when she writes:

Individuals practice, and thus nurture, neoliberal subjectivity when they, for example, monitor their physiological performance in order to enhance their human capital, when they embrace insecurity in order to live intensely, when they accept all time, including leisure, as labor/capital time, or when they calculate their worth based on their ability to compete<sup>394</sup>

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<sup>393</sup> Shenk, Timothy. "What Exactly Is Neoliberalism?". *Dissent Magazine*, 2022, <https://www.dissentmagazine.org/blog/booked-3-what-exactly-is-neoliberalism-wendy-brown-undoing-the-demos>.

<sup>394</sup> Alphin, *Neoliberalism and Cyberpunk Science Fiction*, p.2

Alphin is writing very much with the purpose of connecting this ideology to cyberpunk, and we can see a number of the key elements that she highlights here. First of all is the insecurity of living conditions, a reflection of the precarity innate to many cyberpunk characters' lives.<sup>395</sup> Precarity incentivises the need to market every element of the self, to turn 'wasted' time of self-enjoyment into 'productive' time. We see this taken to its extremes in cyberpunk fiction, every part of the self is considered for its value, and this is not only in time and activities but literally in the commodification of the body through augmentation. One of the impacts of this exaggeration of precarity and the ingenuity or talent required to market the self successfully enough to rise to the top of the capitalist ladder is the emphasis it places on exceptionalism.

Exceptional individuals dominate a market, and it is through competing amongst each other that they can truly succeed, and society, in turn, benefits: this is the story used to generate support for entrepreneurs such as Musk or Bezos, and is similarly intended to encourage others to identify with them and their ideals; it is widely purported that these figures built their businesses up to billion-dollar organisations 'from their own garage', conveniently leaving out the initial investments they often accrue from their parents to set up their businesses.<sup>396</sup> In this narrative they start from the same disadvantaged position of much of the public, with only their own talents to their name,

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<sup>395</sup> We discuss the importance of precarity to cyberpunk in Chapter 1 of this thesis

<sup>396</sup> See articles such as Mary Miesenazahl's from Business Insider, and Gene Marks' article for The Guardian to elaborate further on the startup help such CEOs received from their relations. Meisenzahl, Mary. "Starting In A Garage Is Crucial To The Origin Story Of Many Silicon Valley Entrepreneurs. Here Are The Modest Beginnings Of 5 Tech Companies Worth Billions Today.". *Business Insider*, 2022, <https://www.businessinsider.com/google-apple-hp-microsoft-amazon-started-in-garages-photos-2019-12?r=US&IR=T>. Marks, Gene. "Entrepreneurs Are Great, But It'S Mom And Dad Who Gave Them Their Start". *The Guardian*, 2022, <https://www.theguardian.com/business/2021/jan/31/small-business-entrepreneurs-success-parents>.



just as many cyberpunk protagonists (such as Case)<sup>397</sup> demonstrate. We see this story played out to the letter in the 2011 novel, *Ready Player One*<sup>398</sup> where a young, nerdy, man successfully inherits a multi-billion-dollar company through direct competition with others, therefore rising from living in a slum to the heights of financial superiority. I turn to *Ready Player One* to support this idea, as it is a key example of a recent text that lifts traditional elements of cyberpunk and misses the point of why they are essential to it. It exaggerates this exceptionalist story without critique, thus demonstrating how closely cyberpunk elements can support neoliberalist ideology when used inappropriately. This text and its use of cyberpunk elements is investigated in more detail in Chapter 4.

What this story does for the entrepreneurs who use it, is to perpetuate the expectation that the potential for success is within anyone, but only if they maximise their potential for acquiring capital and beating their competitors in terms of dedication and innovation. In Brown's words '[h]uman capitals, like all other capitals, are constrained by markets in both inputs and outputs to comport themselves in ways that will outperform the competition and to align themselves with good assessments about where those markets may be going.'<sup>399</sup> Rather than a shared approach to progress, neoliberalism relies on assuming that the individual is responsible for their own successes, and if they do not succeed it is due to their reluctance to align with the correct way to manipulate (minimally regulated) markets for profit. It supports the

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<sup>397</sup> From *Neuromancer*

<sup>398</sup> And its movie adaptation, although the movie replaces a lot of the book's idolization of 1980s Western, nerd culture with modern popular culture references. The impact of this is that the text more strongly calls back to the importance of cultural icons from the time when the current CEOs we are discussing were growing up. The book therefore more strongly appeals to the value of people who nostalgically remember particular artefacts of the 1980s.

<sup>399</sup> Brown, *Undoing...* p.109

system to believe anyone can rise to the top, as in so doing each individual is encouraged to behave accordingly for this ideology to remain dominant. Reinforcing this idea then, is how successful CEOs, such as the above, mythologise it.

With cyberpunk's clear connections to this mode of thinking, it makes it a prime candidate for this strategy and Case from *Neuromancer* remains a perfect example of this. Case himself is just one of many console-cowboys, enough that they have bars with a reputation for being hang-outs for this career. He is a tradesman, of sorts. Yet out of all the console-cowboys it is him who is chosen to help change the world. He comes from the streets and rises to success through his technical talent. He has best aligned with the direction of the markets, marketing himself as a hacker, and he has risen to the top by out-competing all other console cowboys, not by working alongside them. As a trajectory, this matches exactly the message that would support capitalist exceptionalism. Case can become a comfortable fit for the ideal narratives of billionaires being 'everyday people' before their fortune. Therefore, if the details of his story remain omitted, the message we can take from this narrative is that our path to counteracting an oppressive, dystopic future is through competitive marketisation of the self.

Returning to Wendy Brown, 'All [market actors including individuals] are tasked with enhancing present and future value through self-investments that in turn attract investors.'<sup>400</sup> We then see Case is also lifted out of his place by an investor, Armitage, who is working as the financial front for the AI Wintermute. Case attracts the attention of this financier in part through his previous history and skills as a hacker. However, if we interrogate this relationship further, cracks start to appear in this ideal comparison. It

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<sup>400</sup> Shenk, 2015. *Dissent Magazine*.

is true that Case is discovered by Wintermute due to his past legacy. Case, at the beginning, is courting self-destruction, and Gibson makes it clear that even his character understands that it is not uncommon for console-cowboys to overshoot, burn out, and die in the gutter: 'A part of him knew that the arc of his self-destruction was glaringly obvious to his customers, but that same part of him basked in the knowledge that it was only a matter of time.'<sup>401</sup> This outright establishes that life in this society is precarious, and great numbers of talented people die because of it. What Case is, therefore, is lucky. This is a key element of his story that is omitted through the active transmission of this comparison. The element of luck undermines the exceptionalism of this narrative. It isn't through grind it is through chance. This runs cross-purposes to the confidence the speakers we have discussed want to instil in their capacity to drive future development. However, the use of this story through rhetoric allows the element of luck to be downplayed as Case's role as lead protagonist means his actions in turn prove his talents, thus enabling an emphasis on his superiority over his peers. Key elements of his narrative take are stripped through specific emphasis of his heroic trajectory, and emphasising heroic rhetoric is an important strategy that will also be discussed following this.

If we continue to analyse Case's position, we can widen these cracks between his ideal, neoliberal image and the criticisms of this that Gibson is beginning to introduce. Case is also a vulnerable figure, not just due to the precarity of being a hacker. When we are introduced to him, he had been a successful hacker, but he went too far and was administered a nerve-toxin to stop him from ever going online again.

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<sup>401</sup> *Neuromancer* p.15

Case is important here partly for his skill, but mostly for the leverage Wintermute has over him. Wintermute can promise his return to glory, as an addict being allowed to indulge once again. The cost of this is not only the harrowing experiences and near-deaths he endures on his run with Wintermute's cue, but in the end the purpose is to free the AI of its sanctions. Wintermute gets what it wants, and Case is lucky to come out with what he wants, as many of his crew suffer horrible fates. Therein lies too the further, easily omitted, element of *Neuromancer* that rejects this neoliberal ideal. Wintermute's team. Case needs support from his companions to survive his self-destructive tendencies. Case's lifestyle was unsustainable, but the direction he is given, and forced into by a further potentially lethal virus, puts him on track to success. This does not align with the expectation for Cyberpunk texts that its heroes will be loners; the external help these characters require falls by the wayside during its transmission. In so doing, in relating oneself to Cyberpunk protagonists and eliding the support networks upon which those characters rely, the image of sole responsibility and capacity for action can be created which has negative consequences when appropriated in unsuitable contexts. Case is supported physically by Molly and even in cyberspace by a digital recording of one of his old mentors. Case has to learn to be part of a team, and to see a larger world of which he isn't the sole protagonist, as his previous efforts to put himself to the top of the ladder resulted in his near burnout on the streets. Gibson shows his awareness of the trope of the loner through Case's history and gives him a lucky break to have a second chance at not betraying his team (the neurotoxin was administered after he stole from his employers).<sup>402</sup>

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<sup>402</sup> *Neuromancer* p.12

Through this analysis of *Neuromancer* we can see the ways cyberpunk criticises the neoliberal beliefs that it represents. This line can be taken even further by diversifying the core texts of cyberpunk, such as was demonstrated in Chapter 2, weakening the potential for this social critique to be lost by further stepping away from masculine ‘hero’ narratives such as *Neuromancer* is purported to have. However, this dominant perspective has yet to be dislodged, and it is still reinforced in the narratives actively transmitted by Silicon Valley magnates such as Musk and Bezos. To understand how this happens, we now look to why this appropriation of cyberpunk comes so naturally and is so useful for those particular figures.

### Why Cyberpunk and Why Silicon Valley?

Many technologies which are currently being sought to be ‘made real’ find common depiction in cyberpunk fiction, from bionic limb enhancements,<sup>403</sup> to neural interfaces,<sup>404</sup> to cryonics.<sup>405</sup> It is important however, to take a moment here to reinforce that it is not the intention of this chapter to criticise the process of transmission. The desire for SciFi

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<sup>403</sup> *Disability Horizons* shows the breadth of currently available bionic arms. Disability Horizons. 2022. Advanced Bionic Arm and Hand Technology | Disability Horizons. [online] Available at: <<https://disabilityhorizons.com/2021/01/bionic-technology-amputees-disabilities/>> [Accessed 12 May 2022].

<sup>404</sup> As we can see on the Rand Corporation website itself, the US Department of Defence as well as this corporation are very invested in supporting developments of this technology. Binnendijk, A., Marler, T. and Bartels, E., 2022. Brain-Computer Interfaces: U.S. Military Applications and Implications, An Initial Assessment. [online] Rand.org. Available at: <[https://www.rand.org/pubs/research\\_reports/RR2996.html](https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR2996.html)> [Accessed 13 May 2022].

<sup>405</sup> Companies such as Alcor and the Cryonics Institute are both companies that provide this service.

capabilities is not inherently immoral or problematic and can be a positive driving force for many people and sectors.

For this reason, we can look to companies such as Open Bionics, a tech start-up whose research has led to the development of a 3D-printed bionic arm that places a strong focus on accessibility, in particular for younger children.<sup>406</sup> This chapter will finish by analysing these more positive instances of active transmission,<sup>407</sup> where for Open Bionics distribution and equal access are just as important as the possession of such cyberpunk artefacts. Therefore to best contrast this example,<sup>408</sup> within the same medical field, we can compare it with Neuralink, a company founded by Elon Musk. One of the research goals of Neuralink is to develop brain implants that would help people suffering with brain injuries such as strokes or cancer lesions. This goal is to be commended as it looks to make possible and accessible far better medical recovery; among the first of their projects has been addressing issues sufferers of brain injuries may be facing, such as those with spinal cord injuries, 'restoring motor and sensory function and [helping with] the treatment of neurological disorders.'<sup>409</sup> The dangers inherent in the Neuralink project in particular, however, include whether their designs inherently come with a restrictive cost that undermines their universal application, and whether Musk's other stated, and less altruistic, goal of achieving synthesis with Artificial Intelligence overrides positive medical application.<sup>410</sup> He is quoted by Tim Urban in a

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<sup>406</sup> Open Bionics. 2022. Open Bionics - Turning Disabilities into Superpowers. [online] Available at: <<https://openbionics.com/en/>> [Accessed 3 May 2022].

<sup>407</sup> With Open Bionics being a key study to counter this more problematic active transmission

<sup>408</sup> And our further discussion of Biopunks

<sup>409</sup> Play Studio, 2022. Applications. [online] Neuralink. Available at: <<https://neuralink.com/applications/>> [Accessed 27 April 2022].

<sup>410</sup> Despite the initial mention of Neuralink's aims to 'improve the lives of people with brain damage', this goal is presented as a secondary objective, overshadowed by the company's long-term goal of enabling human brains to link with AI. As referenced in: Knapp, A., 2022. Elon Musk Sees His Neuralink Merging

*waitbutwhy.com* article covering Neuralink in a great deal of detail as concerned with us [humans] being left behind by AI and becoming useless, like a house pet, or having to merge into a symbiotic relationship with AI.<sup>411</sup>

What is interesting in this distinction is how treating neurological disorders with neural implants is made to seem as an 'insufficiently Science Fictional' result. It is not the end game, it is a small step on the way to a much more transhumanist<sup>412</sup> form of augmentation, a way to avoid the obsolescence of the biological body, rather than a way to support people in a more medical context. I highlight this distinction to raise how the generic term of 'AI', and more specifically the SciFi concept of merging with it,<sup>413</sup> is presented sans context as a desirable endgame over medical technologies. Self-augmentation likely comes at a level of expense prohibitive to all but the wealthiest, and so it is the conception of an ideal future directed away from altruistic medical research to transhumanist self-improvement. In this manner, we can see the ways that our visions of a future that is within our grasp are directed towards the desires of the wealthy with SciFi fiction as its legitimisation. The end goal is to merge with AI, for those fortunate enough to afford the implants to ascend to a transhuman state, and the

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Your Brain With A.I.. [online] Forbes. Available at: <<https://www.forbes.com/sites/alexknapp/2019/07/17/elon-musk-sees-his-neuralink-merging-your-brain-with-ai/?sh=6b3739ea4b07>> [Accessed 3 May 2022].

<sup>411</sup> Putting aside the idolisation in this article for use of Musk's quote. It is also referenced in Stuart Russell's *Human Compatible*. Urban, Tim. "Neuralink And The Brain's Magical Future — Wait But Why". *Wait But Why*, 2022, <https://waitbutwhy.com/2017/04/neuralink.html>. Russell, Stuart J. *Human Compatible: Artificial Intelligence and the Problem of Control*. , 2019. Print.

<sup>412</sup> This is a philosophy which seeks to change the concept of the human fundamentally through the research and implementation of technological advancements. For more detailed discussion of this philosophy, see the following to start: Benjamin Ross. *The Philosophy of Transhumanism : A Critical Analysis*, (Emerald Publishing Limited, 2020) ProQuest Ebook Central, <https://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/bham/detail.action?docID=6183833>.

<sup>413</sup> Something which one might have a passing familiarity with due to *The Matrix Trilogy* in which the central protagonist enters into and merges with different artificial beings as a resolution to some of the films' conflicts.

medical benefits of this technology that initially supported its development can be left as a stepping-stone to this desire.

This is a corporate narrative *telling us* what SciFi future we are promised; *telling us* what parts of this fiction we desire to be real. In the case of this example, we see a very cyberpunk understanding of AI and human-brain interfacing.<sup>414</sup> This is pitched as desirable, overlooking the multitude of criticisms the genre levels at these beliefs. If we do not support active engagement with these texts, they are laid bare to be interpreted and wielded to establish and entrench exploitative practice in our future. Cyberpunk fiction is regularly drawn in this way into narratives about societies', or humanity's, progression whilst rarely mentioning their speculated consequences. Our future is told to us from the perspectives of those who would benefit the most.

This chapter has discussed how cyberpunk as a genre is home to a number of iconic technologies ripe for extraction. This is due in large part to the intimate relationships it establishes between characters and the computers, bionics, futuristic transports, and so on of its worlds.<sup>415</sup> The modern-day importance of information technologies, and the broadening influence and accessibility of the digital, are no doubt leading factors in the many news articles claiming that we are already living in cyberpunk dystopias.<sup>416</sup> This is

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<sup>414</sup> The intimacy of this connection, of fusing the human and the machine is an investigation much more allied with cyberpunk than other forms of SciFi, and is part of the 'devaluation of the body through technology' that Chapter 1 established as core to this genre. In relation to this chapter in particular, the fusing of human and AI minds plays a central part in Gibson's *Sprawl* texts where both parties jointly pass between digital and biological substrates to intertwine their minds.

<sup>415</sup> As seen in the intimate, boundary-crossing relationships between the body and technology that were discussed a key definitional element of cyberpunk in Chapter 1

<sup>416</sup> See the following:

Atherton, K., 2022. "The Fictional Future of Cyberpunk Is About to Come True." [online] *Slate Magazine*. Available at: <<https://slate.com/technology/2020/04/coronavirus-cyberpunk-science-fiction-government-politics.html>> [Accessed 27 April 2022].



put most distinctly by Kelsey Atherton, writing that ‘cyberpunk speaks to the present because the conditions that inspired cyberpunk remain largely unchanged.’ The growing expanses of urbanisation that inspired its sprawls continues today, as do the neoliberal social structures discussed above.<sup>417</sup> Atherton directs their discussion not to the specifics of what SciFi tropes and trinkets make up cyberpunk, but instead at what they are used to do: ‘The technologies at the center of it are all means of control, control bought by the wealthy or broken by criminals.’ It is key here that the criticism of this article’s connection of our present to a cyberpunk future focuses on the power dynamics shifting away from government oversight into corporate responsibilities. Similarly, Andrew Paul’s article about accepting our cyberpunk conditions interweaves the futuristic technologies about them with the social implications they bring. The digital newspaper is a window into a ‘proto-facist administration’, the VR headsets that are the future of socialising are beyond Paul financially as our future becomes unequally accessible in the ‘Neo Gilded-Age economy.’ Technology is an element of the conditions of living in cyberpunk texts for those cautioning its arrival into the real; a stark contrast from the ‘thing-based’ idealism of those already in the driving seat.

The dominance of digital information gathering, and a rising awareness of the broad personal and political threats posed by hackers who can illegally access this information, ties heavily into the language of cyberpunk storytelling. Thus, as concern over digital technologies arise, media outlets find easy reference in cyberpunk fiction for

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Malikyte, E., 2022. Are We Living in a Cyberpunk Dystopia?. [online] TopTenz. Available at: <<https://www.toptenz.net/are-we-living-in-a-cyberpunk-dystopia.php>> [Accessed 27 April 2022]. Paul, A., 2022. It's well past time to accept that we are living in 'Blade Runner'. [online] Input. Available at: <<https://www.inputmag.com/culture/its-well-past-time-to-accept-that-we-are-living-in-blade-runner>> [Accessed 27 April 2022]. Robitzski, D., 2022. [online] Available at: <<https://futurism.com/the-byte/crimes-mueller-report-futuristic>> [Accessed 27 April 2022].

<sup>417</sup> Both of which form key elements of the new definition in Chapter 1, namely urban sprawls and

these concerns, giving rise to the popular expression that the 21<sup>st</sup> Century has ‘become a cyberpunk dystopia.’ In this manner, it becomes easily apparent how useful cyberpunk is as a shorthand for understanding the present. To look back to Atherton’s article, the conditions that gave rise to cyberpunk are largely unchanged. The intensification of neoliberalism that underlies the conception of cyberpunk narratives underpins our current moment in just the same way, and cyberpunk’s use as the reference point for media analysing our present day conditions reflects this continued concern.

This line of thought, however, runs counter to that of the figureheads who also draw upon these narratives. Whilst those who express concern about the ‘cyberpunkification’ of the present draw connections to the social and political conditions of these narratives, the shiny promised items of SciFi remain firmly detached from this context in the pitches of rich CEOs. Cyberpunk has influenced tech research at its highest levels, and its interest in the intimacy of technology’s relationship to the body in particular have drawn it into view for transhumanists seeking self-improvement (whilst rooted in near-future possibilities). The augmentations it promises could grant extended life and vitality to figures who wish for the unequal neoliberalist conditions of the present to continue, and thus become desirable outside of cyberpunk’s revolutionary gaze. This is the dangerous appropriation that will be important later in this chapter, as I analyse the specifics of Silicon Valley’s active transmission of the genre. Cyberpunk’s inseparability from information technology also gives it a strong home in Silicon Valley, where it too is a vital part of the success of many businesses. These are strong examples of the points of mutual influence identifiable between cyberpunk and real-world research which can be pried open to analyse the transmission of its ideology and

imagery. It is through analysis of these connections that the emphasising of the inspirational speculation of the technologies of cyberpunk are the clearest; and we can see how its separation from the moral coding of its structure due to the seduction of its dynamic narratives is a problematic legacy of this sub-genre.

Neuralink's brain implants do, however, still offer the capacity to support many who might be struggling with existing medical conditions. Even if the motivation behind its development stretches to SciFi desires of transcending the 'meat' of our bodies,<sup>418</sup> it still has the capacity to enable positive, progressive technological development. It is not the purpose of this chapter to criticise the idea that connecting fictional technology to reality results only in problematic or exploitative technological development. However, it is incredibly important to highlight the dangers of using over-generalised assumptions about the future, and particularly through the lens of SciFi, to mask the inequalities present in the development towards this ideal. An appeal to imaginings of the future is important for establishing the value of progressive research, but the manner in which these connections are made, and the particular fictions inspiring these decisions remain important considerations.

It is here that the complication of cyberpunk fiction comes into play. The technologies that are becoming the target of futuristic wishlisting are increasingly those found within cyberpunk texts. Notably the context of their development, that of international megacorporations lead by billionaire figureheads, connects very heavily

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<sup>418</sup>Lopatto, Elizabeth. "Elon Musk Unveils Neuralink'S Plans For Brain-Reading 'Threads' And A Robot To Insert Them". *The Verge*, 2022, <https://www.theverge.com/2019/7/16/20697123/elon-musk-neuralink-brain-reading-thread-robot>. Musk's terminology here draws parallels with the dualistic perception of the mind as separate from the body that fueled the early transhumanistic desires reflected in much of Cyberpunk fiction.

with the hypercapitalist futures that are central to cyberpunk's flavour of SciFi. Cyberpunk specifically speaks to these situations, attempting to illuminate and explore the consequences of futures dictated by such corporate desires. Therefore, when cyberpunk becomes the target for active transmission, the process that destigmatises these technologies and living conditions is at its clearest. A number of prominent figures in high technology research would have been in their teens or early 20s<sup>419</sup> when cyberpunk emerged on the SciFi scene and began scooping up awards for its depictions of possible near futures.<sup>420</sup> If Silicon Valley CEOs wish to emphasise the inspiration that they found in SciFi when growing up, it is important to consider what the condition of the genre may have been at that time, and what technologies inspired their ambitions. It is for this reason that cyberpunk is key to understanding this strategy of active transmission.

### The Rhetorical Origins of Appropriating Hero-Narratives

Considering this influence of cyberpunk texts on Silicon Valley CEOs, we can see how more typical political rhetoric feeds into the appropriation of cyberpunk's protagonists. To frame the quest for SciFi capability in its most positive form, many of the figureheads of contemporary real-world corporations aspiring to futuristic technological possibilities

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<sup>419</sup> Elon Musk would have been 13, Bezos 20, and Peter Thiel 17 when *Neuromancer* was first published, which would put them at appropriate reading ages for such exciting, award-winning publications

<sup>420</sup> The foundational *Neuromancer* was the first novel to win the Nebula, the Hugo, and the Philip K. Dick Award for paperback original. Bruce Sterling, another famous author in the early days of Cyberpunk, won the John W. Campbell Memorial Award for Best Science Fiction Novel for *Islands in the Net* in 1988 and Pat Cadigan won the Arthur C. Clarke award in 1992 and 1995 for *Synners* and *Fools* respectively

represent themselves as the protagonists of their stories. The reasons for this are fairly self-evident: for one, it rhetorically positions them to receive support in their endeavours from anyone familiar with the tropes of the stories on which they draw; for another it encourages listeners to connect with the speaker, for it is typical for readers to associate with the 'heroes' from whose perspective these stories are most often told. It is for this reason we see this 'good vs evil' rhetoric in political discourse also. Lawrence Freedman, when talking about American politics identifies the Republican Party's understanding that developing a 'narrative of themselves as on the side of patriotism and God' trumped their opponent's narrative of 'fighting for working people' as it was a less soft message that played on its audience as an emotional, not rational, recipient.<sup>421</sup> Likewise a struggle against evil plays to the same strategy, arguably even more strongly. We see the rhetoric surrounding the war on terror fitting a traditional hero narrative by establishing a universal evil.

This language has been particularly common in U.S. security discourse, as Alexandra Homolar addresses;<sup>422</sup> as she highlights, President Bush directly connected Nazi Germany to Iraq in the 1990s, describing an attack as being 'in blitzkrieg fashion' and an 'outrageous and brutal act of aggression.' This continues to gain strength in the aftermath of the terrorist attacks of September 11<sup>th</sup>, in Homolar's words 'bringing to life a powerful dual-focus narrative [...] embedded in the rich heritage of dualistic terminology in US Security rhetoric. This becomes particularly clear in President Trump's 2017 speech where he addresses the war on terrorism as 'a battle between barbaric criminals

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<sup>421</sup> Freedman, Lawrence. *Strategy : A History*, Oxford University Press, Incorporated, 2013. ProQuest Ebook Central, <https://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/bham/detail.action?docID=1389064>. P.435

<sup>422</sup> Homolar, Alexandra. "A Call to Arms: Hero–Villain Narratives in US Security Discourse." *Security Dialogue*, June 2021, doi:10.1177/09670106211005897.

who seek to obliterate human life and decent people...a battle between good and evil.<sup>423</sup> Now CEOs such as we have discussed already have yet to stretch to this level of emotive exaggeration. Their appeals to hero narratives are much less stark; the evil is not clearly definable, as often the structures in their way are requirements of financial backing, and speeches given of their upcoming research to maintain good stakeholder relations do not so much require an evil to overcome as they do a hero to blaze a path to success (most importantly for these audiences, financial success). However, we do begin to see the opening of this rhetorical development move into these tech discourses through their appeals to cyberpunk narratives. Cyberpunk, with its clear, oppressive corporations and its often dynamic, almost action-hero-evocative storylines<sup>424</sup> sets up this good vs evil structure in place for this rhetoric to follow. We could easily see, as this successful political strategy follows power and moves into this corporate setting, legislations and working restrictions become the tools of an 'evil' or 'oppressive' governing body or competitor. In these ways, how cyberpunk appeals to its audience emotively also becomes a pathway for it to be used as an extension of good vs evil rhetoric. Through understanding cyberpunk, however, we can better reinforce where the appropriation of this narrative diverges from its source and arrest this strategy before it becomes too strong.

It is how this positioning of who is good and who is evil twists the narratives and political drives of cyberpunk texts, however, that is most important when it comes to this

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<sup>423</sup> Homolar, "A call to arms..."

<sup>424</sup> With *Neuromancer*, *Blade Runner*, and *Snow Crash* among the most famous cyberpunk texts, the three of these borrow heavily from action movies and texts (supporting the masculinist perception of cyberpunk criticised in Chapter 2). They have gun fights, betrayals, and chase scenes; albeit recontextualised for their SciFi, digital contexts.

element of transmission. As previously analysed, it is the slant of many cyberpunk works, particularly the most celebrated iterations from the early days of the genre's development, to focus on outsiders who use their position to rebel against stagnant and oppressive societies. Differing from what can commonly be bleak stories in specifically Dystopian texts wherein resistance to the suffering of their society can be futile, cyberpunk frequently celebrates the potential for rebellion, whether that be through effecting sweeping change to a corrupt system or finding personal freedoms through ingenuity and creative reappropriation of existing systems and technologies.<sup>425</sup> This direction is a powerful, positive message that can be inferred from a number of texts.<sup>426</sup> It rejects the inevitability of ceding power and agency to established political and financial powers, rephrasing the future as something under our control. It shows its audience a bleak future that is set before their feet, but also a pathway to something better through its protagonists. It encourages an active engagement with the systems threatening such oppression in order to adapt and better them as they come into place.

### The Effects of Appropriation.

This rhetorical strategy intersects with cyberpunk's obsession with neoliberal futures that support the dominance of corporate power, opening an opportunity to seize

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<sup>425</sup> This expectation formed part of the counter-cultural element highlighted in Chapter 1.

<sup>426</sup> Some examples include the ending of *Mona Lisa Overdrive*, wherein a number of the central cast repurpose a cyber-harddrive to enable the potential of communicating with alien life; *Altered Carbon*, where the main protagonist uses a private military developed viral weapon to depose and kill an immortal Corporate Tyrant for good; and *Moxyland*, where a wannabe hacker uses bio-implants developed for corporate advertisement to survive a Government viral attack and enable the potential for the truth to out.

cyberpunk's rebelliousness and turn it in favour of supporting that which it intends to critique. Its exciting narratives capture the audience's attention, creating memorable visual futures and struggles against authority, such as has been established in Chapter 1. We can look too to the legacy of *Blade Runner* which speaks to this strength; that through every element working together it has persisted as a common referent in public memory of our urban future. This blessing is, however, also a curse. Cyberpunk's striking visuals make it an easy referent, but less frequently carry the narrative's critiques as strongly as other elements of these texts, and we have discussed above how the excitement of cyberpunk protagonist arcs can fuel support and energy into different ideologies through the process of active transmission.

What remains then, is what happens when active transmission repurposes cyberpunk, and it is time to turn to specific examples of this and their effects. I will look at how invoking the protagonist role within this genre's context also, by default, evokes the idea of rebellion and revolution. To make clear the dangers in this invocation, I will continue to look at the application of this idea to leading tech CEOs, namely Elon Musk and Jeff Bezos. The manners in which they use active transmission are not necessarily overt, and this needs to be briefly discussed before we go much further. However, even when such figureheads do not directly make this comparison between their desires and cyberpunk futures, the exceptionalist, hero narratives above are those they increasingly tend to buy into. When discussing the possibilities of space travel, to use one example,<sup>427</sup> they preach about the necessity of their dreams as such to imply that they are speaking from a minority (but expert) position; that their perspectives are

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<sup>427</sup> Clifford, Catherine. "Jeff Bezos: Forget Mars, Humans Will Live In These Free-Floating Space Pod Colonies". Cnbc, 2022,



controversial, and they are rebelling against a general (misinformed) belief in order to voice them. When this framework is used in conjunction with connecting the speaker to a rebellious cyberpunk hero, it is easier to erase their position as head of a leading corporate power and reallocate blame for poor working conditions to competitors instead. In fact, often the greater complaints about the aims of these speakers are in the processes they go about achieving them and the short-sightedness of the new product or service's availability to the wider public. Therefore, what we are looking into in this section is how persuasive rhetoric combines with the active transmission of cyberpunk narratives to obfuscate corporate responsibilities for exploitative work practices and favouring the success of the rich over accessibility to the masses.

What is problematic about this association then, is not the specifics of their relation to cyberpunk protagonists per se, but how this adopts and subverts the narrative of rebellion into perpetuating and supporting the late capitalist regime. When Silicon Valley CEOs are associated with rebellious protagonists, their actions become the actions of rebellion, encouraging support of them as they fight for freedom and the good of the less privileged. We can see the effectiveness of this strategy in the vocal communities that jump to defend these figures already. Suzie Weiss addresses the 'die-hard fans' of Elon Musk as an example in her New York Post article.<sup>428</sup> Musks's 'online army', as she calls it, of 'mostly men' leap to defend the CEO at any criticism of them. In this article, Weiss picks examples of praise these fans have heaped onto the billionaire and contrasts them immediately with examples of their inapplicability. One supporter claims

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<sup>428</sup> Weiss, Suzy. "Elon Musk's Die-Hard Fans Will Defend Him To The Death". Nypost.Com, 2022, <https://nypost.com/2020/07/08/elon-musks-die-hard-fans-will-defend-him-to-the-death/>.

Musk 'definitely cares about his employees', to which Weiss juxtaposes with a similar article covering how Musk claimed lockdown procedures during the early stages of the COVID-19 pandemic were 'fascist' and reopened a Tesla factory in defiance of the shutdown orders in place.<sup>429</sup> Whizy Kim also addresses Musk's successful claim to a hero's narrative where he alone is 'pushing the progress of humanity forward' in their coverage of the CEO's failed attempt to purchase the social media site, Twitter.<sup>430</sup> In this campaign, Musk continued his underdog, protagonist stance and framed this takeover as a moral decision to protect freedom of speech. Here too we can see the legacy of cyberpunk at play, where a battle for the right of individual ownership of speech and action is taken to an online location; he would like his audience to believe he is battling corporate hegemony to protect all members of this social platform, an easy substitute for a 'matrix' of our own. His supporters rally to this continued strategy still, defending him after he began to attempt to withdraw from his bid. They rephrased it as the correct move, as solely 'to expose' it for the claims he had made about it. "Elon Musk was playing 5d chess this entire time" another supporter claims; he is striking out against the 'deep state'.<sup>431</sup> Musk, therefore, is a fantastic example of the strong, and stubborn, support this strategy can garner.

The problem of this is fairly apparent, in that those at the head of billion-dollar corporations are already the 'villains' that these narratives propose. Nowhere was this

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<sup>429</sup> Vega, Nicolas, and Noah Manskar. "Elon Musk Slams 'Fascist' Coronavirus Lockdowns In Tesla Earnings Call". *Nypost.Com*, 2022, <https://nypost.com/2020/04/29/elon-musk-slams-fascist-coronavirus-lockdowns-in-tesla-earnings-call/>.

<sup>430</sup> Kim, Whizy. "Elon Musk Fans Can'T Handle The Truth". *Vox*, 2022, <https://www.vox.com/recode/23207361/elon-musk-twitter-narrative-billionaire>.

<sup>431</sup> Gilbert, David. "Here'S How The Right Is Spinning Elon Musk'S Twitter Withdrawal As A Victory". *Vice.Com*, 2022, <https://www.vice.com/en/article/g5vgdx/elon-musk-twitter-far-right>.

drawn into the light more than in April 2020, when Elon Musk changed his Twitter avatar to that of JC Denton, the protagonist of *Deus Ex*,<sup>432</sup> the cyberpunk videogame. As Nathan Grayson neatly summarises for an article in *Gizmodo*:

Musk might be attempting to draw a comparison between our current situation and the plot of *Deus Ex*, in which a pandemic known as “the Gray Death” runs rampant across the globe. Denton himself is an agent who discovers that the anti-terrorist coalition he’s a part of is actually trying to keep a vaccine from reaching anybody other than powerful, wealthy elites; he defects, risking his own life in the process. Ultimately, he finds out a trillionaire businessman named Bob Page is behind everything, using both the virus and his company’s stranglehold on the vaccine as a means of exerting control over society.<sup>433</sup>

This garnered a swathe of responses highlighting Musk’s more appropriate similarities to Bob Page. This includes Page’s token donation to Gray Death sufferers that never makes it to clinics and its similarity to Musk’s donation of ventilators to hospitals to assist with COVID-19 patients and the hospitals’ responses that they received products designed to aid breathing and sleep apnea but not the ventilators they needed.<sup>434</sup> Similarly, it is one of Bob Page’s final desires to be merged with a powerful AI, a desire

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<sup>432</sup> *Deus Ex*, Ion Storm (2000)

<sup>433</sup> Grayson, Nathan. "The Internet Agrees That Elon Musk Is *Deus Ex*'s Trillionaire Villain, Not JC Denton". Kotaku, 2022, <https://kotaku.com/the-internet-agrees-that-elon-musk-is-deus-exs-trillion-1843185039>.

<sup>434</sup> CNN say here that of the 4 hospitals that responded to their contact, all of them reported getting bilevel positive airway pressure or continuous positive airway pressure machines, not ventilators Passantino, Jon. "Elon Musk Says He Sent Ventilators To California Hospitals, They Say They Got Something Else Instead". CNN, 2022, <https://edition.cnn.com/2020/04/17/tech/elon-musk-ventilators-california/index.html>.

openly stated to be an end goal of Musk's company Neuralink.<sup>435</sup> By associating themselves with cyberpunk protagonists, they in turn reframe cyberpunk's oppressive corporate villains with the entrenched institutions that Silicon Valley commonly seeks to disrupt. Silicon Valley CEOs can then morally oppose restrictions and existing businesses with 'ingenious' new strategies that frequently benefit themselves over their workers. Whilst not inherently a problematic direction, the ways these companies have moulded governing processes is inherently unbalanced. Looking in particular at the responses of these businesses to the global COVID-19 pandemic, a focus on work and the value of production has exposed how willingly they put the health and lives of their workers at risk for maximised profit. Take, for example, Tesla's conflict with public health officials over the essential nature of their work during the initial outbreaks of COVID-19 in 2020. Tesla demanded its workers returned to the factories, despite concerns over safety precautions within. As covered in Faiz Siddiqui's article for *The Washington Post*, despite being told they were free to postpone returning to work until they felt safe to do so, taking time at home with no pay but no repercussions for their jobs, two workers were confirmed to have been issued termination notices for 'failure to return to work'.<sup>436</sup> This is not an unheard of problem for Tesla, who have also been subject to a very high number of Cal/OSHA investigations and fines in the previous years.<sup>437</sup> This is not confined to Tesla, however, and the ongoing 2020 pandemic offers

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<sup>435</sup> Knapp, Alex. "Elon Musk Sees His Neuralink Merging Your Brain With A.I.". *Forbes*, 2022, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/alexknapp/2019/07/17/elon-musk-sees-his-neuralink-merging-your-brain-with-ai/?sh=66f00c374b07>.

<sup>436</sup> Siddiqui, Faiz. 2022, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/technology/2020/06/25/tesla-plant-firings/>.

<sup>437</sup> Ohnsman, Alan. "Inside Tesla'S Model 3 Factory, Where Safety Violations Keep Rising". *Forbes*, 2022, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/alanohnsman/2019/03/01/tesla-safety-violations-dwarf-big-us-auto-plants-in-aftermath-of-musks-model-3-push/#24bdd20054ce>.

a series of easy comparisons; Amazon, for example, has garnered similar protests and concerns over the safety of its workforce and the prioritisation of financial gain over health and welfare.<sup>438</sup>

An unfortunate, but desired, effect of aligning figures such as Musk and Bezos with protagonists like Case, is that these practices can be overlooked for the greater good of their end goal, or worse justified as necessary evils needed to overcome those who wish to halt the progress of humanity. It appropriates the instinct to resist their own corporate hegemony. For this reason, Musk appears in interviews to describe how he 'slept on the floor' at work because he 'wanted [his] circumstances to be worse than anyone else at the company.'<sup>439</sup> This contrasts interestingly with Tesla's recent 'closed loop' lockdown regime that forces employees to live at the factory, and with no 'purpose-built dormitories [that mean] workers will be required to sleep on the floor.'<sup>440</sup> Looking into supporters of Musk, Bijan Stephen has written a very intriguing article in which they interview members of this community. One of which says 'he disagrees with the billionaire on the topic of "basic safety and human treatment" [but] he's still wary of the press that brought these offences to light.'<sup>441</sup> This is fascinating for how the belief that he is 'delivering a future to humanity' means his supporters can come to overlook mistreatment of their own peers. It can be seen too how this rhetoric can bypass

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<sup>438</sup> Sainato, Michael. "'Jeff Bezos Values Profits Above Safety': Amazon Workers Voice Pandemic Concern". *The Guardian*, 2022, <https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2020/apr/07/amazon-warehouse-workers-coronavirus-safety>.

<sup>439</sup> Matousek, Mark. "Elon Musk Said He Slept On The Floor Of Tesla's Factory Because He Wanted To Suffer More Than Any Other Employee During Model 3 'Production Hell'". *Business Insider*, 2022, <https://www.businessinsider.com/elon-musk-said-he-slept-on-tesla-factory-floor-to-maximize-suffering-2018-7?r=US&IR=T>.

<sup>440</sup> Foy, Simon. "Tesla Forces Shanghai Workers To Sleep On The Floor". *The Telegraph*, 2022, <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/business/2022/04/18/tesla-forces-shanghai-workers-sleep-floor/>.

<sup>441</sup> Stephen, Bijan. "The Gospel Of Elon Musk, According To His Flock". *The Verge*, 2022, <https://www.theverge.com/2018/6/26/17505744/elon-musk-fans-tesla-spacex-fandom>.

visibility in its believers. One supporter claims they don't see many news sources that are 'pro-logic and pro-reason', and this scepticism of media criticism of this mistreatment when it is revealed implies that only Musk himself is providing unbiased 'reason and logic'. He is the hero that is fighting back against the 'deep state', an argument that we saw used to defend his Twitter bid before. We can see too how this appropriation of SciFi culture feeds into the creation of this relationship, Stephen also interviews an ex-fan who 'fell for Musk initially when he started naming his rocket landing infrastructure after ships from Iain M. Banks' Culture novels, one of Sanders' favorite sci-fi series.'<sup>442</sup> Appeals to SciFi fandom, and the futures they promise is inherently part of the 'future industry' to which Silicon Valley clings.

The effect of this misappropriation encourages support of, and capitulation to, the necessities of late-capitalist society. In losing its resistance narratives to those already benefiting from the systems they have helped put in place, the inevitability of the dominance of late-capitalist corporatocracies becomes more broadly accepted. This is a theme that can be identified in news articles reflecting on the proliferation and rapid development of digital technologies. Kelsey D. Atherton reflects on it in his article for *Slate* (quoted above); he concludes that without addressing a collective resistance to governmental abnegation of responsibilities 'we're not just living in the prologue to a cyberpunk future. We're living in the first chapter of a cybourgeoisie reality.'<sup>443</sup> He expresses concern over cyberpunk's focus on 'clever protagonists who can outwit the

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<sup>442</sup> Stephen, "The Gospel of Elon Musk..."

<sup>443</sup> Atherton, Kelsey. "The Fictional Future Of Cyberpunk Is About To Come True". *Slate Magazine*, 2022, <https://slate.com/technology/2020/04/coronavirus-cyberpunk-science-fiction-government-politics.html>.

cruelties and exploitations of the wealthy few', which is an understandable concern as, without a concerted response, political resistances will be easily outmanoeuvred by the power and resources of the financial elite. Cyberpunk texts, however, are not as centred on the successes of lone wolves as their reputation suggests. This returns to the issue that cyberpunk, when stripped of its contexts and details, can be seen to support pro-capitalist and pro-neoliberal agendas. The books that follow in Gibson's *Sprawl* trilogy lean even heavier on this, following a cast of characters whose stories take much of their respective novels to intertwine, but do so in such a manner that the success of any would be hollow if not impossible without them. The loners of cyberpunk commonly struggle to triumph against their respective systems, relying on the charity and support of others as they learn more of the futility of acting alone against such monolithic powers.

Take *Blade Runner's* Rick Deckard as a further example; he fails to triumph against both the Tyrell corporation's exploitation of its creations, and against the Replicants he is tasked with hunting. At the very end, it is the mercy and sorrow of Roy Batty that saves Deckard's life, and in the Director's cut, there is no happy ending for Deckard who last seen fleeing from his previous employers is doubting the validity of his own humanity. Richard Morgan's *Altered Carbon* also expresses a similar futility in its 'heroic ending.' The novel follows a traditionally outsider protagonist in the form of the ex-military operative, Takeshi Kovacs, attempting to take revenge on one of the semi-immortal financial elite of Earth. By the end of the novel, he manages to permanently kill his quarry, despite a number of sacrifices along the way, and this could be read as a success story of the individual. However, killing this one target proves exceptionally

difficult, and achieves nothing for him other than the empty vengeance of having succeeded, and a myriad of others stand ready to step into the same place as the target he has killed. By the end of *Altered Carbon*, Kovacs has achieved nothing significant in his pursuit of vengeance; lone action is not enough to cause any fundamental systemic change to the world. The far more significant political actors in *Altered Carbon* are the socialist 'Quellists', whose ideology runs in resistance to the corrupt, self-serving political hegemony of the financial elite against which Kovacs pits himself. Kovacs enacts his personal revenge story, but ultimately the world is the same. For Morgan, Quellism as an ideological movement outstrips that capacity, and the later novels in this series lean further into this as Kovacs becomes more interwoven with a unified rebellion by the third instalment. This book, *Woken Furies*,<sup>444</sup> centres around the return of the Quellist's originator, Quell, and reinforces this belief that Kovacs' original 'loner perspective' is flawed by pitting an older Kovacs who is fighting for Quell, against a version of himself from the past. We can see too in Netflix's adaptation of *Altered Carbon*, that Quell and her beliefs take a greater focus than in the original novel as ideas from *Woken Furies* are incorporated into its two season run. There is a hollowness to the actions of lone cyberpunk heroes, and whilst there is still doubt as to the lasting effectiveness of combined action, it is through group struggle that changes of a broad scope are achieved. We can see too that cyberpunk creators begin to understand this limitation, and the Kovacs texts, and media, show the progression of this criticism of individual exceptionalism from the contextual undermining of its hero's actions, into more overt inclusion of more successful alternatives like Quellism.

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<sup>444</sup> Morgan, Richard. *Woken Furies*. (London: Gollancz, 2005)



Unfortunately, hero narratives are hard to dislodge, particularly once audiences have an expectation of them reinforced by surface-level transmission of cyberpunk stories. How these ideas of lone protagonists come to the fore, however, is in part through the biggest named videogames that have supported the genre's popularity throughout its disappearance from more mainstream media. The format of the first-person shooter genre, from which *Deus Ex* hails, necessitates the majority of action originating from the player character, to create a sense of importance and agency on behalf of the player, and reinforces the idea that one loner can accomplish it all (this is not the case in all cyberpunk videogames, particularly later Indie productions<sup>445</sup> where the mechanics diverge from this format to better support a broader interlinking cast). With the Video Game industry booming, and a high correlation of video game enthusiasts interested in the technologies pushed for in Silicon Valley, these famous, or mainstream, Video Game examples are prime supporters of this narrative. They reinforce the idea that one figure can change the world for the better and justifies the need for heroes to take the risks they do. And so those drawing upon games like *Deus Ex* garner support as they are 'in the position to save the world', a position which these games emphasise as a natural state for any struggle.<sup>446</sup>

Where this becomes more problematic is how cyberpunk's Noir influences encourage breaking the rules, or the law, whether for the rights of the individual or to fight for

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<sup>445</sup> See *The Red Strings Club*, Hairbrained Schemes' *Shadowrun* games, or *Technobabylon* for good examples of this.

<sup>446</sup> There is more discussion of cyberpunk video games, in particular *Cyberpunk 2077*, in Chapter 4

systemic change against a monolithic hegemony. As discussed in the first chapter of this thesis, cyberpunk owes a lot to Noir detective fiction, and its earliest iterations drew on this to a great extent, to the level that “tech-noir” exists as a counter genre title intersecting heavily with cyberpunk itself.<sup>447</sup> Noir protagonists are commonly detectives, down on their luck or world-weary from working in a city rife with injustice and corruption. They are commonly categorised by their need to break the law themselves in order to do what is right; they are likewise violent and stereotypically refuse to follow the orders of their superiors which would otherwise allow the villains of their stories to escape justice. This tendency can be seen in cyberpunk traditions, where protagonists are commonly criminals and other rebels who break the laws of their worlds as those laws were set by the powers that be to keep them in their place. Criminality is celebrated, although commonly with the caveat that it is being done for just intentions. Taking *Neuromancer* as the stereotypical example again; Case himself is a criminal, he hacks corporate networks for information and raids the home of the Tessier-Ashpool corporate family to ‘destroy’ the AI at the heart of their business. He does this in part, however, to prevent the AI’s exploitation, and in the hope that releasing a unified and free AI will allow his world, stagnant and oppressed by high capital, to begin to change again. His story contrasts with Riviera, his companion, who commits crimes alongside Case ostensibly for the same cause, but in the end he is villainised, turning against his former team as his desire to break the law for his own personal enjoyment surpasses his desire for systemic change. For this he is killed, suggesting that criminality is not

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<sup>447</sup> Emily Auger, in her book, *Tech Noir Film: A Theory of the Development of Popular Genres* (2011) acknowledges a number of similarities between the two, mostly distinguishing Tech Noir in her eyes as ‘primarily a film genre’ (p.11). See bibliography for full citation.

supported unconditionally, but only if it is the only pathway to positive change, echoing the extremes Noir detectives go to put away genuine criminals.

This reveals a further danger in evoking similarity between cyberpunk protagonists and real-world figures: it brings with it a justification for illegality. Breaking the rules, or the law, should be supported in the narratives of cyberpunk, if it is for a just cause, which it may not necessarily be in reality. Herein again we see strong connections with Silicon Valley, with the desire to break rules and expectations being contained in their own idea of 'disruption.' Susi Geiger explores this idea in more depth. In this context the term disruption means 'to prevent something, especially a system, process, or event, from continuing as usual or as expected' and is 'usually paired with its more upbeat cousin "innovation".'<sup>448</sup> It is in the name of this form of radical reinvention that we see Peter Thiel's seasteading project to build floating cities on the ocean, outside international law.<sup>449</sup> These locations would be havens for tech giants with 'freedom from taxes and government oversight.'<sup>450</sup> Interestingly, idealising this perspective of rebellious destruction and recreation of established order aligns cyberpunk narratives more with

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<sup>448</sup> Susi Geiger (2020), "Silicon Valley, disruption, and the end of uncertainty", *Journal of Cultural Economy*, 13:2, 169-184, DOI: 10.1080/17530350.2019.1684337

<sup>449</sup> Katie Canales, "Silicon Valley's Elite Wants Yet Again To Abandon Land And Live On Floating Cities In The Middle Of The Ocean That Operate Outside Of Existing Governments". *Business Insider*, 2022, <https://www.businessinsider.in/tech/news/silicon-valleys-elite-wants-yet-again-to-abandon-land-and-live-on-floating-cities-in-the-middle-of-the-ocean-that-operate-outside-of-existing-governments/articleshow/76434022.cms>

<sup>450</sup> Canales, *Business Insider*. This particular ideal compares very strongly with the 2007 game *Bioshock*, which criticised a similarly Randian community whose attempt to establish an intellectual research community outside of government, and legal, restrictions ends in disaster. Canales, Katie. "Silicon Valley's Elite Wants Yet Again To Abandon Land And Live On Floating Cities In The Middle Of The Ocean That Operate Outside Of Existing Governments". *Business Insider*, 2022, <https://www.businessinsider.in/tech/news/silicon-valleys-elite-wants-yet-again-to-abandon-land-and-live-on-floating-cities-in-the-middle-of-the-ocean-that-operate-outside-of-existing-governments/articleshow/76434022.cms>.

traditional cyclical mythology. If we praise this promise of rebirth through contest in discussion of cyberpunk, we expect it to champion the ‘myths of destruction and creation’ that have been argued to be a foundational notion of ‘creative destruction’ (the process of disruption).<sup>451</sup> This overlooks the stagnancy of cyberpunk and the futility of many of its rebellions. Case’s plight to ‘*change something*’<sup>452</sup> ultimately comes to nothing, Kovacs fails to meaningfully uproot the inequality on Earth, and other cyberpunk stories criticise the limitations of attempting to destructively break through into a new society.<sup>453</sup> Disruptive narratives do not fit cyberpunk as well as they would like; in Daub’s discussion of this term, he notes that ‘[t]he rhetoric of disruption frequently creates solidity, stability and uniformity where it doesn’t exist.’<sup>454</sup> Such as in cyberpunk. There is no stability, there is precarity. There is no uniformity, there is a riot of punk individuality. We can see in the connection that these speakers are attempting to create between cyberpunk and the disruption in Silicon Valley a continuation of how: ‘[m]isperceiving, misunderstanding or simply ignoring the industry one is seeking to disrupt seems [...] no impediment to disrupting it.’<sup>455</sup> The speakers ignore, or misunderstand cyberpunk stories at no impediment to their own narrative.

What the effect of this appropriation of cyberpunk rebellion into Silicon Valley’s concept of disruption is, is to encourage the overlooking of unethical behaviour due to the promise of a ‘better’ future. The suffering and hardship required to cause this snap

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<sup>451</sup> Geiger

<sup>452</sup> *Neuromancer* p.307. Emphasis in text

<sup>453</sup> For other examples we can look to Beukes’ *Moxyland* to see an ideological revolution torn down and destroyed, or even *Blade Runner* pitting its protagonist to actively contest those seeking to radically change the treatment of androids. This is naturally not a universal outlook on change across cyberpunk, but can be commonly found amidst the pessimistic trajectories of its stories.

<sup>454</sup> <https://www.theguardian.com/news/2020/sep/24/disruption-big-tech-buzzword-silicon-valley-power>

<sup>455</sup> Daub, 2020 “The Disruption Con...”

into a new system is legitimised by its framing as an heroic final push against oppressive forces. This is further compounded, however, as it is not the CEOs who encourage this association that are put at risk by their behaviour. If the hackers of cyberpunk are caught, it is their own skin on the line for their illegal actions. For the head of an innovation corporation, unethical behaviour most commonly risks the lives of the employees beneath them, and any consequences of these actions that do reach them can often be offset by their accumulated capital. We have looked at examples of the risks to workers when safety protocols are overlooked in times of a global pandemic, whilst those at the head of the company can remain in safe isolation, and the concept of fines as consequences is mitigated by the vast wealth already at these companies' disposal. With the reduction of cyberpunk teams to sole acting heroes, we can see the erasure of supporting casts woven into the narratives these CEOs wield, painting the image of sole responsibility and risk onto their projects. In the exceptionalist narratives of hacker-heroes building themselves up from the streets we see any success gained as achieved entirely by sole actors. This also works to overlook how they often buy existing ideas and then, through this idea of self-achievement, passively obtain credit for these ideas. Elon Musk did not found Tesla, the electric car company whose 'environment saving'<sup>456</sup> profile is the evidence often used by his supporters to paint him as a hero seeking to better the world.<sup>457</sup> He bought it.

Through active transmission, these figures can shape narratives about our near future, cyberpunk narratives, to fit the moulds of political rhetoric they need to garner

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<sup>456</sup> Which is not necessarily the case: Bansal, Tima. "How Green Is Tesla, Really?". *Forbes*, 2022, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/timabansal/2021/05/13/how-green-is-tesla-really/?sh=16e98e3f1576>.

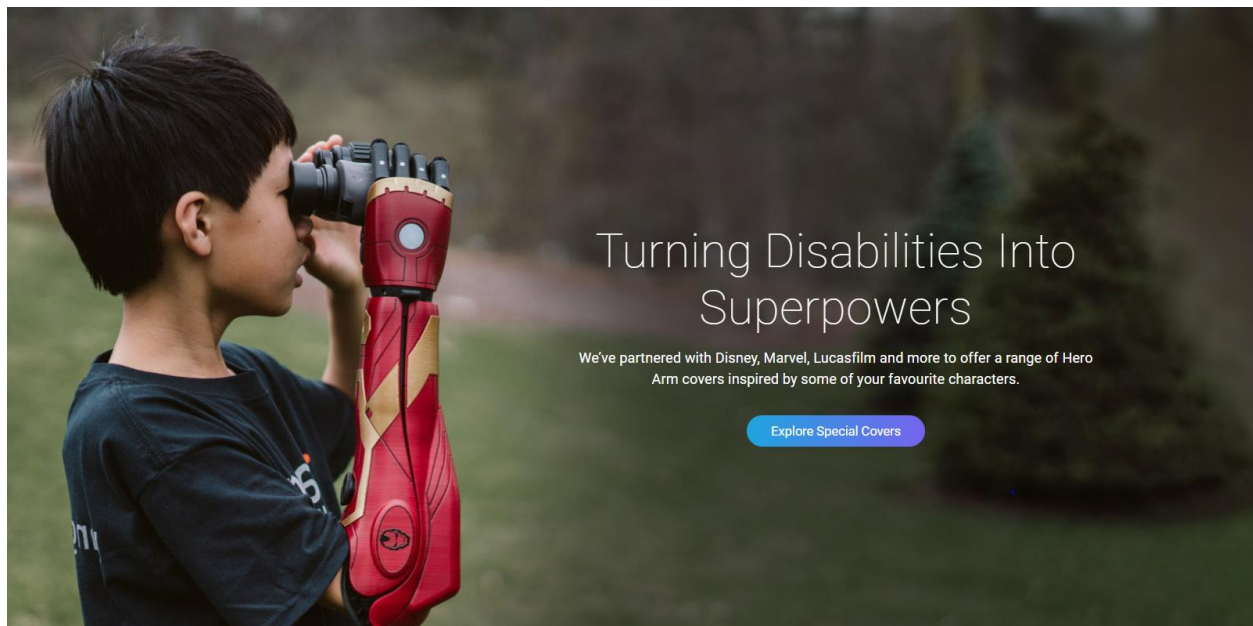
<sup>457</sup> Stephen, 2018: "The Gospel of Elon Musk"

support. Cyberpunk narratives are wide open to this reinterpretation due to their suffusion of worlds with technology that can become desirable products, their commitment to the representation and criticism of neoliberal futures, and their desire to use familiar narrative structures or stunning visuals to engage their audience. At the heart of this issue of appropriation, however, is how the stories of cyberpunk rebels can be taken and inappropriately applied to the wrong actors. When resistance narratives are co-opted inappropriately, there is a genuine danger to those entangled within the lower corporate structure, and these risks can often be overlooked by attributing the work of a company to the actions of a single personality at its head.

### Breaking the Mould: Collaborative Work and the Positives of Active Transmission

With the dangers of this misunderstanding of the message of cyberpunk discussed in detail, we turn now to look at methods for breaking this expectation and establishing a more positive message for the revolutionary intentions of cyberpunk. We have primarily discussed how transmission can be directed for specific intent, such as the shaping of cyberpunk narratives to disseminate a particular understanding of technological development and for the appropriation of liberatory narrative arcs. What is important about this, however, is that it is not the sum total of cyberpunk's transmission, and the 'punk' element that encourages resistance to sweeping ideologies and political systems still finds its home outside of fiction. In order, then, to reclaim this message of cyberpunk that risks continued misappropriation, we will first look to examples in the real world of

companies and activists that encourage systemic change in scientific research and development, or otherwise seek to establish good practice in the distribution of high tech-developments ahead of the extension of said-technology's capability. These examples seek to reinforce the narrative take of their source material through their transmission, rather than divorce the two as in the previous case studies. By looking at these, we will identify the elements of cyberpunk ideology or narrative within their work and use this as a basis to reread cyberpunk fiction away from the seduction of stereotypical assumptions, such as those encouraged by Silicon Valley figureheads. This discussion will weave together with examples of cyberpunk texts that already demonstrate this potential.



*Image from: OpenBionics<sup>458</sup>*

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<sup>458</sup> Open Bionics. 2022. Open Bionics - Turning Disabilities into Superpowers. [online] Available at: <<https://openbionics.com/en/>> [Accessed 3 May 2022].

The first company that will be important in revisiting cyberpunk's transmission potential is Open Bionics. Open Bionics is a Bristol-based start-up tech company whose aim is to develop 'affordable, assistive devices that enhance the human body.'<sup>459</sup> So far, their company has been incredibly successful in their reception, in 2017 they received the UAE AI & Robotics International Award for Good enabling them to further push development of their product, the Hero Arm (see pictured above). This product is a 3D-printed bionic arm with 'multi-grip functionality [...] for below elbow amputee adults and children aged eight and above.'<sup>460</sup> Bionics such as these are becoming a much more widely developed technology, from the Hero Arm to the Modular Prosthetic Limb developed by John Hopkins University, 'a bionic arm that responds to human thought' and can be capable of communicating a sense of touch to its user.<sup>461</sup> What makes Open Bionics in particular a fascinating source for analysis, is the fictional gravity the company invests in its production and promotion, namely how it also actively engages with SciFi popular culture. To begin with, the product's title includes the word 'Hero', aligning it with traditional positive narratives. Open Bionics reinforce this connection with story-telling, describing their work as creating technology that turns disabilities into superpowers.<sup>462</sup> They demonstrate an active desire to tap into a cultural understanding of SciFi possibilities, directly confirming that '[they] want to show limb different people that the products and devices that they're seeing in SciFi and gaming and movies can

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<sup>459</sup> Open Bionics. "Our Story - Making 3D Prosthetics Beautiful - Open Bionics". Open Bionics, 2022, <https://openbionics.com/about/>.

<sup>460</sup> Open Bionics. "The Hero Arm Is A Prosthetic Arm Made By Open Bionics". *Open Bionics*, 2022, <https://openbionics.com/hero-arm/>.

<sup>461</sup> Motherboard. The Mind-Controlled Bionic Arm With A Sense Of Touch. *Motherboard*, 2016. [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=F\\_brnKz\\_2tl&ab\\_channel=Motherboard](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=F_brnKz_2tl&ab_channel=Motherboard)

<sup>462</sup> Open Bionics, "Hero-Arm"



become reality or become reality very soon.<sup>463</sup> Even the name they have chosen emulates this desire to evoke a SciFi atmosphere surrounding their product; it does not use 'prosthetics' as its term but instead 'bionics', a term popularised by the SciFi television show *The Six Million Dollar Man*.<sup>464</sup> We can compare this ideological language quite directly to that implemented by Musk, when he speaks about his plans to colonise Mars:

I think it is important that we become a space-faring civilization and be out there among the stars ... We want the things that are in science fiction novels and movies not be science fiction forever. We want them to be real one day.<sup>465</sup>

One of the greatest differences we see between these quotes is the specificity the speakers give. Open Bionics are clear about their audience, and how they wish their invention to impact communities. It is for 'limb different people', to show them what could be available to support them 'in the near future.' They reinforce this by making the design files for this particular bionic, the Adam Jensen arm, opensource; this allows people to download them and, with access to a 3d printer, make one for themselves. Naturally, the restrictions for accessing this are still relatively limited to 3D printing access, but it demonstrates the prioritisation of accessibility that the company

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<sup>463</sup> Deus Ex. Augmented Future - Open Bionics x Deus Ex x Razer. *Deus Ex*, 2016. [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=la3P-RHVWQ&ab\\_channel=DeusEx](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=la3P-RHVWQ&ab_channel=DeusEx)

<sup>464</sup> See etymology online where the '[p]opular sense of "superhumanly gifted or durable" is from 1976, from U.S television program "The Six Million Dollar Man" and its spin-offs. Harper, Douglas. "Etymology of bionic." *Online Etymology Dictionary*, <https://www.etymonline.com/word/bionic>. Accessed 12 August, 2022. Citation for the show is as follows: Richard Irving, Gil Mellé, and Hal Mooney. *THE SIX MILLION DOLLAR MAN*. USA, 1973.

<sup>465</sup> Clifford, C., 2022. [online] Available at: <<https://www.cnbc.com/2019/03/08/jeff-bezos-mount-everest-is-a-garden-paradise-compared-to-mars.html>> [Accessed 27 April 2022].

champions. They even speak to the capacity of the model they had developed at that point; it was a 'semi-functional prototype.' They respond directly to their mission statement of 'affordable, functional, and beautiful prosthetic devices to amputees.' Conversely, Musk is responding to a press conference question about what advice he would have to 'all the dreamers out there who are dealing with the same kind of doubt that [he] did.' To this response, Musk only speaks about his own doubts about his company failing, before giving the quote above. It is also important to note that part of this quote in full reads: 'it is important that we become a space faring civilisation and I'll be out there among the stars.'<sup>466</sup> Musk's response to this question is unable to relate to others on any specifics, other than an assumption that being in space is what he thinks 'makes people excited about the future.' Linguistically, between these two quotes from Open Bionics and Elon Musk, we see Open Bionics speaking not only about the particular demographic they want to market towards, but they speak about what 'can' become reality. They also talk about what limb different people 'are seeing' in SciFi. This immediacy references its contemporaneous context, and in particular gestures towards *Deus Ex* which features in the very same video.

Contrasting this, Musk speaks *for* his hypothetical audience; he tells them what he thinks 'makes [them] excited' and that 'we want' SciFi things to be real. Open Bionics is saying that they are trying to make what people can see into reality, but they are not speaking for that audience's desires. Musk talks about 'becoming a spacefaring civilisation' and then steps in to interpose for his listeners to declare that is what they

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<sup>466</sup> Space Policy and Politics. SpaceX Demo-1 Flight, Postlaunch Press Conference, March 2, 2019. Space Policy And Politics, 2019. [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ttBSwE-Zko&ab\\_channel=SpacePolicyandPolitics](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ttBSwE-Zko&ab_channel=SpacePolicyandPolitics)

want. In his case we can see a more active mode of transmission where he controls the narrative by laying out the response it should receive. Open Bionics partnered with *Deus Ex* to create this open comparison between them but do not interpret for us in the manner of Musk. The text is left for audiences to become familiar with however they will (through playing, reading reviews or otherwise) and in this manner leave space for the transmission process that they have invited. Before moving on, however, it is important to note the difference in context between these two events. Open Bionics was specifically working with *Deus Ex* for this release, therefore reference to cyberpunk becomes necessary for the purpose of this piece; in contrast Elon Musk is being interviewed following a rocket launch, therefore it is not as tightly connected to the specifics of cyberpunk or SciFi. However, we can see in the language choices they make how they are using the near future promises of cyberpunk (and the near future that Musk is promising in demonstrating that space-faring technology is working today). Open Bionics seeks to connect to the promise of its future technology, and actively speaks to how they would rectify issues present in cyberpunk fiction, it will be accessible and functional not run-down or faulty. They allow cyberpunk to present criticism and address it. Musk denies any specifics of how he draws upon scifi, omitting any potential criticisms of space-faring societies, and then speaks for his audience to tell them they want this. This comparison shows how cyberpunk, and SciFi by extension, can be drawn upon to positively reinforce future products, or how it can be wielded to attempt to legitimise the desires of figureheads.

Through their collaboration with *Deus Ex*, Open Bionics creates a positive connection between their work and the science fictional capability promised by

cyberpunk. This is a direction that they follow not just in this example, but in other instances too. Open Bionics bring the fictions with which they connect their work to the fore, rather than leaving it ambiguous. They embrace Basset et al's 6<sup>th</sup> transmission method by encouraging audiences to view (or play) the texts that will familiarise them with their product. This has one major reasoning, and that is timeliness and partnerships; Open Bionics have partnered not only with the production team of *Deus Ex: Mankind Divided*, but they have also worked with the 2019 production of *Alita: Battle Angel*.<sup>467</sup> At its simplest level, both parties in these endeavours gain exposure from this collaboration, the producers of the texts gain positive associations with disability support and research and Open Bionics get the media attention of high-profile releases to breed awareness of their work for future funding. Although, as we have just discussed with *Deus Ex*, Open Bionics are also entwining their product into cyberpunk's long history of exploration of not only human augmentation, but also of power and political freedoms. This is important for Open Bionics as it gives them access to a recognisable aesthetic that establishes the dangers of corporations that do not prioritise accessibility and functionality for their products; similarly, cyberpunk establishes augmetics as a site of individuality, power, and beauty. These connections give Open Bionics access to conversations cyberpunk has been engaging with for years,<sup>468</sup> providing it with a strong baseline to communicate the positive outcomes of their business' priorities.

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<sup>467</sup> Rodriguez, Robert. *Alita: Battle Angel*. Twentieth Century Fox, 2019.

<sup>468</sup> In fact, both the pieces of media Open Bionics has worked with are from existing, older franchises. The first *Deus Ex* game was released in 2000, and *Alita: Battle Angel* is based on a Japanese manga series from the 1990s.



Image from: Nerdbot<sup>469</sup>

Connecting the Hero Arm to specific texts makes the suggested ideal of 'Science Fiction becoming reality' much more analysable, as how the texts discuss prosthetics becomes a direct analogy to the Hero Arm. It is no surprise then, that the media that Open Bionics has connected with supports a presentation of prosthetics that shows bionics as a positive defining trait for the capability of their user as well as being fashionable in presentation. Their partnership with *Alita: Battle Angel* is a particularly important not just for how Open Bionics connects itself with a text that supports a positive message that they want to encourage, but also for how they counter the usual narrative control that CEOs like Musk take over the interpretation of a text by handing that responsibility to other speakers. *Alita: Battle Angel* takes the lead of these texts in presenting the

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<sup>469</sup> B. A. Walsh, "'Alita: Battle Angel' Filmmakers Gift Bionic Arms To Young Amputee", NERDBOT, 2019 <<https://nerdbot.com/2019/03/11/alita-battle-angel-filmmakers-gift-bionic-arms-to-young-amputee/>> [Accessed 18 September 2022].

aesthetic beauty of bionics, with the porcelain-white, filigreed limbs of the eponymous protagonist (see above) becoming a source of beauty in the hectic and crowded sprawl. Similarly, *Alita...* makes bionics seem commonplace, with a large number of heavily augmented characters, each sporting unique designs to fit their needs or personalities. Bionics are key to a number of past-times, employments and entertainments despite the brutality of a number of these such as the hunter-warriors and motorball players, finding excitement through high octane lifestyles is a privilege mostly belonging to the augmented. *Alita...* however, despite being body-positive in the appeal of bionics, drawing attention to them as positive artefacts not a physical lack, also presents them as a path to exploitation.

A central danger of *Alita...* is the threat of attack on the streets, as the de-facto ruler of Iron City employs agents to assault augmented people, steal their bionics, and return them to him. Interestingly, this theft is not a black-market operation, it is a top-down illicit act as those on the lower rungs of this society are 'recycled' for the profit of the wealthy. It is not the street-level surgeons and repairmen that threaten customers with malpractice, these instead become kind-hearted pragmatists. They stand in opposition to the companies themselves, who orchestrate the exploitation of their customer-base to maximise their profits. In associating the Hero Arm with *Alita...*, Open Bionics open themselves to comparison with high-level research corporations, and street-level distribution. Their method of publicity was designing bionics aesthetically similar to those in *Alita...* and gifting them to a young girl, Tilly Lockley, at the premier.<sup>470</sup> They had been working with Tilly since 2016 on the development of the Hero

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<sup>470</sup> Technology Org. "Tilly Lockey Receives Bionic Arms Made In Collaboration With The Production Team Of *Alita: Battle Angel* - Technology Org". Technology Org, 2022,

Arm, but a key effect of this action is to associate themselves with the street doctor who saves Alita, the protagonist. Open Bionics shape their connection to the protagonist actively, therefore making clear that their accessibility-focused development goals align with the positive aspects of the film's representation of their technology. With this connection, Open Bionics makes their product exciting and dynamic. It becomes about the possibilities and futures of younger audiences, not the persistence of the currently entrenched, older class. Their active transmission encourages engagement with the narrative takes (in the terms of Bassett et al) of their connected fiction.

Following on from this, it therefore suggests multiple motivations for development of technology. It brings to the fore profit-based motivation and a desire for uneven distribution, with the villainous rulers of Iron City separating themselves from the masses in a walled off suspended city above Iron City, and developers seeking to fit bionics to the lives of their users to improve their living conditions by working alongside them, such as the street-doctor Dr Idow. There is a rejection of a blanket understanding of how bionics fit into futuristic life through this connection, and this can serve to strengthen awareness of how aiming for futuristic technologies to become reality may be a common goal, but there is not just a single way of approaching it; this could serve to destabilise the assumption that only the currently wealthy can make this reality through the unequal practices that they currently use. Open Bionics' Hero Arm directs its audience to look to cyberpunk directly, rather than gesturing at vague ideals, therefore reinforcing the need to interrogate futuristic imaginings directly. The active transmission at play here is not a reworking of the story to disguise the similarities

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<https://www.technology.org/2019/02/28/tilly-lockey-receives-bionic-arms-made-in-collaboration-with-the-production-team-of-alita-battle-angel/>.

between cyberpunk megacorporations and the corporate speaker interpreting the story, but a re-emphasis on the liberatory potential many characters within these worlds find in working with the technological innovations that threaten to compromise them. Open Bionics' emphasis on the accessibility of their product, alongside the message of the potential of rebellion within *Alita...* is just as strong an act of active transmission as the vagaries with which we began this chapter.

Looking at the title, 'hero-arm', we can see an acknowledgement that the future does have risks. It is not a golden utopia; it is an identifiable struggle for this younger audience of 'heroes' and 'villains'. The ideals towards which Musk and others gesture imply they know best, and they alone can steer us to this future they (or we as they would have their listeners think) desire. In this example, Open Bionics hands the voice of their publicization to the future generation and selected a media partner to reinforce this message. In embracing the story of *Alita: Battle Angel* wholly, Open Bionics allows itself to benefit from the exploration of exploitation and resistance at its heart without attempting to co-opt that narrative for themselves. It allows for cyberpunk to present for its audience the dangers of exploitative corporate work structures that benefit their richest members at the expense of their workers to play out to the full, encouraging its audience to experience the cyberpunk text they believe represents (some of) their desires for the future. This connection encourages active engagement with cyberpunk concerns to further the impact of cyberpunk's narrative takes; it encourages an audience to understand the potential for malpractice in their near future whilst they explain how they are working to avoid these pitfalls. This is an example of cyberpunk being used to help explore the real-world futures, when it is not being wielded to



promise physical items as much as it is showing living conditions of the future, and introducing ethical considerations that encourage its audience to think critically about what their future may look like, and who is selling it to them. Cyberpunk is important for engaging this thought, and its connection to technologies such as those made by Open Bionics proves its continued relevance to today, and how understanding cyberpunk stories helps open productive dialogues in broad audiences for real world issues.

When we interrogate cyberpunk works directly, we can find that their messages often contradict the expectations born from broad understandings and surface-level readings. Therefore, encouraging direct engagement with texts mitigates some dangers of transmission, namely uncoupling the moral implications speculated on within texts from the artefacts that may be desired to be replicated outside of fiction. Whilst Bassett et al. are correct to assert that ‘SF isn’t simply a fictional field from which gobbets of ‘real science’ or ‘real technology’, growing there in seed form, may be ripped, more or less whole<sup>471</sup> this persists as an ideal that can be a useful tool for research development. Therefore, to support an understanding of SciFi that encourages an active interrogation of the processes, and implications, of proposed futuristic technologies, we can look to the processes of transmission as the real-world permeates fiction reflexively. The “Biohacking” movement provides a key example, in particular how it reclaims and recontextualises the ‘-punk’ suffix of fiction into an ideological movement for equality in access to and distribution of scientific knowledge and practice. “Biopunks,” taking this

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<sup>471</sup> Better Made Up p.12

definition of the movement's ideology from the *Biopunk Manifesto*,<sup>472</sup> seek to support and encourage the practice of 'scientific literacy' wherein a person not officially a 'scientifically educated' person, such as researchers officially educated and employed by universities, governments, and corporations, may have the information and material resources to directly engage with scientific practice safely outside of such institutions. They object to the private possession of research information and materials that restricts the progress of scientific advancement as it prevents broad, collaborative work from scientifically educated and literate peers worldwide. What is particularly important about the Biopunk movement, with regards to the issue of transmission, however, is how it offers an understanding of the '-punk' suffix detached from fictional genre. The 'Bio-' of Biopunk is easily identifiable in the wetware focus of its research aims, therefore the resistance ideology it provides reflects directly to the '-punk' of its name, and in this distinction, it reconnects collaborative desires to '-punk'; it brings '-punk' back to a broad, non-scientifically educated, but scientifically passionate or interested demographic.

One particularly important effect of familiarising ourselves with the Biopunk movement, is how it can help to relocate the 'punk' in cyberpunk. With Silicon Valley proudly supporting the law-breaking loner, the broader movements at play destabilising the entrenched privatised systems of cyberpunk became uncoupled from a base understanding of the genre, just as the moral implications of some of its artefacts also risk being lost. What can be done to reinforce a refocusing on distributed action, is to emphasise it in cyberpunk fiction, therefore making it difficult to uncouple under

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<sup>472</sup> Maradydd. "A Biopunk Manifesto". *Maradydd.Livejournal.Com*, 2022, <https://maradydd.livejournal.com/496085.html>.

generalisation; just as *1984*'s surveillance technology is inseparable from the moral implications of loss of privacy, so too can important elements of punk rebellion and equal access to technology be solidified in the broad understanding of cyberpunk. Cyberpunk texts that emphasise the communities and groups that strive to overcome systematic oppression and make clearer their deviation from the hard-boiled, loner heroes of their heritage will better resist reductive interpretations that detach cyberpunk items from their political interrogation. With a more concrete understanding of how cyberpunk builds punk into its perspective and does not just raid it for its neon and leather, we make it more difficult to pull technology out of its stories and divest it of its context. As we have shown that decontextualization is one of the strongest strategies for the appropriation of cyberpunk, the more difficult we make this process the more effective cyberpunk's critique of its technologies will be; and therefore the more likely it is to have deeper and more considered discussions around bringing cyberpunk technologies into being.

As cyberpunk moves further into the mainstream during its 21st Century renaissance, and as technological innovation reaches and gestures into the even-nearer-futures of cyberpunk texts, the dangers of the elision of cyberpunk analysis grow starker.

Accepting generalisations about the potential of cyberpunk technology overlooks the attention cyberpunk gave to disadvantaged parties. We can see in the technologies and stories gestured to by the Silicon Valley magnates in this chapter, that the overly-historicised focus of previous conceptions of cyberpunk have opened space for the genre's appropriation. The limitations of cyberpunk's previously reductive definitions,

that I outlined in Chapter 1, return with genuine implications for the accessibility of future technologies and for the conditions of workers supporting their production. However, it is apparent that the 'punk' ideologies of this genre have transmitted to certain areas of public consciousness, and movements such as Biopunk help to combat the misappropriation brought about by Silicon Valley executives who wield narratives about the future as an idealistic goal they alone can press humanity towards. As companies such as Open Bionics begin to work alongside cyberpunk fiction, a direct identification of the nature of real-world practice and the exploration of how these processes could benefit or harm workers and communities becomes easier to communicate to a mass audience. It is for this reason that revisiting cyberpunk with an aim to emphasising the creative variety at its heart, as performed in Chapter 2, is so vital; it enables analysis that weakens the prevalence of one dominant perception of cyberpunk and heightens awareness of the multiple lines of flight possible through its presentations of possible futures. In particular though, it is important to support the popularity of the genre as mass engagement with cyberpunk familiarises audiences better with the genre's specifics and supports a more engaged technique of transmission than relegating SciFi to fringe demographics such as the 'nerds' who became Silicon Valley magnates. When cyberpunk is pushed to the fringe of analysis, it is opened up for interpretation by people who can appropriate its narratives for their own benefit, at the risk of others. However, when we encourage engagement with cyberpunk texts, dialogue and discussion unravelling and exploring the depths of its fears about our future becomes more common. They therefore become more familiar to wider and wider audiences due to their profusion of culture, and we can mitigate the negative effects of active

transmission through awareness of the reductive interpretations that so commonly drive this strategy.

Cyberpunk texts themselves have also always been innately vulnerable to this process; the high-octane thrills and the heroic gestures of early cyberpunk characters engaged its readership but opened itself to 'fishing for objects' and idolising technologically trained hero-figures. With an increase in return to mainstream attention, cyberpunk gains traction once again as a 'relevant' representation of our current technology and the pathways down which it could lead. As new texts are produced off the back of this attention, cyberpunk needs to look to the expectations brought forward from its history as generalised ideals, and actively differentiate from them to prevent reinforcing these misaligned desires of resistance to corporate hegemony and exploitation and strengthen the variety of representation that cyberpunk has as a genre. For this reason, the final chapter of this thesis looks at the conditions of recent cyberpunk fiction; the ways it falls prey to reinforcing the limited expectations that can lead to its appropriation as a genre, and also how it parodically reinvents its messages to liberate and update them for a contemporary audience. By looking at the conditions of contemporary cyberpunk, and those of its own near future, we can unravel how cyberpunk responds to these popular understandings of its form and the conditions it sets up for its own development.

## CHAPTER 4: MODERN CYBERPUNK ITERATIONS

As evidenced in the last chapter, cyberpunk, perhaps even to a greater extent than other SciFi forms, finds itself characterised and limited by its own legacy. This thesis has returned, through each separate analysis, to the central concern of contemporary cyberpunk; can it escape from the expectations and stories of its past, and is it in a position to do so? In the first chapter, I laid out a new framework for understanding cyberpunk that foregrounded a flexible approach to genre and eschewed the historicisation of its previous definitions. Using the concept of variation and mutation as a base, I then re-analysed early cyberpunk (in Chapter 2) to emphasise how embracing a flexible understanding of cyberpunk accentuates the genre's ability to interrogate socio-technological concerns rather than didactically repeat the messages of cyberpunk's 'headline' texts. Moving from this, Chapter 3 turned to the transmission processes that perpetuate this misunderstanding of cyberpunk and explored how this has influenced its legacy.

It is this idea, then, that extends into this final chapter. In a summative gesture, this thesis will turn its attention to specific examples of contemporary cyberpunk texts; it will analyse the ways the genre still conforms to these preconceptions but importantly emphasise how it innovates through intentionally resignifying and parodically reflecting on the genre's history. This culminates in an analysis of a recent cyberpunk text that received much media attention to assess the ways it suggests a failure to escape these preconceptions, but how its audiences recognise this fresh-parodic potential. Cyberpunk, despite remaining relatively popular since its inception, is often criticised for

refusing to move on. The reception of recent works like *Blade Runner 2049*<sup>473</sup> or the remake of Masamune Shirow's classic *Ghost in the Shell*,<sup>474</sup> is often marred with concerns that they copy earlier works to play on their popularity without deepening any discussion or progressing the detailed social commentary that this specific form of science fiction can provide.<sup>475</sup> This is an argument that has resurfaced over and over again throughout the previous chapters. I have established a definitional approach that steers discussion of cyberpunk away from this idolization of its past in Chapter 1, in Chapter 2 I have debunked the myth of what cyberpunk 'was supposed to be', and in Chapter 3 I have looked at how the popularity of cyberpunk can cause it to be disconnected from its social commentary thus emphasising the cultural narrative that it is now empty of discursive value. Now, in Chapter 4, it is time to embrace the particular criticisms of how cyberpunk has lost its 'essence', and whether it is set to repeat the same mistakes that have led it to this point. Here, I will break down and analyse three texts that have all garnered this specific response. This analysis reveals how close readings of works easily expose those that play into imitation to capitalise on popularity. It also demonstrates how critics often overlook the subtle and nuanced ways many cyberpunk texts reinvent their legacy. Finally it explores how we can anticipate impactful additions to the genre, and identify their parodic strengths and limitations before they become a new encapsulation of 'the state of cyberpunk'.

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<sup>473</sup> Denis Villeneuve, *Blade Runner 2049* (Warner Bros, 2017).

<sup>474</sup> Rupert Sanders, *Ghost In The Shell* (Paramount Pictures, 2017).

<sup>475</sup> This argument is presented most loudly about visual media such as film, television, and video games. For this reason this is the focus of this final chapter, as there is a greater breadth of critics engaging with these texts and these arguments. Recent cyberpunk literature (such as Larissa Lai's [2018] *The Tiger Flu*, or Kali Wallace's [2021] *Dead Space* - citations in bib) escape much of this accusation. Therefore whilst they are important, recent cyberpunk texts this chapter focuses on examples that have garnered this level of response, *Netflix's Altered Carbon*, *Ready Player One*, and *Cyberpunk 2077*

First, looking at *Netflix's Altered Carbon*,<sup>476</sup> I explore how this criticism can be unfounded. Accusations of empty pandering to cyberpunk popularity are often responding to surface-level similarities to older works, often from aesthetic signifiers, and overlook the intentional parodic work that underlies these connections. *Altered Carbon* will prove a positive case study for how modern cyberpunk texts work alongside their history and reveals the methods with which cyberpunk can update and modify the impact and implications of its features to better fit a contemporary context. Following this discussion, this chapter will turn to its second study of Ernest Cline's *Ready Player One*.<sup>477</sup> This, and its film adaptation by director Steven Spielberg, will serve as a counter to the discussion of *Altered Carbon*, as examples of cyberpunk texts which fall into the trappings of retro-futuristic popularity and nostalgia signalling. It is a useful example of where cyberpunk creators can fail in updating the 80s concerns of their origins and serve to only emptily pastiche on bygone cyberpunk history. In this manner it will contrast with the analysis of *Altered Carbon* to highlight the differences in the two. This serves to reinforce how cyberpunk can innovate and iterate even within the boundaries of its own genre's signifiers but only through an awareness of the trappings of empty pastiche.

Finally, this chapter looks to the future of cyberpunk by focusing on the high-profile video game release *Cyberpunk 2077*<sup>478</sup> as the popularity of and media attention to this release makes it likely that this video game may become a keystone text that

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<sup>476</sup> Laeta Kalogridis, *Altered Carbon*, (Netflix, February 2018). Discussion in this chapter focuses on this adaptation of Richard Morgan's novel. If any points relate to the novel instead I will directly acknowledge this at those points.

<sup>477</sup> Ernest Cline, *Ready Player One*. (London: Random House, 2011)

<sup>478</sup> *Cyberpunk 2077*, 2020, CD Projekt Red



embodies the state of cyberpunk for a broad audience for many years to come. Directly embracing, as it does, the term cyberpunk in its title and using 'cyberpunk.net' for its own marketing purposes, this game puts itself in position to become a new definition or understanding of cyberpunk. Therefore, it becomes incredibly important to address the manner in which it is setting up this understanding of a whole genre. Using the two analyses previous, this chapter will break down the methods with which *Cyberpunk 2077* emphasises its connection to previous cyberpunk and how it signifies deviation from this. Using this text's marketing and presentation as a metric, this chapter concludes with a speculation about how *Cyberpunk 2077* sets up the upcoming progression of the genre. Whether it foregrounds a response to the current political and technological climate, emphasising cyberpunk's continued relevance and the power of varied cyberpunk representation to more deeply explore the issues at their heart, or whether it will fall back on reinstating the previously held public popularity of the genre itself, pandering to the surface desires expected of it and setting an expectation of replication not innovation to follow in its legacy.

### To Parody or Pastiche

The first step in beginning this analysis lies in establishing the theoretical basis for comparison between our central case studies. At the core of this comparison is the distinction between parody and pastiche. These terms intersect very appropriately with the manner of criticism cyberpunk texts often receive from reviewers and isolating the

distinction between them opens a framework for criticising the response to fresh cyberpunk iterations.

Cyberpunk literature and media, despite its continued popularity since the 1980s, has received an unfortunately sparse academic consideration for its most recent iterations. Although it must be noted that this is shifting with cyberpunk's resurgence in the public eye inspiring fresh discussions to emerge. Many older critics of cyberpunk, e.g. Keith Johnston<sup>479</sup> or Gregg Rickman,<sup>480</sup> perceive it through its broader membership to the wider SciFi genre. Others, however, who consider such work within a tighter focus, tend to not analyse contemporary cyberpunk texts, linking the genre to a specific time around three decades ago; Featherstone and Burrows' (1995) collection of essays, for example, or Dani Cavallaro's discussion of William Gibson's work typify this approach.<sup>481</sup> Whilst both of these examples are older analyses of cyberpunk, it is important to note that later texts still put a heavy focus on these older works.<sup>482</sup> These analyses also gravitate towards canonical works such as Gibson's *Sprawl* trilogy or Neal Stephenson's *Snow Crash*.<sup>483</sup> This tendency in critical responses is beginning to be addressed, but for the case of the texts analysed here, existing critical analysis is sparse, in a large part due to how recently released they are. Therefore, this chapter uses a number of news sites, articles, reviews and editorials to address the cultural impact and response to these particular texts. These discourses pertain not only to the

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<sup>479</sup> Keith M Johnston, *Science Fiction Film: A Critical Introduction* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2011).

<sup>480</sup> Gregg Rickman, *The Science Fiction Film Reader* (New York: Limelight Editions, 2004).

<sup>481</sup> Dani Cavallaro, *Cyberpunk And Cyberculture* (New Brunswick: Athlone Press, 2000).

<sup>482</sup> It is this issue that we have returned to across the thesis. In particular we see that the recent Routledge cyberpunk texts are beginning to diversify this focus, but due to the atmosphere and weight given to Gibson and other 'central' early cyberpunk texts, in part by Cavallaro and Featherstone & Burrows, it is a difficult process to divest criticism of these texts.

<sup>483</sup> Neal Stephenson, *Snow Crash*. (New York: Bantam Books, 1993)

excitement, production value, or other aspects of viewing pleasure of the show itself, but also capture the thinking that the show can provoke and do so in the absence of sustained academic discussion that will hopefully continue to grow as the cyberpunk Renaissance builds in mainstream media consumption. They are also of particular interest for our discussions of pastiche and the 'imitativeness' of recent cyberpunk texts, as they very clearly reach for familiar cyberpunk lodestones for comparison, thus emphasising relationships between them and the wider canon. These articles demonstrate cyberpunk's reputation and legacy in non-specialist audiences.

I will use the first season of *Altered Carbon* to help emphasise the relation of parody and pastiche to modern criticism of cyberpunk, as its debut received numerous online responses that perfectly represent this dichotomy. The first season in particular is important for the impact it made as a fresh intellectual property for the visual market. The overall reception of *Altered Carbon*, on its release, was generally favourable, though it averaged a 64 out of 100 score from critic reviews on Metacritic as of January 2019.<sup>484</sup> The mixed response from critical reviews often took a similar shape: *Altered Carbon's* similarities with earlier works in its genre were acknowledged (and disparaged), only to be followed by the praise it earned for its distinguishing features. Graeme Virtue's brief review is a good example of this pattern.<sup>485</sup> He notes at the outset that "[a]s cultural consumers, we have been bombarded with variations of this future on

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<sup>484</sup> "Altered Carbon", *Metacritic*, 2022 <<https://www.metacritic.com/tv/altered-carbon>> [Accessed 22 January 2019].

<sup>485</sup> Graeme Virtue, "Altered Carbon: Has Cyberpunk Discovered Life Beyond Blade Runner?", *The Guardian*, 2018 <<https://www.theguardian.com/tv-and-radio/2018/feb/05/altered-carbon-has-cyberpunk-discovered-life-beyond-blade-runner>> [Accessed 5 February 2018].

and off for more than 25 years [...] cyberpunk has become so shopworn that it has become essentially a nostalgic period setting.” Following this, however, he highlights how *Altered Carbon* stands out thanks to “pleasingly oddball” aspects. He draws attention to elements such as the inclusion of the AI hotel whose projection takes the appearance of Edgar Allan Poe, and how the series contrasts gruesome torture with a “heartwarming side story” within a single episode.<sup>486</sup> Similarly, Maureen Ryan of *Variety* concluded her review with the thought that “[t]hough “Altered Carbon” is dependent on a number of the genre’s oldest conventions, the casual inclusivity of its cast [...] and its ability to shift between worlds and memories becomes impressive over time.”<sup>487</sup> Both of these reviews emphasise how *Altered Carbon* is able to distinguish itself, and progress the genre it positions itself within, even while adhering to certain conventions which can feel repetitive at best.

*Altered Carbon*, then, is typically seen as a show, like other recent iterations of cyberpunk, utilising the styles of past works from the genre— with *Blade Runner* being far and away the most cited source—without contributing any new perspectives to cyberpunk’s exploration of the socio-cultural concerns surrounding technology. Ryan Britt writes that the series “wants desperately for you to be reminded of the original *Blade Runner* and older Gibson books, rather than challenge the viewer with anything new.”<sup>488</sup> Whilst the show does occasionally suffer from unnuanced repetition of

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<sup>486</sup> An episode we will return to analyse in greater detail later in this chapter

<sup>487</sup> Maureen Ryan, "TV Review: With 'Altered Carbon,' Netflix Takes On The Future - Variety", *Variety.Com*, 2018 <<https://variety.com/2018/tv/reviews/altered-carbon-netflix-review-joel-kinnaman-1202681320/>> [Accessed 30 January 2018].

<sup>488</sup> Ryan Britt, "Altered Carbon And Blade Runner 2049 Don't Exist Because Of Futurism", *Inverse*, 2018 <<https://www.inverse.com/article/40915-altered-carbon-blade-runner-netflix-cyberpunk>> [Accessed 22 August 2022].

established cyberpunk tropes, it is far more than an empty pastiche of older cyberpunk works as it has been denoted in these reviews. It is more appropriate to press analysis of *Altered Carbon* as a parody of not only the transhumanist technology suffusing the cyberpunk genre, but more importantly, as a self-aware and useful parody of the wider genre itself. *Altered Carbon* actively seeks to represent, revisit, and reimagine settings, roles, and narrative structures from cyberpunk's history to parodically refresh its messages; it utilises the familiar elements of cyberpunk history to reignite and update the genre's longstanding fear of a technologically dependent transhumanist future.

In order to analyse cyberpunk texts such as *Altered Carbon* as parody, and so challenge the criticism that it emptily copies a thirty-year-old aesthetic, we can turn to Fredric Jameson's distinction between parody and pastiche. In *Postmodernism, or The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*,<sup>489</sup> Jameson laments the eclipsing of parody by pastiche. In his terminology, parody capitalised on the uniqueness of modernist styles to produce mocking imitations; these parodic imitations held elements of respectful sympathy for their sources. What Jameson terms as pastiche is instead a negative postmodern phenomenon, an 'imitation of dead styles';<sup>490</sup> it is a 'blank parody'<sup>491</sup> bereft of the satiric impulse or laughter of its predecessor. Jameson sees this shift as an indication of a downward movement from modernism where "Modernist styles... become postmodernist codes", leaving behind merely "a field of stylistic and discursive

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<sup>489</sup> Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, (Duke University Press, 1991) ProQuest Ebook Central <https://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/bham/detail.action?docID=3007805>.

<sup>490</sup> Jameson, 1991, *Postmodernism*... p.18

<sup>491</sup> Jameson, 1991, *Postmodernism*... p.17

heterogeneity without a norm.”<sup>492</sup> Our capability to understand the past erodes with this change, restructuring the past as a repository for genres and styles for commodification.

Whilst this distinction in terminology is very useful, this perspective colours approaches to contemporary parody with an assumption that they are worse than their predecessors. *Altered Carbon*, or other contemporary texts’ “copying” of *Blade Runner*’s imagery, after Jameson’s critique, is more liable to be viewed as pastiche, and this aligns with the perspective of reviewers outlined above; it is apparent that Jameson’s concept informs cultural responses to texts such as *Altered Carbon*, even if it’s not invoked by name, and this leads to a silencing of the work that the show does with its recycling of prior art.

Before exploring what *Altered Carbon* achieves with its parody, and where *Ready Player One* fails with its pastiche, we can usefully expand on Jameson’s concepts by incorporating some terminological distinctions from Linda Hutcheon’s Theory of Parody.<sup>493</sup> Hutcheon attempts a comprehensive distinction of the range of terms often confused with parody, such as irony, satire, burlesque, and also pastiche. In Hutcheon’s definition, ‘[p]arody is, in another formulation, repetition with critical distance, which marks difference rather than similarity;’<sup>494</sup> it is ‘a method of inscribing continuity while permitting critical distance.’<sup>495</sup> This aligns with Jameson’s perception of the term as an imitation that implies a respect of its source. Neither theorist foregrounds humour as the sole intent of parodic work, and whilst humour often features in parody, it is not a requisite of the form. The difference between the two is best summarised as follows:

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<sup>492</sup> Jameson, 1991, *Postmodernism...* p.17

<sup>493</sup> Linda Hutcheon, *A Theory Of Parody* (London: Methuen, 1985).

<sup>494</sup> Hutcheon (1985), *A Theory of Parody*, p.6

<sup>495</sup> Hutcheon (1985), *A Theory of Parody*, p.20

Parody is bitextual in that it needs the encoder and decoder to superimpose two texts upon one another to incorporate the old into the new, whereas pastiche is more monotextual as it stresses similarity rather than difference.<sup>496</sup>

Of particular importance in Hutcheon's definition is the emphasis she places on the 'encoder' and 'decoder' both actively working to create parody. Parody is designed with intent and requires engagement and an appropriate cultural awareness to communicate its message. Furthermore, parody strives "to incorporate the old into the new."<sup>497</sup> In this, Hutcheon acknowledges how parody creates new material, and seeks to reshape the messages and traditions of the old into its new context; its "bitextuality" melds two texts rather than simply replicating and glorifying an older work. This resonates, as we will see, with *Altered Carbon*, and how it strives to blend the older texts in its history into new material and the context of its production. Importantly here too is the emphasis on the joint action of the encoder and the decoder, of the creator and the receiver of the text to actively work to superimpose the texts upon each other. In this instance Hutcheon emphasises how whilst cyberpunk texts must be created with an awareness to the forms from which their inspiration is derived, so too must its audience actively apply the new product to that which it alludes in order to correctly achieve its parodic effect.

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<sup>496</sup> Hutcheon (1985), *A Theory of Parody*, p.33

<sup>497</sup> Hutcheon (1985), *A Theory of Parody*, p.33

It is this above separation in terminology of parody and pastiche that will be used throughout the following chapter. Important too to this discussion, however, is Hutcheon's definition of "irony" which is vital to understanding the intentions behind the parodic intent of these cyberpunk texts. "Irony," for Hutcheon, is "a strategy used to parodic effect, one which highlights the difference between the parodic and the parodied, and substitutes for the mockery or ridicule of the target text traditionally seen in this area".<sup>498</sup> When irony is seen as a substitute for mockery, it enables the discussion of parodic strategies that seek to highlight the critical difference between the parody and the parodied as a focus of creative intent in itself. This is vital to the analysis below, the intent of reshaping cyberpunk parodically is most commonly ironic in its design, as in such a way contemporary cyberpunk is able to criticise its past by emphasising a shift in message away from its previously historicised expectations.

A final point to establish before moving into the case studies themselves, however, is to draw attention to the inherent similarities between both parody and pastiche.

Distinguishing between each of these terms, Hutcheon notes that they are not exclusive of each other. The definitional categories that we can establish for them are semi-permeable by nature. Hutcheon clarifies that "[t]his is not to say that a parody cannot contain (or use to parodic ends) a pastiche".<sup>499</sup> The boundaries between these terms can intersect, and this is why this chapter uses an example of a predominantly parodic contemporary cyberpunk text, and one which utilises mostly pastiche. It is, however, not the intention of this chapter to establish which single term can best be applied to any of

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<sup>498</sup> Hutcheon (1985), *A Theory of Parody*, pp.31-32

<sup>499</sup> Hutcheon (1985), *A Theory of Parody*, p.38



the following texts, but rather to demonstrate how these case studies utilise ironic strategies to achieve useful parodic effects. In so doing we can more easily recognise cyberpunk texts that do more with their legacy than create an empty pastiche of cyberpunk as the dominant criticisms of recent additions to the genre have repeatedly asserted, or vice versa. The case studies act as elaboration on each other to identify which elements reflect which intention. It is the ability to recognise these differences that is the central focus here, to encourage identifying these strategies in further texts, such as *Cyberpunk 2077* and any that follow it. There is, however, a particular focus within this analysis on the identification of parodic intent, as it is less represented in immediate cyberpunk criticism and review in favour of accusations of imitation and pastiche. To see all contemporary cyberpunk as a simplistic imitator of its past forms and concerns is to miss much of its potential for provoking more nuanced discourse about transhumanism, embodiment, and the neoliberal conditions of living in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Through critical analysis that has been blinded by the visual similarities of shows such as *Altered Carbon*, the historicised, prescriptive definitions I rejected in Chapter 1 become self-sustaining, excluding fresh perspectives on cyberpunk fiction. In this chapter, I will use this terminology of parody and pastiche to unpick examples of contemporary cyberpunk to enable a considered response to, and analysis of, the genre as it progresses.

## How *Altered Carbon* alters *Blade Runner*

We turn first then to *Altered Carbon* to demonstrate the importance of parodic intent and the manners in which it can manifest in a product otherwise criticised for its aura of pastiche. Cyberpunk texts are on the whole susceptible to this form of criticism, as they are part of a genre with a high degree of visual and thematic specificity. This, as discussed earlier in the thesis, arises to some extent from their shared origin in visual media. *Altered Carbon*, therefore, cannot be detached entirely from the media that precedes it, and it is not the intent of this chapter, nor the show's creators, to suggest this. As its critical response so often argues, *Altered Carbon's* visual style and narrative structures do draw heavily from *Blade Runner* as source material.<sup>500</sup> However, Scott's film is hardly the only inspiration for the show which brings together imagery, ideas, and even actors from other cyberpunk work such as *The Matrix* (1999) and *Max Headroom: 20 minutes into the future*.<sup>501</sup> *Altered Carbon* is an important example of recent cyberpunk because of this connection, it chooses to embrace its legacy rather than openly reject it; rather than representing a failure to iterate, it displays a designed commitment to the imagined worlds which stand at the heart of the cultural conception

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<sup>500</sup> One further acknowledgement here is the decision to analyse *Altered Carbon* for its relationship to *Blade Runner* over *Blade Runner 2049* (also referred to as *2049*). The key motivation behind this decision is that *Blade Runner 2049* is directly connected to its predecessor as a sequel. Comparison and connection between these two texts is intrinsically part of that relationship. Whilst *2049* does reimagine, reinvent and re-explore key elements of *Blade Runner*, that is inherently part of its intent as part of the same franchise. *Altered Carbon* is more useful here as an external text; as it is not directly connected to any of the influential cyberpunk pieces in my analysis here, the connections we can see between them speak to the expectations and language of cyberpunk, and the pervasiveness of *Blade Runner* (and later *The Matrix*) into the genre's visual and thematic language. *Altered Carbon* is not under the same obligation (or expectation) to connect to *Blade Runner* as *2049*, these choices are active decisions by the creators and therefore more revealing of its relationship to the cyberpunk genre as a whole.

<sup>501</sup> Annabel Jankel and Rocky Morton, *Max Headroom: 20 Minutes Into The Future* (Chrysalis, 1985).

of cyberpunk.<sup>502</sup> *Blade Runner* is a landmark production for the genre and has become its foundational work of visual media; it is almost impossible to uncover discursive pieces on cyberpunk material without mentioning *Blade Runner*. It appears repeatedly, for instance, in both Featherstone and Burrows' edited essay collection, and Cavallaro's discussion of cyberculture, even though her focus is on the work of William Gibson. Brian Baker's study of SciFi<sup>503</sup> similarly uses *Blade Runner* a great deal, particularly in the discussion of SciFi and cinema.

Its pervasive presence in cyberpunk is therefore also influenced by the popular cultural resonance of the film in the broader SciFi and cinematic milieu. Since *Blade Runner* is such an influential piece of cinematic history, *Altered Carbon* would never have been able to escape its legacy. Of greater importance to the Netflix adaptation, but eliciting similar decisions in narrative and aesthetic design, is *Altered Carbon*'s own source text, Richard Morgan's 2002 novel. In his own words, Morgan 'ransacked the genre [cyberpunk] and made off with the goods'<sup>504</sup> when it came to appropriating concepts that were already embedded in SciFi. In this manner, the novel itself was already indebted to classic works, *Blade Runner* very much included. For this reason, *Netflix's Altered Carbon* had the choice to either deviate significantly from its source material or to embrace the links it had to prior art and to do something different with that same commitment. The final product was destined to be read in terms of what came before it, whether this is rejecting, replicating or updating its past. And it is the latter of

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<sup>502</sup> Just as in Chapter 2 where I analysed how Pat Cadigan worked within cyberpunk's familiar form to broaden the messages at its heart

<sup>503</sup> Brian Baker, *Science Fiction* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014).

<sup>504</sup> Saxon Bullock, "From The Vault: Richard Morgan Interview (2002)", *Saxon Bullock*, 2014 <<http://www.saxonbullock.com/2014/04/never-mind-the-cyberpunks-an-interview-with-richard-morgan-2002/>> [Accessed 23 August 2022].

these options which follows mostly in this instance. To understand how, I shall use more specific examples from the text itself.



Image from: "Altered Carbon"<sup>505</sup>

Nowhere is this debt and difference to prior cyberpunk works more evident than in the distinction between the series' advertising material and its final narrative. One of the most frequently appearing images in the show's campaign was Kovacs silhouetted against a steep skyline adorned with neon advertisements. This very clearly situated the two texts in a dialogue, encouraging cross-comparison which we will now unpick. This promotional material presents, just as *Blade Runner* did, a hard-boiled detective protagonist and sets out to follow his struggles in a classic combination of SciFi and noir

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<sup>505</sup> Laeta Kalogridis, *Altered Carbon*, (Netflix, 2018)

cinema that echoes throughout cyberpunk. After actively conjuring this connection, however, it is this hard-boiled aspect from which *Altered Carbon* also ironically distances itself to update and reflect on the genre's progression since *Blade Runner*.

Historically, hard-boiled fiction is constituted by certain elements that, as Sean McCann rightly notes, 'are so widely known that they have achieved something close to mythic stature'.<sup>506</sup> He precedes this statement with a neat summary of general assumptions about the genre:

tough-talking, streetwise men; beautiful, treacherous women; a mysterious city, dark, [...]; a disenchanting hero who strives, usually without resounding success, to bring a small measure of justice to his (or, more recently, her) world.<sup>507</sup>

Both *Blade Runner* and *Altered Carbon* certainly fit this description. Their cities are both mysterious and dark, lit only by an artful neon tinge. Priss, the beautiful and acrobatic cyborg target of *Blade Runner*'s detective Deckard, and Miriam Bancroft, the seductive yet suspect wife of Kovacs' employer, can both be described as femme fatales (the "beautiful, treacherous women" from McCann's description). Finally, both Deckard and Kovacs are disenchanting, tough-talking heroes who can only hope to administer a small amount of justice into their worlds.

This is reinforced in Cavallaro's discussion of the literary influences which anticipate cyberpunk, where she points to how 'Chandler [a hugely influential hard-

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<sup>506</sup> Sean McCann, "The Hard-Boiled Novel", *The Cambridge Companion To American Crime Fiction*, 2010, 42-57 <<https://doi.org/10.1017/ccol9780521199377.005>>. p.42

<sup>507</sup> McCann, 2010, "The Hard-Boiled Novel", p.42

boiled fiction author] emphasizes the isolation and rootlessness of his hero'<sup>508</sup> (though this isolation, or rootlessness, is dramatically exaggerated in *Altered Carbon* with Kovacs appearing, primarily, as a man 250 years detached from both his environment and his own skin). The aspects of hard-boiled fiction described above are so close to mythic that the moment the genre begins to align with any of these tropes an audience will anticipate the inclusion of them in their entirety. This expected alignment with an established set of genre traditions becomes a useful tool for parodic works, however, enabling creators to play on audience expectations and disrupt a familiar structure in order to produce an effect. It conjures expectations to later disrupt.

The ironic distance that *Altered Carbon* establishes between itself and the legacy of *Blade Runner* is apparent from the very structure of its narrative. Kovacs is a resistance fighter made to wear the body of a detective. In this case, quite literally, as the central conceit to *Altered Carbon* is the idea that a person's mind can be digitised, stored in a small implant (a cortical stack) and transferred between bodies (referred to in the world as 'sleeves', hence characters can be 'resleeved' into fresh bodies). Kovacs, therefore, is forced by circumstance to embody the traditional noir protagonist's role, regardless of his own wishes. This creates a dismissive, detached perspective towards the recognized structure that the show itself is "wearing"; it invites a direct comparison with *Blade Runner* in its visual style, and its future-noir hard-boiled detective, whilst simultaneously showing an utter disinterest in these features through its focal character; Kovacs, asleep for centuries and trained to be beamed to alien worlds, doesn't much care if the case is solved, or even if he lives or dies. This disjuncture is picked up by

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<sup>508</sup> Cavallaro, 2000, *Cyberpunk and Cyberculture*, p.9

some of the reviewers of the show, but rarely in a positive tone. Muncy laments Kovacs' role as the protagonist due to what she calls:

the simple problem that Kovacs has almost no stake in the life he's been given. He's detached and bitter, and justifiably so, but his lack of interest in the world leads the show to feeling untethered, distant, and focused on all the wrong things.<sup>509</sup>

In this regard, Kovacs' relation to the plot distances the viewer from the show which focuses on 'the wrong things' for the detective structure it parodies. The highly praised additions which make *Altered Carbon* stand out, however, are enabled by the shifting of focus from a direct recreation of a detective story, strongly implying that we should see this as a feature, not a bug.

One such applauded addition is a set of scenes in which Detective Ortega, an officer with a "neo-catholic" family who do not believe in resleeving anyone who has died, brings her previously deceased grandmother to her home in a new body for a family celebration. These moments are given a chance to shine and develop due to the distance *Altered Carbon* ultimately establishes from the fetishisation of detectives and criminals so intrinsic to hard-boiled fiction. As a consequence of this, *Altered Carbon* is able to shift the exploration of the implications of transhuman technology from the

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<sup>509</sup> Julia Muncy, "'Altered Carbon' May Not Be The Cyberpunk You're Looking For", *WIRED*, 2018 <<https://www.wired.com/story/altered-carbon-review/>> [Accessed 23 August 2022].

violent detective's world to the more recognisable family space, encouraging engagement with the concept of this technology's impact on their own lives.

As Hutcheon writes in her theory of parody, parody "may indeed be complicitous with the values it inscribes as well as subverts, but the subversion is still there".<sup>510</sup> Indeed, *Altered Carbon* does fall into some of the traps identified by its reviewers. The hard-boiled structure at times pulls the narrative away from its fresh additions to the genre. At the end of episode 1, for instance, Kovacs is confronted by the hitman Dimitri Kadmin, a fractured killer at the head of a gang of criminals hired to apprehend Kovacs. The scene, which quickly escalates into a well-choreographed fight sequence, leaves Kovacs triumphant but injured. Kovacs, however, initially accepts Kadmin's command patiently, but is taunted and beaten until he is ultimately forced into a violent engagement. If Kovacs is forced to play the role of the detective, then he is also forced to respond appropriately as Kadmin does not accept his acquiescence. Sean McCann identifies the hard-boiled traits that dictate this response. He argues that the Western legacy, which hard-boiled fiction, in part, draws upon, exerts an influence wherein the detective must battle 'the brute enemies of civilization – [in these worlds, the] swarthy denizens of the urban underworld.'<sup>511</sup> Until this point, Kovacs has not proven his physical strength, aside from a brief flashback to a different life in a different body.

The fighting, however, serves only to distance Kovacs from the answers that he seeks and further embeds him into a structure for which he has no interest. This expectation of Kovacs' athletic and violent form of heroism stems from both the demands of the storyworld and, metatextually, from the genres the show adapts,

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<sup>510</sup> Hutcheon, 1985 *Theory of Parody*, p.106

<sup>511</sup> McCann, *The Cambridge Companion To American Crime Fiction*, p.45



dictating the character choices and many of the topics of focus for *Altered Carbon* as a whole. Importantly, however, the framing of Kovacs' relationship to his role as a detective allows the show to express a frustration with, or simply ambivalence toward this prescribed path. In this way, even as the show suffers from its expectations, it communicates discontent and in so doing ironically distances itself from the established structures that place these expectations upon them. This distance emphasises the enactment of power on the human body enabled by the technology of *Altered Carbon*; how inescapable the performative demands of his body are on Kovacs and how despite his resistance inevitably he is dragged back to his prescribed role. *Altered Carbon's* prescribed culture is enforced by the bodies its people inhabit, especially for those such as Kovacs and Kadmin.

*Altered Carbon's* ironic distance from its noir history is again shown in episode 4, where, in one of the show's most discussed scenes, Kovacs' torture at the hands of Kadmin is contrasted by Ortega's family celebrations. Kovacs is placed in a virtual torture room where he is interrogated and mutilated on a seemingly endless loop that is broken up for the viewer with flashbacks to Kovacs' past and Detective Ortega's Día de Muertos celebrations. In this latter scene, Ortega's family, who are devoutly neo-catholic, a Christian sect in the show who believe resleeving deceased individuals puts the soul at risk of going to hell, are celebrating a holiday devoted to remembering friends and family members that have died. Ortega has resleeved her deceased Grandmother in the body of a criminal gang member so that the dead woman can attend the family

celebration, and this sparks an argument and discussion within the family about the moral and spiritual implications of resleeving.

This episode is important for a number of reasons. Firstly, it contrasts a scene from Morgan's original novel, Kovacs' torture, with a new scene unique to the show. Secondly, it intertwines the most extreme violence of the series with a lighter, often humorous exploration of the implications of resleeving. The inseparability of cyberpunk and violence is something on which Kevin McCarron comments,<sup>512</sup> admitting that, despite its many critical and philosophical merits as a genre, the worlds presented in cyberpunk texts are often incredibly violent and misogynistic. The actions that cyberpunk protagonists take are frequently brutal in order to emphasise the uncaring culture they live within and are infected by. This often leads to nihilism as characters see themselves surrounded with meaningless, easy-to-replace people in overpopulated urban sprawls. It is also indicative of the popularity of violent action for many readers, viewers and players of cyberpunk fiction, with Morgan's own love of violence in his writing being well documented.<sup>513</sup>

The torture scenes in both this episode and the novel have garnered a lot of critical discussion due to their shocking and potentially problematic natures. In the novel Kovacs is interrogated after being virtually resleeved into the body of a young woman; in the show he is tortured in the sleeve he occupies for the majority of the season. Laeta Kalogridis, the creator of Netflix's *Altered Carbon*, reveals that she made this change to

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<sup>512</sup> Mike Featherstone and Roger Burrows, *Cyberspace/Cyberbodies/Cyberpunk* (London: Sage, 1995). P.261

<sup>513</sup> Alison Flood, "Altered Carbon Author Richard Morgan: 'There'S No Limit To My Capacity For Violence'", *The Guardian*, 2018 <<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2018/feb/13/altered-carbon-author-richard-morgan-violence-netflix>> [Accessed 23 August 2022].

avoid the scene becoming 'some torture porn thing.'<sup>514</sup> Kalogridis goes on to state that she kept the scene in the series to continue the show's seemingly paradoxical discomfort with violence: "the worst violence is visited on [Kovacs]. Nobody else gets their legs burnt off while they're still alive with a blowtorch" she states.<sup>515</sup>

Violence begets violence for *Altered Carbon's* detective; Kovacs is forced into violent behaviour and the repercussion of this is violence visited on himself. In these segments, Kovacs is mistaken for Detective Ryker, whose body acts as Kovacs' current sleeve, and a man described as every bit the violent, short-tempered, criminal-associate noir detective that *Altered Carbon*, and Kovacs, wish to be separated from. The show is uncomfortable with the violent legacy from which it springs. Violence is rarely rewarded neatly with success, but instead with the frustrated withholding of answers, as seen in Kadmin's death, and with an increase in violence reinscribed onto Kovacs' body. *Altered Carbon* presents cyberpunk's hypermasculine history here, the 'masculinist conventions'<sup>516</sup> identified by Karen Cadora in her criticism of early cyberpunk,<sup>517</sup> but distances itself from it by undermining its effectiveness. It works within its stereotypical structures to criticise them, a fact that risks being lost by the dismissive response it received from critics.

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<sup>514</sup> Quoted in: Weber, Rachel. "Finished watching *Altered Carbon*? Here's the shocking part of the novel's torture scene its showrunner refused to film". *Gamesradar*. February 15, 2018, <https://www.gamesradar.com/uk/finished-watching-altered-carbon-heres-the-shocking-part-of-the-novels-torture-scene-its-showrunner-refused-to-film/>

<sup>515</sup> Chris Eggertsen, "'*Altered Carbon*': Inside The Drama'S 15-Year Road To Netflix – The Hollywood Reporter", *Hollywoodreporter.Com*, 2018 <<https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/live-feed/altered-carbon-inside-dramas-15-year-road-netflix-1080944>> [Accessed 23 August 2022].

<sup>516</sup> Karen Cadora. "Feminist Cyberpunk." *Science Fiction Studies*, vol. 22, no. 3, 1995, pp. 357–72. JSTOR, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4240457>. Accessed 27 Aug. 2022., p.358

<sup>517</sup> As was discussed in greater detail in Chapter 2

It is important too to note that this scene is only partially the focus of the episode. Indeed, the frequent scene changes between the torture and Ortega's party draw the two into comparison and create a disturbing backdrop of the potential terrors of resleeving. In Ortega's scenes, her neo-catholic family struggles with her Grandmother's return. The Grandmother, who is sleeved in the body of a threatening, tattooed, white supremacist, acts as a comedic juxtaposition of appearance and personality. Even so, this comedic element is problematized as the threatening appearance of the sleeve causes members of the family, even in this future world, to be fearful when Ortega's Grandmother plays with the young children. The inclusion of these scenes shifts the show's focus to a recognisable social dynamic and the impacts its futuristic technology can have on everyday social spaces. This cleverly restaged family drama is, however, broken by Kovacs' more literal experience of being physically torn apart. By juxtaposing these scenes, *Altered Carbon* is able to pay homage to its legacy, both its source text and the violent nature of previous cyberpunk works, whilst simultaneously expanding upon the social and cultural dynamics of personal life affected by high technology that otherwise may have been overlooked. Within this episode's structure the two interconnect and develop one another.

The potential for torture is experienced by those who tread the violent path, contrary to the reunion and celebration enjoyed by others at greater peace. Therefore, whilst *Altered Carbon* does fall into the expectation of providing brutal and gory spectacles for its viewers, its integration of this into new imagery distances it from a pure pastiche of the genre's expectations and allows a fresh, parodic focus to be applied to the philosophical and ethical questions inherent in its SciFi conceit. *Altered*

*Carbon* works within the recognisable stereotype of cyberpunk's legacy, but its presentation of these elements is more than surface deep; it parodically criticises the expectations surrounding the genre, such as those exploited by Musk and others,<sup>518</sup> to update the limited understanding of the message of cyberpunk fiction that had previously dominated its narratives. It encourages a varied understanding of cyberpunk ideas by reconfiguring the stereotypical expectation of a hyper-masculine hero, working within the genre to support the inherent variety demonstrated throughout this thesis and deepen cyberpunk critique of violent solutions.

### Building on *The Matrix*

As identified with Sophie Gilbert's review of *Altered Carbon*, this torture scene represents a further visual link to another iconic cyberpunk film, *The Matrix*, in its use of 'robotic insects that invade your body in nightmarish fashion.'<sup>519</sup> Not only this, but the torture sequence discussed above takes place entirely in 'virtual', the simulated spaces of *Altered Carbon*, just as Neo's torture at the hands of Agent Smith take place within the construct of the Matrix. Virtual spaces in 21<sup>st</sup> century media are difficult to separate entirely from those of *The Matrix* due to its dramatic cultural impact.<sup>520</sup> Yet as with its

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<sup>518</sup> As explored in Chapter 3

<sup>519</sup> Sophie Gilbert, "Altered Carbon Is A Moody, Violent Spectacle", *The Atlantic*, 2018 <<https://www.theatlantic.com/entertainment/archive/2018/02/altered-carbon-netflix-review/552182/>> [Accessed 23 August 2022].

<sup>520</sup> The importance of *The Matrix* to cyberpunk was discussed in more detail in Chapter 1. Namely it was a key text in maintaining the genre's popularity over the turn of the millennium and despite its different styles of representation to *Blade Runner*, it fulfils the same important cyberpunk elements as that text in a similarly distinct and memorable style

connections to *Blade Runner*, *Altered Carbon* embraces this comparison, actively encourages it, and twists it to extend the commonly identified cynicism of cyberpunk fiction into the virtual to criticise the idylls of digital paradise expected of the genre. The Virtual is not a space of freedom or mastery, such as it is for Gibsonian protagonists, but a space of vulnerability, torture and trauma. Not only for the human characters, but for their AI associates too; in this way *Altered Carbon* builds on its cyberpunk ancestry to complicate the ideas of both Digital Paradise and omnipotent AI.



*Interrogation scene from "The Matrix"<sup>521</sup>*

Beginning with how *Altered Carbon* re-envision's humanity's experience of digital existence then, is the torture scene from Episode 4. The 'robotic insect' Gilbert calls attention to above is visually near-identical to its equivalent in *The Matrix*, varying only in its more biological appearance compared to the biomechanics of the Matrix creature; in the equivalent scene in *The Matrix*, our protagonist (Neo) is as yet unaware they are

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<sup>521</sup> Image taken from [https://matrix.fandom.com/wiki/Unable\\_to\\_Speak?file=Room.png](https://matrix.fandom.com/wiki/Unable_to_Speak?file=Room.png)

living in a simulation, and are taken by AI agents (at this stage suspected to be human, government agents) to an interrogation room where their mouth is melted shut and the 'robotic insect' burrows into their body to 'bug' them. It is not just in this scene, however, that the imagery from *The Matrix* is evoked. On more than one occasion, Kovacs is shown in a Protectorate virtual interrogation room, and this empty space, with panelled walls and a single table again reflects the room of Neo's interrogation. Early into episode 7, Kovacs is recruited into the Protectorate. He is placed, alone, in the aforementioned interrogation room where a single, smartly dressed Protectorate recruiter blackmails him into enlisting with the promise of protecting Kovacs' sister. This scene prevents itself from merely pastiching *The Matrix*, however, with one key distinction: Kovacs is a child. He is not 'the chosen one' that Neo is. He is not a revolutionary hero, or a traditional hard-boiled detective seeking truth or social change. He is a vulnerable minor, put into an alien environment and emotionally blackmailed into enrolment in the military. By contrasting a child and a military general across the table of this hollow virtual room, *Netflix's Altered Carbon* reinforces Morgan's criticism of authoritarian governments' involvement in the running of cyberpunk dystopias. Kovacs is given no opportunity to resist his enlistment, out of his comfort zone and isolated by a power figure such as he is. This represents how those in power wield their knowledge of the technologies that underpin their societies, and their current position of authority to subjugate their opposition;<sup>522</sup> and the cyberpunk setting brings this dynamic to the fore with its exaggerated future technologies. It also interestingly embodies the relationship between young people and (importantly digital) media. In this instance a minor is put

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<sup>522</sup> Just as was discussed in Chapter 3

into a digital space where the military lie to him about their actions, not only extolling the necessity for their continued success but even about protecting his sister because of his recruitment. They isolate and manipulate Kovacs as a child using The Virtual, resignifying digital space as an area of danger that is at the mercy of governmental powers rather than rebel hackers.

These ideas recur throughout the virtual spaces of *Altered Carbon*. They are not, like *The Matrix*, environments that mimic those of reality, or offer an idealised 'paradise' against the hardships of the dystopian reality outside of the simulation. The virtual worlds of *Altered Carbon* are all spaces of torture, trauma, and exploitation. This truth appears away from Kovacs' character too; it is also, for instance, the space where Lizzie Elliot relives the trauma of her death on repeat, and compounding their context is the visual representation of these spaces, filmed through a fisheye lens which adds an uncomfortable, distorted perspective to the scenes. In Episode 2, Kovacs enters the stage of Lizzie's Virtual trauma and the production crew represent this space by using negative distortion, heavy colour saturation which shifts and undulates throughout, and reinforce this discomfort with the continual sounds of dripping water and a sobbing woman. These techniques evoke the feeling of a horror story, disorienting the viewer, denying them a stable viewing position, and echoing the sounds of distress.

The main thing that these effects make abundantly clear, is that the Virtual is not a replacement for reality. Instead, the artificiality is emphasised in a manner that harkens to real-world virtual reality's issues with motion sickness, i.e. how movement and



extended sessions in VR can nauseate users.<sup>523</sup> This has the effect of undermining the traditional “mind-over-meat” dichotomy set up by traditional cyberpunk literature, such as William Gibson’s foundational novels, and *The Matrix* itself. This perspective which is aptly summarised by N Katherine Hayles when she writes that *Neuromancer* ‘delights in the “bodiless exultation of cyberspace” and fears, above all, dropping back into the “meat” of the body.’<sup>524</sup> Here it is something only desirable for short bursts of experience, not as a substitute for reality. Users don’t desire to escape their bodies into this, it is a tool for exploitation. They are used as methods of isolating people to imprint on them somehow, mostly to the detriment of the subject. For Kovacs it is to extract information or recruit. For Lizzie, she initially is trapped reliving her trauma, but that space becomes an opportunity for Poe, the AI secondary protagonist, to provide therapy for her; thus imprinting again albeit with a more positive intent. In these ways, despite utilising the imagery of *The Matrix*, *Altered Carbon* offers up a different relationship with virtuality.<sup>525</sup>

For *Altered Carbon*, virtual spaces are created for specific purposes and mostly on an individual level. If the grand delusion of *The Matrix* suggests there is a great veil over humanity’s eyes obscuring the truth, *Altered Carbon* offers a proliferation of minor deceptions and manipulations that support a dystopic society by breaking it apart and undermining it on a more individually tailored scale. This has interesting implications for

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<sup>523</sup> See the following article for information on how VR can trigger nausea through motion sickness: Jason Coles, "What Causes Motion Sickness In VR, And How Can You Avoid It?", Space.Com, 2021 <<https://www.space.com/motion-sickness-in-vr#:~:text=So%2C%20VR%20makes%20people%20feel,to%20make%20you%20feel%20ill.>> [Accessed 25 August 2022].

<sup>524</sup> Hayles, N. Katherine. *How We Became Posthuman: Virtual Bodies In Cybernetics, Literature, and Informatics*. E-book, Chicago, Ill.: The University of Chicago Press, 1999, <https://hdl-handle-net.bham-ezproxy.idm.oclc.org/2027/heb05711.0001.001>. p.290

<sup>525</sup> *Altered Carbon*’s use of the Virtual echoes how Cadigan presented digital spaces as psychological ones in *Mindplayers*. This was discussed further in Chapter 2, but it is important to note that these ideas chart a progression from early cyberpunk, as I highlighted in that earlier analysis

the rising awareness of fake media and tailored advertising. What may amount to more minor deceptions over governmental conspiracy theories form a more insidious and familiar representation of the negative potential of virtuality. Although this time we don't have 'the one' to solve our problems, they fall to individual awareness.

This is emphasised in the emptiness of the Virtual. There is seemingly no universal online location. Unlike the bustling networks of the Matrix occupied by interconnected data streams that one finds in Gibsonian cyberspaces, where the freedom for global logins enables a multitude of interactions, the Virtual of *Altered Carbon* is individualistic. As they are created for specific uses, it appears that on the whole they must also be traversed and run by people directly. Kadmin's torture, for example, seems to always be run with someone actively performing the torture, it isn't handed off to programs or subroutines. As Morgan writes, 'in the end [a psychologist is] going to have to generate a virtual environment in which to counsel her patient, and go in there and do it.'<sup>526</sup> Virtual spaces in so much as they are created for effect, have to be inhabited and enacted to achieve this end, they have no self-agency. They're empty in the sense that no responsibility can be offloaded onto non-human parties. The act of recruiting or torturing Kovacs, for instance, is attributable only to Jaeger and Kadmin respectively. The digital technologies of *Altered Carbon* cannot indoctrinate or torture, only enable, therefore the effect of this technological dystopia is not a byproduct of the technology, but an act of willful misuse. It emphasises how people treat and exploit other people, not technology.

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<sup>526</sup> Richard Morgan, *Altered Carbon* (London: Gollancz, 2002) p.153

Whilst this shift in representation of virtual spaces reflects a change in online concerns from the expansive fears of an open and vulnerable online existence, to a fear of isolation, it reminds its audience how this malpractice is the result of conscious decisions not passive corruption of technology. Machines no longer dupe humanity, as in *The Matrix*, this responsibility is shifted. This is not the world run by a great machine, where shady government agents hunt down resistance fighters using supernatural power. It is one where experienced businessmen lie to children to get what they want. It's one where our tormentors can trap us alone for an untold time. It is one where we can be constantly encircled by our traumatic memories. *Altered Carbon* presents a shift in cultural fear surrounding virtuality. Its disorienting and exploitative digital spaces resituates this element of cyberpunk away from breathtaking vistas of limitless potential. It is no longer a space where 'you' can triumph,<sup>527</sup> but a claustrophobic trap that threatens your wellbeing. Its parodic effect serves to mark its distance from *The Matrix*, as Hutcheon defines parody's purpose. Gone is Agent Smith and his power to exploit the system he is within to subdue an ignorant population. Now AIs sit wasting their time in poker games with each other, while people punish and exploit each other. Just as with *Blade Runner*, *Altered Carbon* pays homage to *The Matrix*, signifying the important visual language which familiarised an audience with the concept of digital life, yet it distinguishes its virtual spaces in their implications, grasping an argument from the past about questioning the authenticity of reality and molding it to reveal the intentional and personal manipulations behind the black box of the internet.

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<sup>527</sup> Neo is 'the one', an all-powerful messianic figure in the matrix. Similarly Case and other hackers are often seen as heroes projecting their wills and supremacies into digital frontiers. This ideology is unpicked more in Chapter 3, but it is something *Altered Carbon* rejects throughout, as evidenced here.

### 40 years into the past: *Ready Player One* and pastiche

The previous two examples used to represent parodic reference within *Altered Carbon* were both high profile films. They either were at release, or have since gained notoriety within the public eye, and it is this reason that they are the films that are identified in the reviews of *Altered Carbon* as potential sites for mimicry. In order to further emphasise both *Altered Carbon*'s awareness of its heritage and the parodic intent behind its creation, however, we will turn our attention to its incorporation of less immediately apparent cyberpunk material, in particular the character of Max Headroom. In recognising the connection between these two materials, *Altered Carbon* acknowledges the history of cyberpunk, reinventing its styles and signifiers just as it has with *Blade Runner* above. Importantly, the figure of Max Headroom opens a direct point of comparison between it and *Ready Player One*, revealing how the latter vacuously drew upon this same history for financial and popular success.

Headroom originally appeared in the British TV movie, *Max Headroom: 20 Minutes into the Future*, as a digitised television presenter, essentially an uploaded copy of a human mind with a wacky personality. *Altered Carbon* creates an ironic relation to this character, not by directly referencing the material, but by positioning the actor who played Headroom, Matt Frewer, as the Panama Rose Fightdrome's ringmaster, Carnage. This subtle placement of an influential cyberpunk figurehead within the broader setting is indicative of the insightful parodic awareness *Altered Carbon* establishes with its intertextuality. To emphasise the parodic relationship in this connection, we will begin comparing Matt Frewer's role in *Altered Carbon* to *Ready*

*Player One*, and how it uses the same character of Max Headroom. In the latter, references to and depictions of the character more neatly fit the criticisms levelled at *Altered Carbon*, demonstrating a relationship far more akin to pastiche than parody, where references to older cyberpunk become empty, contextless signifiers, stripped of their original cultural criticisms.<sup>528</sup> In the juxtaposition of this and *Altered Carbon*, we can better see how the latter demonstrates its awareness of cyberpunk's generalised expectations, and shapes it into active critique that deepens cyberpunk dialogues with a fresh perspective.<sup>529</sup>

*Ready Player One* is a novel, written by Ernest Cline in 2011, and adapted for film by Steven Spielberg in 2018. Both texts are set in the near future, a cyberpunk dystopia where many citizens live in slums and so the majority of the world spends significant periods of time in a shared virtual reality called the OASIS. The story follows Wade, the main protagonist, and a group of other 'Gunters' whose sole purpose is to find three secret keys to an easter egg hidden in the OASIS that will grant them ownership of the company which controls it. Overall, the plot remains mostly consistent between the novel and film, with only superficial changes and omissions.

In the novel, Max Headroom is present in his entirety. Wade selects an OASIS copy of the character to essentially act as his personal assistant. The only reason given for choosing Headroom for this position is that he is supposedly cool because he is from

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<sup>528</sup> We see this in the divorcing of technologies and stories from their 'narrative takes' in Chapter 3, where this decoupling of signifiers from cyberpunk's critiques opens it up to problematic appropriations.

<sup>529</sup> Embracing the variety of perspectives and representation at the heart of cyberpunk that this thesis has extolled throughout.

the 80s, a decade venerated throughout the story as the billionaire creator of the OASIS nostalgically adored and replicated the pop culture of his childhood. Headroom, therefore, serves no new purpose in *Ready Player One* other than to signify awareness of 80s television. He does not progress the story or open any new perspectives onto the storyworld or the reader's reality. All scenes including Headroom are therefore bland pastiches of this character rather than fresh contextualizations. This lack of significance is emphasised in the 2018 film where Headroom is entirely absent. The closest replacement is an AskJeeves-like Curator who is affiliated with any user of the OASIS rather than the desires of any single character.

Jameson feared a 'nostalgia mode'<sup>530</sup> in postmodern pastiche, an inability to represent our own present and instead only retreading our inner memories of a past that is forever out of reach.<sup>531</sup> This inability signifies an eclipse of creative potential. None of the references made in *Ready Player One* are intended to reinterpret the sources upon which it draws, and the replaceability or elision of the intertexts in its adaptation only serves to highlight their empty worth as pastiche. *Ready Player One* also so selectively cherry-picks the elements of one decade's pop-culture that its positioning of itself as a repository of the influential texts of that period becomes a dangerously exclusive exercise, hyper-tailored towards the memories of white, male teenagers and their nostalgic fathers, a direction criticised by Jazmine Joyneron in *Okayplayer*, who writes that '*Ready Player One* consistently and aggressively enforces the narrative of an all-

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<sup>530</sup> Jameson, 1991, *Postmodernism...*, p.20

<sup>531</sup> Jameson, 1991, *Postmodernism...*, p.25

white nerdism.’<sup>532</sup> Without drawing upon its references to do any real narrative or cultural work, they exist only to signify what icons are presumed to be important to what are believed to be the dominant readers or viewers of this piece of fiction.

Max Headroom is not important to *Ready Player One*; the connotations he carries are unexplored and unutilised, and so his use, along with the vast majority of references in both the novel and the film, becomes empty. His only purpose is to market a new product to an established demographic and perpetuate a singular perception of a past now beyond reach. Suffusing and undermining *Ready Player One* is this lack of a coherent, updated message beyond the veneration of this particular understanding of the 80s. This limitation is represented in its use of prior material extending from Max Headroom into other familiar icons. Key narrative setpieces of the book are literal repetitions of the past, with Wade following the *Dungeons and Dragons* adventure *The Tomb of Horrors*<sup>533</sup> and reciting the movie *Wargames*<sup>534</sup> word for word, and the film likewise detaches cultural signifiers from any context for similar effect. One particularly egregious example is the use of the Iron Giant as a stand in for a ‘cool fighting robot’ in the climactic sequence; as Eric Francisco points out in his article for *Inverse*,<sup>535</sup> the titular Iron Giant, who ‘is and was, unmistakably, pacifist’ is bereft of the meaning he once held. Francisco too noted how it has become ‘an empty call back to a generational touchstone, as the reference to the thing eclipses what the thing actually meant.’ These

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<sup>532</sup> Jazmine Joyner, "Why 'Ready Player One' And Its Erasure Of Black Culture Is Harmful", Okayplayer, 2018 <<https://www.okayplayer.com/originals/ready-player-one-black-culture-erasure-harmful-opinion.html>> [Accessed 23 August 2022].

<sup>533</sup> Gary Gygax, *Tomb of Horrors*, (TSR, 1978)

<sup>534</sup> *Wargames*, dir. by John Badham, (Metro-Goldwyn- Mayer, 1983)

<sup>535</sup> Eric Francisco, "Here's What 'Ready Player One' Gets Very Wrong About 'The Iron Giant'", *Inverse*, 2018 <<https://www.inverse.com/article/42896-ready-player-one-iron-giant-antiwar>> [Accessed 23 August 2022].

signifiers serve only to highlight the directionless understanding of cyberpunk that underlies the text. Wade as a protagonist presents a traditional rebellious hero only on the surface, signifying this cyberpunk keystone but eclipsing the meaning behind this position. He opposes IOI, an 'evil' corporation racing him to obtain ownership of the entire virtual world. IOI, we are told, will destroy the dream of freedom enabled by the OASIS. They will monetise it to deprive its freedoms to the lowest classes, a position Wade is in at the outset of the novel. However, being in this position reveals that financial status already dictates one's enjoyment of, and ability to benefit from, the OASIS. The evil corporation is in part already present. Therefore, as Wade gathers popularity from his success you would expect him to continue to tear down any limitations he can to spread digital freedoms across the public.

However, his veneration of what has come before prevents this, he, alongside *Ready Player One* itself, does not understand the concept of revolutionising its sources. One of Wade's first acts is to begin streaming his activities to a paid subscription service, charging his fans to enable his success. He becomes part of that which he initially resisted. The key distinction in Wade's adoption of the process to which he supposedly objects, is that he is not disparaged or criticised for this behaviour. As above, we see Kovacs suffer for his adherence to the violent status quo that governs his world, and when we see Case in *Neuromancer* rising into power it is undermined by the self-hatred he has for the life he has built for himself. Cyberpunk's frequent pessimism that the society will stagnate and its protagonists will fail to effectively change their world is communicated in criticisms of their central characters such as these; in this way their audiences can understand how they are not to be idealised but pitied. *Ready Player*



*One* does not understand this. Wade is still the 'hero', and we are intended to support him in his endeavours, not stopping to realise this hypocrisy. The integration of good vs evil rhetoric discussed in Chapter 3<sup>536</sup> appears here, divesting the (often pessimistic) nuance of cyberpunk's rebellious protagonists from their struggles. Whilst *Ready Player One*'s use of reference material, in particular that of 80s culture which ties it so heavily to early cyberpunk, is not the sole reason it falls flat in progressing the message of cyberpunk material, it is indicative of its misunderstanding of the implications of the material on which it attempts to draw. It understands the expectations it has as a cyberpunk text, but not the critical representation of corporate hegemony and the inequalities in financial distribution<sup>537</sup> that is core to cyberpunk's reflection on its contemporary world.

It is this desire to emptily reference popular culture that can be recognised too in Spielberg's cinematic adaptation. Whilst vast swathes of Cline's novel are in fact repetitions and re-enactments of his favourite 80s media, we see Spielberg's attempt to update this has merely updated its reference material not its relevance to its subject matter. The delving of the *Tomb of Horrors* becomes a race sequence wherein the Delorean from *Back to the Future*<sup>538</sup> and the motorcycle from *Akira*<sup>539</sup> can be deployed as references for audiences to delight in recognising. It is also incredibly important to note how *Ready Player One* fails to acknowledge the importance of its environments.

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<sup>536</sup> Which aligns cyberpunk protagonists with neoliberal beliefs of individual responsibility and exceptionalism.

<sup>537</sup> And access to technologies necessary for better education and living conditions, as the OASIS is presented in *Ready Player One*. This social critique is one of the key elements across cyberpunk identified in Chapter 1 of this thesis.

<sup>538</sup> *Back to the Future*, dir. by Robert Zemeckis, (Universal Pictures, 1985)

<sup>539</sup> *Akira*, dir. by Katsuhiro Otomo, (Tokyo Movie Shinsha, 1988)

We have discussed previously how cityscapes, slums, and digital worlds are vital to cyberpunk worlds, and whilst *Ready Player One* makes use of each of these it fails to interrogate their importance. Wade lives in a slum his entire life, and the film depicts this in its rusty, run-down misery. However, the necessity of the slum, nor the conditions of life it really affects are discussed. In fact, Wade climbing down the stack of mobile homes in which he lives portrays almost a playful feeling, and the hidden VR gear he sets up in a mound of scrap implies privacy and access to up-to-date technology. 'There's nowhere left to go' Wade intones in *Ready Player One's* trailer, to shots of overpopulated, decrepit streets, 'nowhere to go except the OASIS' he finishes as the trailer zooms into the digital paradise that houses most of the film's activity. The OASIS is just that, a place of escape, of paradise. And while *Ready Player One* lays the groundwork to interrogate a dystopic world where VR is necessary to escape the terrible lives its people are forced into, this potential is unexplored as we are immediately divorced from the lived experiences of the people in these slums.

The OASIS is distinguished from other famous cyberpunk digitalities such as *The Matrix* or the same-named space in *Neuromancer* in that it takes a lot of its visual language and signifiers from the world of video games. However, this fact is only celebrated in *Ready Player One*. The OASIS is a place of fun and adventure. We are not invited to criticise their over-prioritising the digital over the physical, the threat of addiction to video games and abandonment of other concerns is not important to the story. *Ready Player One* defends technological progress, uninterested in any ethical implications of its wide scale adoption; it is more interested in supporting an exceptionalist story, such as those commonly drawn upon by Silicon Valley to support

their own desires to make their technologies reality,<sup>540</sup> and in so doing runs against cyberpunk's counter-cultural desire to destabilise oppressive power structures. *Ready Player One* knows what elements and signifiers it wants to draw upon, but not the messages that its sources use these elements for. Its vacuous use of media references and cyberpunk tropes becomes a symptom of its deeper misunderstanding of the heart of cyberpunk ideals.

*Altered Carbon*'s approach to intertextuality stands in pleasingly stark contrast to what we see in *Ready Player One*. Carnage is the boss and ringmaster of the Panama Rose Fightdrome, a combat arena utilising specially bred sleeves which fight to the death. Whilst not being exactly the same role, this draws upon Frewer's heritage in Max Headroom's boisterous showmanship; he is not given a talk-show, but he is still the host of this new, violent form of entertainment. Visual similarities are also apparent in Carnage's appearance with his excessively decorated suit, replete with colourful floral shirt and bowtie. His exaggerated appearance also compliments his status as one of only two fully synthetic sleeves encountered in the series, positioning him with a similar artificiality to Headroom's virtuality.

In choosing Frewer for this part in particular, *Altered Carbon* makes clear its subtle awareness of its cyberpunk ancestry, again encouraging a more ironic recognition; Carnage himself even remarks that 'people love the classics.'<sup>541</sup> Unlike *Ready Player One*, *Altered Carbon* re-envision the role that Frewer/Headroom can play in a modern cyberpunk text. Carnage himself is a deceitful, menacing figure. He

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<sup>540</sup> See Chapter 3 for more.

<sup>541</sup> Kalogridis, *Altered Carbon*

advertises terrifying spectacles, 'never broadcasting, never recording anything,'<sup>542</sup> whilst secretly undermining his word and recording every fight on VHS tapes. Frewer, therefore, is separated from his humorous ridicule, instead he more closely echoes the duplicitous storing of personal information so intricately important to contemporary society. His deceptive trait is a further, humorous nod to Headroom with its 1980s technology and links to video nasties and other old media panics. In this world, where the digitization of consciousness is commonplace, analogue technology becomes a subversive, dangerous element able to go undetected.

Frewer's role here is not glorified then, as in *Ready Player One*. There is a great contrast between Carnage and the humorous figure that was Max Headroom, with Carnage living up to his name. In episode 6, Kovacs and Ortega are thrown into Carnage's arena and pitted first against bestially designed sleeves with horns growing from their heads, and finally against Kovacs's original body, now a sleeve for Kadmin. This use of bodies positions the scene as a battle of old versus new, of Kovacs working with Ortega to overcome his history, and this is framed and orchestrated by Max Headroom's actor. The scene becomes representative of *Altered Carbon*'s struggle to reshape the recognizable elements of cyberpunk into its contemporary context, striving to avoid stagnation and to contribute to its messages about our evolving technological environment. The presence of Frewer, departing from Headroom's smarmy self-importance which itself ridiculed the phoney familiarity of game-show hosts, is a revelling in Carnage's deceitful greediness; the ridicule is gone and in its place is a vicious undermining of media providers. Carnage, the smiling presenter who promises

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<sup>542</sup> Kalogridis, *Altered Carbon*

anonymous viewership and betrays his customers, restructures the mockery of Headroom into a dangerously exploitative context.

In this comparison, then, *Altered Carbon* is distinguished by its manipulation and recontextualisation of its past. It takes elements of what came before, knowingly gestures towards them, and then reframes them for its own purposes. This demonstrates a parodic intention to signify difference whereas *Ready Player One* uses its intertextual references to shape itself as a pastiche of what came before, drawing comparisons to highlight its similarity to them in order to be legitimised just from the association. *Altered Carbon* therefore demonstrates an impulse to knowingly satirise its cyberpunk ancestry in order to reignite and update the genre's longstanding fear of a technologically dependent, transhumanist future. *Ready Player One* typifies the interpretation of cyberpunk favoured by Silicon Valley figureheads, such as those discussed in Chapter 3. Its pastiche of cyberpunk glorifies the potential technologies of the future, uncritically supporting their wide scale adoption and ignoring the infrastructural reform that would better the precarious lives of the majority of the inhabitants of this future. Its deployment of cyberpunk imagery and nostalgic references furthers the actively transmitted narratives of Musk and others, reinforcing a decontextualisation that strips the reference cyberpunk texts in *Ready Player One* from their own critiques, rephrasing them as empty signifiers of 'coolness'. If all new cyberpunk is approached with a perspective that it is a pastiche of itself, then this becomes the dominant narrative of the genre, eclipsing the fresh, parodic intentions of many later cyberpunk works. As evidenced in Chapter 2, cyberpunk has always experimented within its particular style, and in analysis of *Altered Carbon* it is clear that

this is still the case. We must reject the restrictive perspective that overlooks cyberpunk's continuously developing critiques, and return to it with appropriate attention to its contemporary relevance.

### The future of the future: *Cyberpunk 2077*

Having looked at the application of parody theory to the recently released and reviewed texts of *Altered Carbon* and *Ready Player One*, this chapter has evidenced how these different intentions and effects can be identified and distinguished from each other. It has looked at how criticism of mainstream cyberpunk productions that focuses on their repetitive nature can be justified, and also how it can be mis-construed when the creators of such texts work subtly within the expectations laid out by their predecessors. Taking this line of analysis further, it is time for this thesis to turn its attention to the future of cyberpunk fiction, and what can be expected of this genre as it develops. To do so it is only appropriate to look to *Cyberpunk 2077*, a video game title that is making its product eponymous with the wider genre, in order to assess how the nature of cyberpunk looks to be shaped by the most media anticipated release for many years. For the purposes of this thesis, our analysis will be focused on the lead up to the release of *Cyberpunk 2077* rather than the text itself. This is because how it is marketed best reflects what cyberpunk's sweeping expectations are. Such as in Chapter 3, where we discuss how audiences expect cyberpunk stories to be told, we can see in the production details and early media reviews of *Cyberpunk 2077* whether those same

structures maintain into this modern incarnation of cyberpunk; whether they collect fresh attributes, or rehash the same imagery and features as their 1980s ancestors.

First, to catalogue the origins of *Cyberpunk 2077*, to best understand how it fits into the evolving cyberpunk canon, and how it has garnered so much attention and anticipation in the years leading up to its official release. *Cyberpunk 2077* is the latest iteration in a line of cyberpunk texts originating in the tabletop roleplaying game<sup>543</sup> of the 80s, *Cyberpunk: The Roleplaying Game of the Dark Future* (R. Talsorian Games 1988).<sup>544</sup> Written by Mike Pondsmith, this was the earliest, distinctly cyberpunk TTRPG to be published and set the standard for the genre to follow. As Curtis D. Carbonell writes it ‘followed (or recycled) cyberpunk’s hacker ethos of do-it-yourself technology and a street-level resistance to a dominant, global capitalism.’<sup>545</sup> Pondsmith put rebellion at the centre of his product, introducing the role of a player as ‘a rebel with a cause.’<sup>546</sup> His three tenets of being a cyberpunk were style over substance, attitude is everything, and live on the edge.<sup>547</sup> From the outset the *Cyberpunk* TTRPs sought to break down the behaviour and attitude of a typical cyberpunk, to allow its readers to step into the role themselves. In this manner, TTRPGs, and roleplaying games as a whole, become synonymous with a personal understanding of the nature of the cyberpunk perspective. They are a space for one to enact cyberpunk behaviours, not just be shown them, and so how these types of games categorise and encourage behaviour can set the tone for

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<sup>543</sup> From here referred to as a TTRPG

<sup>544</sup> Pondsmith Mike, *Cyberpunk* ([Place of publication not identified]: R. Talsorian Games Inc., 1988).

<sup>545</sup> Anna McFarlane, Graham J Murphy and Lars Schmeink, *The Routledge Companion To Cyberpunk Culture* (London [i. e.] Abingdon: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2020). p.200

<sup>546</sup> Mike Pondsmith, *Cyberpunk 2.0.2.0*, 2nd edn (Berkeley: R. Talsorian Games Inc, 1993). p.3

<sup>547</sup> Pondsmith, 1993, *Cyberpunk 2.0.2.0*, p.4

how audiences, and potential future cyberpunk creators, come to understand and further the genre's reputation. It is for this reason that *Cyberpunk 2077* holds such an important responsibility. It takes the legacy of Pondsmith's TTRPG into the world of video games, a much more widely popular and individual medium than tabletop games, therefore assuming the mantle of enabling and representing cyberpunk ideals and concerns.

*Cyberpunk 2077* is being produced by the company CD Projekt Red (hence referred to as CDPR), who are working alongside Mike Pondsmith during the game's development. CDPR made their name in the production of the *Witcher* series of games which gathered positive audience responses and reviews across each entry in the series, culminating in *The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt*<sup>548</sup> which earned 600 times more revenue than its predecessor and won 18 different awards, from prerelease awards to narrative, technical and visual acclaim and multiple Game of the Year awards. The reputation of *The Witcher 3* left CDPR with a good-standing reputation moving into its next project, in particular it showed that CDPR could work with an existing IP to produce a 'faithful' and popular adaptation of its source material, even if its original author has a low opinion of the medium of video games himself.<sup>549</sup> This particular factor of concern was addressed in *Cyberpunk 2077*'s initial release information, back in 2012. CDPR made abundantly clear their collaboration with the original author, saying in interviews 'rest assured that we are working very closely with Mike Pondsmith to ensure that the unique feel of the

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<sup>548</sup> *The Witcher 3*, (CD Projekt Red, 2016)

<sup>549</sup> Camden Jones, "What The Witcher's Author Thinks Of The Video Games", Screenrant, 2020 <<https://screenrant.com/witcher-book-author-andrzej-sapkowski-opinion-video-games/>> [Accessed 23 August 2022].



original, paper game is preserved intact.<sup>550</sup> The nature of conversation encouraged throughout its production, from CDPR and Pondsmith in interviews, has been to reassure audiences that *2077* is to be seen as an extension of the original TRPGs, allowing them flexibility to evolve without rejecting what has come before. From the same interview they discuss changing the setting date from *Cyberpunk 2020* to *Cyberpunk 2077* so that the date then became far enough away to be futuristic but still in our near future.<sup>551</sup> Also for *2077*, it 'allow[ed] Mike Pondsmith and CDPR 57 years of history to tinker with'. The capacity for change and evolution, so *2077* can reflect a different future to that of the previous books, thus encouragingly suggesting *2077*'s parodic intent, wherein it can work alongside its previous iterations to present something new and evolved in setting, not just medium. The bullet points from the first conference, however, indicate the video game narrative CDPR tapped into to market their upcoming release. Pawel Frelik notes, in his entry on video games in the *Routledge Companion to Cyberpunk Culture*, 'cyberpunk does not describe any extant gaming genre.'<sup>552</sup> Therefore, without the ease of genre comparison a literary or filmic release may have, *Cyberpunk 2077* must locate its familiarity within gameplay loops, the most common method of delineating video games which are 'defined by the type of activity elicited by the game from the player'.<sup>553</sup> Looking at this initial release conference then, Robert Purchase from *Eurogamer* summed *Cyberpunk 2077*'s introduction through the following bullet points:

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<sup>550</sup> Robert Purchase, "What We Know About CD Projekt Red's Cyberpunk 2077 Game So Far", Eurogamer.Net, 2012 <<https://www.eurogamer.net/articles/2012-10-19-what-we-know-about-cd-projekt-reds-cyberpunk-2077-game-so-far>> [Accessed 23 August 2022].

<sup>551</sup> Which is ideal for a typical cyberpunk setting.

<sup>552</sup> McFarlane, Murphy, and Schmeink, 2020 *The Routledge Companion to Cyberpunk Culture*, p.184

<sup>553</sup> McFarlane, Murphy, and Schmeink, 2020 *The Routledge Companion to Cyberpunk Culture*, p.184

- "Ambitious RPG for mature adults, set in the corrupt and tech-advanced world of the year 2077."
- "Gripping multi-thread story taking place in the sandbox environment of the vivid and detailed Night City."
- "Advanced RPG mechanics based on pen and paper RPG system, upgraded to the 2077 setting."
- "Gigantic arsenal of weapons, upgrades, implants and cool high-tech gadgets. New equipment adopted to reflect over 50 years of mankind progress."

In this summary, we can see that *Cyberpunk 2077* has foreground its connection to the pen and paper system through direct statement and by adoption of the 'RPG' genre. This combines its TTRPG history with that of video game RPGs. The most popular of which, those which typify the genre, are predominantly combat focused including customisable player stat progression supporting this gameplay loop. *TES: Skyrim*<sup>554</sup> and *The Witcher 3* are among the top-rated examples of this genre, and whilst they are known for non-combat interactions and diplomacy the central gameplay loops are in fighting. They are also both typical examples of the 'sandbox' game, a game with an open world allowing players freedom to roam and explore as they desire. Finally, we can see further support of CDPR aligning themselves with this category of gameplay in their emphasis on the 'arsenal of weapons' and other character upgrades. Therefore, despite the variety of activities that its TTRPG heritage offers, it is clear here that the

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<sup>554</sup> *The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim*, (Bethesda Game Studios, 2011)

central commercial appeal of *Cyberpunk 2077* will be in navigating violent encounters. Naturally this is the predominant activity in TTRPGs too as Hamish Cameron summarises it 'is standard (but not universal) for TTRPGs, violence, its tools, and its results occupy considerable space',<sup>555</sup> and Pondsmith's cyberpunk TTRPGs are no exception to this with their renowned combat systems designed to accurately portray the performance of firearms. It is no surprise that early into its reveals, *Cyberpunk 2077* became equated with the FPS (first person shooter) genre, as shortly after it was announced that the game would feature a first-person camera perspective concern about this rose in the public. The concern was that in moving the perspective, *Cyberpunk 2077* might fall into the more linear FPS experience of the (in)famous *Call of Duty*<sup>556</sup> games for instance. This was not helped by articles such as that in *PC Gamer* claiming it was an FPS only because of its perspective and not its gameplay loops,<sup>557</sup> which is a difficult stance to take when retailers, such as the digital platform *Steam*, distinguish FPS from First Person in their categories to market genres and design decisions such as this separately. Similarly Matt Martin in *vg247* epitomises this confusion when he reviewed his introduction to *Cyberpunk 2077* as:

Is it a first-person shooter? Considering the sheer amount of shooting you do, then yes it is. But it's also very clearly an RPG with abilities and passive skills.

And when you shoot someone lots of little numbers burst off their body as they

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<sup>555</sup> McFarlane, Murphy, and Schmeink, 2020 *The Routledge Companion to Cyberpunk Culture*, p.210

<sup>556</sup> A series of games produced by Activision and started in 2003

<sup>557</sup> Wes Fenlon and Steven Messner, "Cyberpunk 2077 Is An FPS", *Pcgamer*, 2018  
<<https://www.pcgamer.com/uk/cyberpunk-2077-is-an-fps/>> [Accessed 23 August 2022].

take damage to different limbs. So that's guns and stat damage. That's a FPS RPG, right?<sup>558</sup>

The importance of this, rather than the specifics of how closely it falls into either category, is that it is difficult to separate expectations of either genre from *Cyberpunk 2077* due to these reviewer responses and reveals. What this combination of genres creates then, as an expected idea of *Cyberpunk 2077*, is a hyper-violent game to support a central, detailed story. The connection between violence and cyberpunk is set to become only stronger post this release. Prior to this, violence was commonly equated with cyberpunk, this legacy coming predominantly from video game and visual sources wherein action sequences are commonly expected therefore violence becomes an easy enabler for this.<sup>559</sup> However not all cyberpunk prioritises it highly, even in the formative work *Blade Runner* and its sequel violence is infrequent and often a minor interlude to the cat-and-mouse detective work, and in some texts such as *Mindplayers* (see Chapter 2)<sup>560</sup> it is not present at all. Recent independent cyberpunk games have made efforts to highlight this distance between cyberpunk concerns and violence. *The Red Strings Club* presents investigation and resistance as empathy and interpersonal connection, and *Va11-Ha11-A* similarly portrayed empathetic support as its gameplay but with a focus

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<sup>558</sup> Matt Martin, "Cyberpunk 2077: Banging, C-Bombs And Bullet-Time - Everything We Know From 50 Minutes Of Gameplay", VG247, 2018 <<https://www.vg247.com/2018/06/12/cyberpunk-2077-banging-c-bombs-bullet-time-everything-know-gameplay/>> [Accessed 23 August 2022].

<sup>559</sup> However this violent, masculine reputation of cyberpunk can be tracked back to criticisms of early novels such as Nixon and Cadora's work which is discussed in greater detail in Chapter 2.

<sup>560</sup> Cadigan also has further examples of this in short stories such as "The final remake of *The Return of Little Latin Larry* with a completely remastered soundtrack and the original audience" (see Kelly and Kessel's *Rewired: The Postcyberpunk Anthology* for the citation). Other texts such as Marge Piercy's *He, She and It* (1991), and even the over-the-top parodic *Dogwalker* (1989) by Orson Scott Card feature only minor sections of outright violence such as is the case with *Blade Runner*.

on personal employment and financial precarity over rebellion. However, with the focus *Cyberpunk 2077* gives to its 'arsenal of weapons', it will likely set a precedent for high-octane action in AAA cyberpunk games, rather than acting to counter the masculinist expectations of its past.

The declaration of *Cyberpunk 2077*'s first person perspective was one element of criticism levelled at it by its fans, but it has not been the only controversy of its development. Most importantly has been how CDPR have handled transgender representation, and the public response to their actions. It is important here to acknowledge the limitations of my following discussion of this topic. The issues of trans liberation and representation are a broader topic than this thesis has scope to do justice; not being a member of these marginalized communities myself, I cannot speak on their behalf to their lived experiences, however as it is raised as a vital criticism of the development of *Cyberpunk 2077*, I do not wish to overlook its importance in contemporary cyberpunk. For these reasons, I will keep the following discussion to the specifics of the complaints levied at CDPR as representative of one facet of this broader issue in modern cyberpunk.

To break down this topic, we will first look at the actions of CDPR that created this backlash. The first of which was an offensive tweet from back in 2018 which, while not explicitly in its content, drew upon a joke, as *Kotaku* put it, 'largely used to belittle or

demean the concerns of transgender people.<sup>561</sup> CDPR issued a retraction apology stating their intention was never to harm anyone with their response, however the damage is done. Through this they present a lack of consideration of transgender prejudice, which is problematic considering the potential of the text they are creating and the inherent possibilities of representation within cyberpunk fiction. To echo the words of Wendy Gay Pearson,<sup>562</sup> 'the inability to tell if someone's virtual gender reflects their 'real' gender identity [...] should have made cyberpunk a haven for trans sf writers.'<sup>563</sup> In her essay on queerness in cyberpunk fiction, she acknowledges that even from the outset cyberpunk technologies presented penetrating and penetrated bodies that are queered through these intimate boundary breakings<sup>564</sup> and that whilst cyberpunk 'still [has] a long way to go to catch up with the quotidian realities of everyday life'<sup>565</sup> including representation from trans SciFi writers, that it is on the path to this stage. When the official Twitter account of *Cyberpunk 2077* uses comments 'largely used to belittle or demean the concerns of transgender people'<sup>566</sup> it frames the state of large-budget, mainstream cyberpunk as uncaring of these concerns.

The large budget influence of *Cyberpunk 2077* bears a similar weight to Musk and other Silicon Valley figures' active transmission processes from Chapter 3; the reputation of CDPR, with its previous accolades, has garnered it a legion of fans comparable to those who support Musk even as he promotes exploitative work

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<sup>561</sup> Heather Alexandra, "Cyberpunk 2077 Tweets Transphobic Joke, Studio Apologizes 'To All Those Offended'", *Kotaku*, 2018 <<https://kotaku.com/cyberpunk-2077-tweets-transphobic-joke-studio-apologiz-1828502562>> [Accessed 23 August 2022].

<sup>562</sup> That we discussed during Chapter 1's definitional section on technology and the body

<sup>563</sup> McFarlane, Murphy, and Schmeink, 2020 *The Routledge Companion to Cyberpunk Culture*, p.210

<sup>564</sup> There is further discussion on the specifics of this difference in Chapter 2

<sup>565</sup> McFarlane, Murphy, and Schmeink, 2020 *The Routledge Companion to Cyberpunk Culture*, p.210

<sup>566</sup> Alexandra, "Cyberpunk 2077 Tweets..."

practices. We can see this connection even clearer in the controversy surrounding CDPR and the mandatory ‘crunch’ that they forced upon their employees. Crunch is compulsory overtime working to meet development deadlines, and despite publicly claiming they would not enforce mandatory crunch, CDPR went back on their word<sup>567</sup> and we can see this enforcement of poor work practices compare directly to Musk forcing its workers to return to factories during the COVID-19 pandemic.<sup>568</sup> This comparison continues yet further; as we discussed in Chapter 3, Musk’s rhetorical appropriation of underdog narratives and cyberpunk’s ‘rebellious hero’ attitude, CDPR still persists with a ‘good guy’ image, since their catapult to success happened in such recent years.<sup>569</sup> Patricia Hernandez identifies a similar body of zealous fans still supporting CDPR through this, and identifies that key element to these fans’ dismissal of CDPR’s poor working conditions as part of the same neoliberal ideology that cyberpunk at its heart responds to; ‘Overworking is a daily fact of life, and one that gets minimized in favor of the fantasy of pulling yourself up by your bootstraps’<sup>570</sup> she writes, which is the neoliberal narrative identified in Chapter 3.

A. Khaled also sums up the public response to criticism of *Cyberpunk 2077* very well in his blog post,<sup>571</sup> drawing attention to the ‘unwavering rush [from what he terms

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<sup>567</sup> Charlie Hall, "Cyberpunk 2077 Has Involved Months Of Crunch, Despite Past Promises", *Polygon*, 2020 <<https://www.polygon.com/2020/12/4/21575914/cyberpunk-2077-release-crunch-labor-delays-cd-projekt-red>> [Accessed 19 September 2022].

<sup>568</sup> Siddiqui, Faiz. 2022, "Tesla gave workers permission to stay home rather than risk getting covid-19. Then it sent termination notices." *Washington Post*, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/technology/2020/06/25/tesla-plant-firings/>.

<sup>569</sup> Patricia Hernandez, "The Cyberpunk 2077 Crunch Backlash", *Polygon*, 2020 <<https://www.polygon.com/2020/10/7/21505804/cyberpunk-2077-cd-projekt-red-crunch-youtube-jason-schreier-labor-the-witcher-3>> [Accessed 19 September 2022].

<sup>570</sup> Hernandez, "The Cyberpunk 2077 Crunch Backlash"

<sup>571</sup> A. Khaled, "Gamergate’S Latest Targets Are Cyberpunk 2077’S Critics", *Medium*, 2019 <<https://akhaledblog.medium.com/gamergate-cyberpunk-2077-poster-71caf0886616>> [Accessed 23 August 2022].

toxic gamers] to defend a corporation over the opinion of a few journalists who've nothing to physically or emotionally gain from criticizing a game of this caliber.' CDPR fill an equivalent space in the public's understanding of cyberpunk narratives that Musk and others do; they actively shape the state of the genre to the broadest audience, due to their financial power behind their interpretations. And as they do so, the zealous defence they have gained from fans through the narratives they have appropriated for themselves shields them from criticism. As Bassett et al identify in *Better Made Up*,<sup>572</sup> 'big budget [SciFi] reaches large audiences, and may have more immediate impact.'<sup>573</sup> If their perspectives are uncritically accepted as 'the current conditions of cyberpunk', we risk allowing its problematic history to be reinforced, and the important parodic distancing and progression that is possible within the genre can be lost beneath this weight.

The problem of *Cyberpunk 2077* and its representation of transgender identities was further compounded a year later, in June 2019, when their newly released gameplay reveal came under criticism for an overtly sexualised advert, in game, featuring a possibly transgender model promoting a fictional drink. The over-emphasised, engorged penis was what drew criticism, and this was in no doubt fueled by their previous mistake, expecting CDPR to fall into the trope of fetishising the transgender body and intending to 'shock' its audience rather than normalise it as a facet of life. This response

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<sup>572</sup> For further dissection of this important piece on SciFi transmission, see Chapter 3

<sup>573</sup> Bassett, C., Steinmueller, E. and Voss, G., 2022. "Better Made Up The Mutual Influence of Science Fiction and Innovation". [online] *nesta*. Available at: <<https://www.nesta.org.uk/report/better-made-up-the-mutual-influence-of-science-fiction-and-innovation/>> [Accessed 27 April 2022]. p.41



is best summarised in a series of tweets referenced by Andy Chalk of *PC Gamer*.<sup>574</sup> These tweets respond to CDPR having a 'history of transphobia' referring not just to the above misstep but a further tweet by CDPR subsidiary GOG.<sup>575</sup> The responses to this tweet are not all in agreement with the original poster however, with some commenting that this poor representation is embodying cyberpunk's dystopian world. This is the response given by Kasia Redesiuk, the artist at CDPR that created this piece. She said in an interview following this controversy that 'However, this model is used — their beautiful body is used — for corporate reasons. They are displayed there just as a thing, and that's the terrible part of it.'<sup>576</sup> She went on to state that 'the world of *Cyberpunk 2077* includes many people who are gender-nonconforming' and that 'hypersexualization is apparent everywhere, and in our ads there are many examples of hypersexualized women, hypersexualized men, and hypersexualized people in between.' For Redesiuk, the advert should be jarring and overly aggressive for its style, not for the choice of model, and she defends a desire for 'empathy for the LGBTQ community among video game consumers' through evenly representing both cis and non-cisgendered people.

The issue with this desire for representation stated by Redesiuk, is that it lacks acknowledgement that trans (or LGBTQ, to speak to her comment in particular)

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<sup>574</sup> Andy Chalk, "Cyberpunk 2077 Art Criticized As Transphobic Is Meant To Reflect Corporate Exploitation, Says The Artist", *Pcgamer*, 2019 <<https://www.pcgamer.com/uk/cyberpunk-2077-art-criticized-as-transphobic-is-meant-to-reflect-corporate-exploitation-says-the-artist/>> [Accessed 23 August 2022].

<sup>575</sup> Charlie Hall, "GOG'S Twitter Account Posts Transphobic 'Pun' Then Deletes It", *Polygon*, 2018 <<https://www.polygon.com/2018/10/23/18015434/gog-twitter-wontbeerased-hashtag>> [Accessed 23 August 2022].

<sup>576</sup> Charlie Hall, "CD Projekt Red Explains Controversial Cyberpunk In-Game Ad Featuring Trans Model", *Polygon*, 2019 <<https://www.polygon.com/e3/2019/6/12/18662443/cyberpunk-2077-trans-advertisement-cd-projekt-red-e3-2019>> [Accessed 23 August 2022].

perspectives were consulted in this representation. It is this that Ana Valens recognises in this discourse. Valens spoke to *PC Gamer* expressing doubt about whether CDPR will actually provide this positive transgender representation. She said that:

Cyberpunk is a complicated speculative fiction genre. Good commentary about trans experiences with gender can only come from a team actively embracing trans perspectives and commentary on gender, whether by working with trans people in sensitivity readings or outright letting them lead in writing and art creation," she told us. "If anything, Redesiuk's comments prove she — and her colleagues — aren't familiar with trans cyberpunk literature on gender experiences in the late capitalist future.<sup>577</sup>

In this lies the heart of the concerns for *Cyberpunk 2077*. That it is unaware of the importance of these aspects of cyberpunk, that it can provide 'good commentary about trans experiences', as it seeks to recreate its original 1980s popularity, just in higher definition. Redesiuk's response claims to speak on behalf of these communities, suggesting that CDPR should be able to choose how trans experiences should be represented. Combined with the Twitter incident above and their re-emphasis on older, masculinist elements of cyberpunk, *Cyberpunk 2077* sets itself to reinstate the previously limited expectations of cyberpunk that this thesis criticised in Chapter 1.<sup>578</sup>

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<sup>577</sup> Chalk, 2019. "Cyberpunk 2077 Art Criticized..."

<sup>578</sup> The same expectations that were part of the discussion of problematic active transmission in Chapter 3

The issue of representation in the lead up to the release of *Cyberpunk 2077* can be better understood by looking at the in-game gang 'The Animals'. This is because there is much more direct discussion about the implementation of this particular faction in the game world. Matt Cox from *Rock Paper Shotgun* best describes this issue, writing that he felt 'increasingly uncomfortable [during a gameplay reveal] that we're shooting at predominantly black people labelled as animals.'<sup>579</sup> This particular concern, of *Cyberpunk 2077* populating its 'thuggish, enemy gang' from the gameplay footage as predominantly black,<sup>580</sup> was vehemently defended by Mike Pondsmith online. He wrote that:

As for the Animals--the WHOLE FREAKING POINT is that they think of themselves as POWERFUL, DANGEROUS, WILD ANIMALS [...] The original Voodoo Boys were a scathing commentary on cultural appropriation. I LOVE the idea that real practitioners of Voudon moved in and took back their turf. And they even got the Creole right! [...]Who the (bleep) do YOU think you are to tell ME whether or not MY creation was done right or not?<sup>581</sup>

This response naturally defends CDPR's decisions in progressing the timeline of Pondsmith's original game and taking it into a new area. As the creator of the source

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<sup>579</sup> Matt Cox, "Cyberpunk 2077'S E3 Demo Leans On Unimaginative Stereotypes", *Rock Paper Shotgun*, 2019 <<https://www.rockpapershotgun.com/2019/06/12/cyberpunk-2077s-e3-demo-has-weak-gunplay-and-unimaginative-stereotypes/>> [Accessed 23 August 2022].

<sup>580</sup> A concern also raised by Valens in the following article: Ana Valens, "Cyberpunk 2077 Is Coming. Remember To Listen To Trans People About Its Problems", *The Daily Dot*, 2020 <<https://www.dailydot.com/irl/cyberpunk-2077-trans-voices/>> [Accessed 26 August 2022].

<sup>581</sup> Tuvlus, "Interview With Mike Pondsmith", *Reddit.Com*, 2019 <[https://www.reddit.com/r/cyberpunkgame/comments/c05qw8/interview\\_with\\_mike\\_pondsmith/er9n6tj/](https://www.reddit.com/r/cyberpunkgame/comments/c05qw8/interview_with_mike_pondsmith/er9n6tj/)> [Accessed 23 August 2022].

material for *Cyberpunk 2077*, Pondsmith does have an important voice on the faithfulness of the upcoming iteration; how it continues to align with the narratives and representation he wishes to show and he makes clear how CDPR have kept him involved to stay true to his vision of the world. Even with this in mind, it is not so clear cut as Pondsmith's intent and the game's representation. For one, whilst as a black man, Pondsmith can speak with some authority about this particular issue, his experience and interpretation of what is produced will not be universal. In fact, Pondsmith's fiery rebuttal overlooks how, even if he understands the intent in the naming of The Animals, that may not be what is communicated to his audience, and he makes no admission of this potentially different response in players. Cody Gravelle is one who acknowledges this dissonance, writing '[p]erception is everything, and fans who feel that names like the Animals or Voodoo Boys are problematic still have a right to feel that way.'<sup>582</sup> Similarly looking at Pondsmith's comments above, the TTRPG writer's perspective can be seen in his response. Pondsmith very clearly sees the social sitting of the gangs about which he speaks. He sees how The Animals think from within their own heads, he sees the historical position of the Voodoo Boys and the positive shift of the gang reclaiming their 'turf' and even identity from the cultural appropriators written into his older books. Pondsmith is visualising these as entries in an encyclopedia of his *Cyberpunk* world, just as TTRPG books commonly include entries that introduce factions on an intimate scale. For the games masters who run TTRPGs to accurately portray these characters when they need to step into that role. TTRPGs encourage

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<sup>582</sup> Cody Gravelle, "Cyberpunk Creator Defends Cyberpunk 2077 From Fan Criticism", Screenrant, 2019 <<https://screenrant.com/cyberpunk-creator-on-fan-criticism-cyberpunk-2077/>> [Accessed 23 August 2022].

readers to understand the working and history of the facets of the world they encounter, and unfortunately for video games this is not necessarily the case. No player becomes the games master, therefore video games do not often provide the information to 'get behind the eyes' of antagonists and other NPCs (non-player-characters) in the same way. Most commonly they are introduced by how the protagonist sees them. A perspective is applied through the player character and through the narrative of the game.

This is where the danger lies, and where Ana Valens' concerns return. Letting the people intimately familiar with racial or transgender issues take roles of responsibility in writing or art makes it more likely that the perspective given to the player by the overarching narrative will be more sensitive to the implications of these subjects. The fact that CDPR are working closely with Pondsmitth implies that the implications of racial representation will be made clearer to them, although this cannot be guaranteed considering its current reception and subsequent defence from Pondsmitth. The dangers there come from the shift into a new medium, but if this transition is well handled then it will be an important representation of a racially diverse near future. Pondsmitth's desire to update the factions of his world and infuse them with new social critique (from cultural appropriation to a community reclaiming their heritage) and implies that *Cyberpunk 2077* may establish the creative distance from its predecessors to parodically update older cyberpunk concerns, although the potential of transitioning to a video game medium may undermine this process. The exclusion of 'actively embracing trans perspectives' that Valens criticises suggests CDPR are set to reinforce other negative stereotypes by including their own representations of them,

without the support and perspective that would support a 'good commentary' of them; in short *Cyberpunk 2077* looks set to pastiche key parts of cyberpunk representation, and the foremost example to represent this is their use of augmentation and the cybernetic body.

Early into the footage shown at a press event in 2018 was a segment where the protagonist discovers the woman they have been sent to rescue from her kidnappers. She is with 'another NPC lying naked in a bathtub filled with ice. With her eyes rolled back in her head and her body glistening with water.'<sup>583</sup> The kidnappers had been intending to chop up her body for implants to sell on the black market. This reveals uncomfortable consequences to self-augmentation, wherein this character has made herself a vulnerable target by her choice of implants. It reveals the body as meat, the value of a person shifted from their social importance to family or others, to their raw resources; in this case not even the flesh they carry but the items they buy to replace it. As Adam Badowski, the game director at CDPR, said at this same reveal, questions such as this are common within cyberpunk, gesturing to *Ghost in the Shell* wherein the distinction between human and robot, to be blunt in this phrasing, become blurred and the distinction of where the human ends and the artificial or external begins is obliterated by heavy body augmentation.

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<sup>583</sup> Charlie Hall, "Cyberpunk 2077 Will Include Full Nudity For A Very Important Reason", Polygon, 2018 <<https://www.polygon.com/e3/2018/6/15/17468232/cyberpunk-2077-nudity-transhumanism>> [Accessed 23 August 2022].

This drew criticism however, and the heart of this problem extends from *Cyberpunk 2020*'s origins, and the language Badowski used to introduce this theme:

[T]he body is no longer sacrum [sacred]; it's profanum [profane] [...] But at the same time she is augmented," he continued, searching for the right words. "She is not clean. Maybe she is augmented too much. Maybe the humanity level is pretty low in her, so it's an interesting topic. It's one of the key themes in cyberpunk. The very first scenes in the original *Ghost in the Shell* anime show exactly the same aspect. Because where is sacrum and where is profanum in a world when you can simply modify yourself to such limits that it makes you a different kind of person?<sup>584</sup>

Now *Polygon* notes here in their article that Badowski appeared to be 'searching for the right words', so the implications of how he discussed this imagery may not have been his direct intentions. However, what he does use to discuss the implications of augmentation is 'sacrum' and 'profanum'. He categorises flesh as sacred and implants as profane, and it is this that was picked up by Elizabeth Rogers in her criticism of the reveal. 'And this is what insults me, as a disabled individual: the implication that we are less than human, that the relationship to our bodies is now profane, because it contains artificial parts.'<sup>585</sup> In drawing on this language, Badowski intimates that the flesh is 'holier' than implants, whereas Rogers defends that implants for disabled people are not

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<sup>584</sup> Hall, 2018, "Cyberpunk 2077 Will Include Full Nudity..."

<sup>585</sup> Elizabeth Rogers, "Disability In Video Games And Cyberpunk 2077 | The Mary Sue", *The Mary Sue*, 2018 <<https://www.themarysue.com/disabled-representation-cyberpunk-2077/>> [Accessed 23 August 2022].

necessarily a choice, but a necessity to ‘achieve a degree of normalcy.’ *Cyberpunk 2077* is set, through this representation, to perpetuate the idea that the disabled, implanted, body is somehow less human, and this plain duality of perspective is offensive.

This danger rises out of the TTRPG mechanics of augmentation in Pondsmith’s older works; characters in *Cyberpunk 2020* spent literally ‘humanity points’ to add augmentations to their character. At a linguistic base this is troubling. This, however, does not seem to be the intention behind Badowski’s struggle to find the right words. Looking to Stina Attebery and Josh Pearson’s chapter on *Cyberpunk 2020*, the two speak positively of the ‘humanity’ mechanic for how it provides the capacity to explore ‘the personal and social ethics of posthuman self-fashioning.’<sup>586</sup> What they highlight is how the humanity system opens a navigation of the value of empathy, what players will sacrifice to keep up with cyber-fashion, as the focus of their article is on. Attebery and Pearson also comment on the universality of this sacrifice. Not just augmetic limbs affect humanity, but cyberfashion such as tattoos or other style choices risk loss of empathy. ‘This universalizes the contradiction that to ‘fit in’ as a normative pro-social consumer, you have to risk your empathy and damage your ability to relate to the very society whose norms you are trying to match.’<sup>587</sup>

This is the idea that Bodowski appears to be trying to draw upon. The idea that with too many implants, people may disconnect from human connection, that they risk the full ‘cyberpsychosis’ of loss of empathy. Unfortunately, in drawing upon sacrum and

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<sup>586</sup> Graham J Murphy and Lars Schmeink, *Cyberpunk And Visual Culture*, 1st edn (New York: Routledge, 2018). P.72

<sup>587</sup> Murphy and Schmeink, 2018, *Cyberpunk and Visual Culture*, p.72



profanum, he implies a hierarchy of flesh to implant, and locates that condition in the kidnapped victim. He does not draw attention to the loss of empathy the player character may be feeling or highlight how this navigation of human social interaction may be universal, he blames the victim for being 'not clean' and 'augmented too much'. This is particularly troubling when the NPC in question is not visibly augmented in any major ways. However, these details are not highlighted, and the emphasis remains on the naked female kidnap victim being responsible for being less human than us. The bluntness of this discussion enforces an understanding of judgement and victimisation, and it is easy to see how this is problematic for those already living with implants. The way in which Bodowski discusses this theme implies a surface understanding of a (game mechanic) connection between 'humanity' and implants but again rejects the key perspectives of those communities that would enable this representation to match the potential Attebery and Pearson see in this mechanic. Whilst the nuance of *Cyberpunk 2020*'s humanity system is 'baked into [its] play mechanics',<sup>588</sup> if CDPR do not understand the specifics of its critique then their work will pastiche their source material.

In *Cyberpunk 2020*:

the rules themselves put negotiating the relations between authenticity, personal branding, and social recognition at the heart of players' experience<sup>589</sup>

Just as in the definitional work in Chapter 1, it is not the specifics of the technology, or the mechanics of the game (in this case) but the effect it is used to evoke in its

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<sup>588</sup> Murphy and Schmeink, 2018, *Cyberpunk and Visual Culture*, p.63

<sup>589</sup> Murphy and Schmeink, 2018, *Cyberpunk and Visual Culture*, p.63

audience.<sup>590</sup> For CDPR to lift the ‘humanity’ mechanic into *Cyberpunk 2077* without understanding the implications of its use, they will be emptyily deploying a signifier that their work is cyberpunk, without updating its message to respond to the world around it, and the limitations of cyberpunk’s past expectations.

As such a lodestone then, it is likely that *Cyberpunk 2077* will become a key source for comparison of cyberpunk texts moving into the future. Its ownership of the genre title, backed by the large budget behind it, sets this work to be instrumental in the persisting expectations of what cyberpunk should be and whether it pastiches its old forms or reinvents its formulas will set a precedent for critical evaluation of the genre into the future. In the evaluation above, it is uncertain the impact *Cyberpunk 2077* will have, although in regard to transgender representation and its presentation of its ‘humanity’ aspect it looks to reinstate cyberpunk’s past legacy. Regardless of whether CDPR meet the potentials of it as a text to refresh the cyberpunk world, it is only one of a myriad of cyberpunk texts arising currently, and criticism of it and the surrounding genre need not take *Cyberpunk 2077* as a new *Blade Runner*. The analysis of this chapter has revealed how many texts, even those with a high budget behind them such as *Altered Carbon* can still play within the familiar shapes of cyberpunk whilst undermining and reinventing their past. It is important that critical opinion of the genre does not overlook visual parody as a ‘cash-in’ on cyberpunk’s neon popularity. This real danger remains, however, and Linda Hutcheon summarises this danger best when she writes that

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<sup>590</sup> It is for this reason my core definitional elements are phrased such as ‘the devaluation of the human body due to the widespread use of, and response to, advanced technology/ies’ rather than ‘digital/cybernetic technologies. Why these structures are used in cyberpunk is far more important than what specifically was described.

parody may "may indeed be complicitous with the values it inscribes as well as subverts.'

Herein lies the main danger in cyberpunk's parodic future. The strength of its genre tropes, in particular how the latest high-budget cyberpunk productions have bought heavily into visual and thematic signifiers that tie them to previously popular iterations of the genre, breeds the risk of a complacency in design and consumption. Hutcheon maintains that despite being complicit, 'the subversion is still there', and this is the case for a number of cyberpunk pieces. But in working from within the genre the ironic strategies which would reveal a progressive understanding of contemporary socio-technological concerns risk erasure in the public mind. It has been the purpose of this chapter not just to emphasise the existence of parodic intent, but to identify too how in enjoying the high-octane, visually stunning and synthesiser-accompanied atmosphere of cyberpunk it is easy to merely reinstate the genre's prior messages.

This is the heart of this thesis. In demonstrating the inherent variety to cyberpunk, I have sought to emphasise why cyberpunk should be revisited in depth to interrogate the true nature of its experimental form. The issue of pastiche echoes across cyberpunk. In the definitional work of Chapter 1, I establish how identifiable key elements of cyberpunk's presentation came to be overstated in their importance through too heavy a focus on a small range of texts.<sup>591</sup> The prominence of understanding cyberpunk through its specifics (of cyberware, leather jackets, and mirrorshades) leads to the expectations of pastiche. Although this imitation happens not just in critical approaches to cyberpunk, it is present in some of its own texts. It is this issue to which

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<sup>591</sup> Such as *Neuromancer* and *Blade Runner*.

*Ready Player One* falls prey, understanding the constituent parts of cyberpunk, but not their intentions; not how they contribute to cyberpunk narratives and perspectives. It is this reason that my definition highlights the implications of each of cyberpunk's central elements, to emphasise what concerns cyberpunk explores through its stylistic decisions. This is to encourage delving into why different texts employ these elements of cyberpunk; it is through this approach that *Altered Carbon* can be understood for its 21<sup>st</sup> Century approach to otherwise familiar cyberpunk stylings.

It is similarly important to recognise the ways the varied messages of cyberpunk texts combine to enable the genre as a whole to more deeply interrogate the shifting, but still recognisably similar, social conditions around it between now and its 80s beginnings. The comparison of *Altered Carbon* and *Ready Player One* is intended to intersect and extend the work of Chapter 2, wherein the specifics of representing typically cyberpunk features reveals the differing implications behind each. Whereas Chapter 2 explores the positive effect of allowing the interplay of cyberpunk imaginings to further each other's representations, in this chapter it is revealed how similar analytical work can reveal the limitations of empty imitation. Importantly these comparisons highlight the need to destabilise the desire to set specific cyberpunk texts as a 'definitional canon.' Just as *Neuromancer* does not represent the totality of cyberpunk's interrogation of the conditions of the 1980s, so too does *Cyberpunk 2077* not encapsulate contemporary cyberpunk. The narratives surrounding its release, and the financial weight behind it, echo the strategies wielded by the tech elite (as evidenced in Chapter 3) to set their interpretation as a canonical fact. I have discussed above how this is problematic for the narratives it excludes or appropriates but there is

no necessity to view it as definitive. In particular, the way *Cyberpunk 2077*'s development has come under these criticisms reveals how audience understandings of the potential of cyberpunk surpass this game and reject it as a complete reflection of cyberpunk values. The video game sphere is home to numerous cyberpunk texts that conflict with traditional expectations<sup>592</sup> and the awareness of these multiple, intersecting variations on cyberpunk ideals is key to destabilising the positioning of *Cyberpunk 2077*. Whilst it does have the potential to parodically reinvent the styles it has chosen to incorporate into its cyberpunk world, whether or not it successfully uses these cyberpunk elements to bring a new, 2020 perspective to its audience it will remain one facet of the conditions of cyberpunk. This genre continues to grow and develop into new iterations. Cyberpunk is, and always has been, about mutation and variation. It will continue to be this regardless of the reception *Cyberpunk 2077* receives. As this thesis has demonstrated, cyberpunk continues to maintain cultural relevance to contemporary contexts and play an important role in encouraging a broad audience to engage with our relationships with technology and capital. It deserves an appropriate critical attention to do justice to both its popularity and its potential.

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<sup>592</sup> I would draw attention here to games such as *The Red Strings Club*, which centralises community, over lone, violent heroes. It depicts the best way to prevent exploitation of working populations for financial gain for corporations is through understanding the varied perspectives different walks of life bring to new technological developments before seeking to enforce one's own desires upon the many.

## CONCLUSION: THE IMPORTANCE OF CYBERPUNK

Cyberpunk is alive. In this thesis I have examined a breadth of cyberpunk material, from its earliest acknowledged appearances in literature and media, through to contemporary iterations of the genre. Despite the assertion of previous analyses of cyberpunk claiming that it 'is dead'<sup>593</sup> or limited to stories 'about the information explosion of the 1980s,'<sup>594</sup> it is now clear how this genre has surpassed such limitations and persisted in generating new formulations that respond to their 21<sup>st</sup> century contexts as much as to the time of the genre's first inception. It has resurfaced in popularity repeatedly in its 40-year lifespan, across mediums, seamlessly moving from literature, to visual and interactive media, and into games both digital and analogue.

With all this in consideration, it is impossible to deny cyberpunk's continued popularity; even as its original authors move on to new arenas it finds fresh voices and fresh formats to engage its audiences. And as corporations continue to hoard wealth, expanding their control over capitalist social systems, and the rate of our technological innovation increases exponentially, the messages at the heart of cyberpunk's fearful and defiantly angry soul continue to resonate with audiences today. This subset of SciFi cannot be overlooked for its importance in actively engaging broad audiences with these important areas of their lives and their futures. It is for these reasons that I have written this thesis with the intention to reinvigorate studies of cyberpunk, to return to a genre that has more to say than has been acknowledged and that maintains an

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<sup>593</sup> Easterbrook, *The Arc of our Destruction*

<sup>594</sup> Clute, *The Cambridge Companion...* p.67

important role in concerns relevant to the lives of contemporary audiences. This thesis was also written to divest cyberpunk of the trappings of its prior reputation and to visit it afresh with a view to expanding and exploring the varied critiques and imaginings it offers of the very real futures ahead and set up a method for analysing such a cultural lodestone that embraces variety within it. Key to this purpose was establishing a new definition for cyberpunk free of these historicised expectations. Furthermore, I have explored how cyberpunk can genuinely impact the world around it, and how it is vital to promote the critical voices and perspectives in this genre to avoid its appropriation to support poor workplace practices and the accumulation of wealth by billionaires. Through this analysis this thesis has unravelled how cyberpunk has adapted to its changing environment to maintain relevance to its audiences, and how it can be an active agent in influencing the world around it.

In Chapter 1 I unpicked how cyberpunk, as a genre, has previously been defined. I began by looking at the limitations of these previous attempts to solidly categorise cyberpunk through definitions that, due to this desire, restricted it. Through those hard limits, cyberpunk had previously suffered from a historicisation that had privileged its early texts over its late ones. In comparing multiple existing definitions, it became clear that a small number of early cyberpunk works had been prioritised and used as measuring posts for the criteria later iterations 'had' to hit; the excessive division of cyberpunk into post-cyberpunk contributes to this effect and is the reason I have rejected this categorisation. Therefore, I established here a universal method of approaching genre analysis that embraces variety through the acceptance of central genre elements. In shifting the focus from a strict description of the limits of cyberpunk

to a loose collection of commonalities (that nevertheless give cyberpunk its distinctive feel, and set the backdrop for its principal concerns), we can create a framework that is inclusive to outliers.<sup>595</sup> This method accepts that all texts conform to genres to differing extents, and in differing manners, and thus better includes the breadth of cyberpunk's variety. This chapter broke down cyberpunk into four of these elements: firstly how fringe counter-cultural movements capture the 'punk' of its name, rebelling against the corporate power structures that rule cyberpunk worlds and offering resistance through community; secondly how human bodies become devalued through technology, becoming obsolete or outmoded in comparison, and how the intimate connections between machine and flesh destabilise boundaries and encourage new conceptions of the human; thirdly how a distinct division in wealth or access to resources fuels the precarity of life in cyberpunk worlds, criticises neoliberal ideologies and warns of the ever-increasing control of corporations; and finally how cyberpunk favours near-future, urban settings out of the futuristic representations common to much of SciFi. These four elements combine to create an understanding of cyberpunk that remains consistent with the definitions that came before whilst rejecting approaching the task of defining cyberpunk through too prescriptive a lens.

Chapter 2 put this new definitional work into practice, exploring the effect that broadening genre expectations can have on literary analysis. In this chapter, I returned to early cyberpunk texts in order to explore the variety inherent to the genre at its outset, i.e. that which is often overlooked in the favouring of *Neuromancer* as the prototypical, literary, cyberpunk text. As many analyses and criticisms of the genre take Gibson's

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<sup>595</sup> I will address this further below with regard to other '-punk' genres such as steampunk



version of cyberpunk to be exemplary of it all, this chapter returned to these origins to dislodge this belief. It focused on a contemporaneous author, Pat Cadigan, who was named at the time as the only female contributor to the rise of the movement. By performing a close reading of her work, this chapter explored important differences in her, and Gibson's, representations of near future society, and most notably how they both used cyberspace, or represented cybernetic bodies, to different ends: to that of bodiless power-fantasies that subsume their owners into self-destructive addiction (in Gibson's work), and to psychological self-discovery and the impermanence of one's individuality in irresponsible use of invasive technology (in Cadigan's writing). This difference highlights how Cadigan better incorporated the movement of feminist SciFi that preceded cyberpunk, even if in so doing she also criticised aspects of it. These intricacies are inherent to the broad landscape of cyberpunk, as its competing representations of the future play off each other, and off the same cultural inspirations, to promote a multifaceted exploration of the world around it. Thus, through expanding our understanding of what cyberpunk is and was, do we better understand how it continues to reach and engage audiences with such topics.

Taking the question of how cyberpunk inspires and engages its audience, Chapter 3 focused on the concept of transmission. With cyberpunk defiantly remaining established within popular culture, even as it has fallen out of academic analysis, it is important to understand not only how it is influenced by these changing times, but how it comes to influence the world around it. Exemplary of this are the CEOs of Silicon Valley, who openly acknowledge the influence SciFi had on them from their youth (in the late 20<sup>th</sup> Century, around the time of cyberpunk's birth). I looked at the language

these figureheads used when taking on the role of interpreter for the SciFi stories that inspired the projects they are proposing to build. I analysed how, in emphasising generic expectations, they strip away the ethical criticisms of the technologies within cyberpunk stories, replacing it with a desire to see a specific vision of the future become real. This strategy supports their having a disproportionate control over what future is made and suppressing discussion surrounding the moral implications of their technologies, such as unequal distribution of (and access to) new artefacts and activities, or the unethical workplace practices at place in their production. I looked too at more positive associations that some groups or projects have made with cyberpunk texts, and how they refocus their transmission of these narratives to accessibility and social connection, encouraging audiences to actively engage with the ethical quandaries of cyberpunk whilst envisioning more equitable futures. These comparisons highlighted how cyberpunk's prior, restrictive, definitions have left it vulnerable to appropriation that strips the depth of its social explorations from its technologies. In reviewing the transmission of cyberpunk, we can recognise not only what to look for when speakers call blindly (or maliciously) upon it to support their desires, but also at how cyberpunk, and its analysis, can familiarise audiences with the ethical implications of future technologies and become a powerful communicative tool to support social awareness and change. The genre need not be adopted by the rich to make a future where they remain in charge; its resistive desires and call to its audience to recognise and fight these attempts can be better brought to the fore to redeem it as a tool for public awareness and engagement.

Finally, in Chapter 4, I looked to cyberpunk's present and future. Recurring throughout this thesis was the criticism that cyberpunk no longer had anything new to say, and that its latest renditions emptily replayed a format its creators knew to be popular and deployed with no more than the intention to earn money. Using the example of Netflix's *Altered Carbon*, I looked both at how contemporary cyberpunk does much more than this, parodically reinventing key elements of its history to update its messages for a modern audience and criticising perspectives it no longer believes true. I contrasted this with *Ready Player One*, a text that embodies the empty pastiche of the genre; one which adds nothing new but attempts to play on nostalgia and bygone popularity to generate its success. This discussion acknowledges that cyberpunk as a genre does contain empty renditions, such as it is criticised for, but this cross-comparison illuminates how to identify when this is not the case. This chapter shows how the overly historicised emphasis on key, early texts (such as *Blade Runner* in this example in particular) breeds an expectation of imitation; this is an important assumption to break, using the definitional work of this thesis, to prevent the incorrect labelling of new cyberpunk as solely empty pastiche and embracing the influx of new perspectives into a familiar format. Following from this, the chapter finished by looking at the pre-release material surrounding *Cyberpunk 2077*. This revealed how several criticisms levelled at its production, and the ideology it was set to support, centred around losing the potential for cyberpunk's progressiveness. In particular, I discussed the fears that it might miss the liberatory potential cyberpunk bodies offer to the representation of transgender people in the near future and how it might relapse into violent, hypermasculine stories containing old dialogues of 'sacred flesh' and 'inhuman

augmentation' (thus failing to update its concerns and to engage with contemporary real world explorations of bodily identity). These negative responses, in both extent and intensity, demonstrated cyberpunk's continued popularity, and the belief of its audience that it can communicate and explore important contemporary issues. In this manner, it remains continually important to embrace the variety of cyberpunk and reject an understanding that sets canonical texts to represent its whole; this means that, regardless of whether *Cyberpunk 2077* meets the hopes surrounding its release, criticism of the genre can resist deifying any one work as the next 'defining text for cyberpunk' and instead focus on what cyberpunk can continue to bring to the table.

Over the course of these chapters, I have demonstrated how cyberpunk criticism can continue to move into the future, embracing change and accepting the depth of exploration the genre offers through its inherent variety. I have established a fresh perspective through which cyberpunk analysis can escape the limitations of its past, de-incentivise focus on previously considered 'canonical' texts, and properly understand its contemporary relevance over its historical hangovers. Unfortunately, however, in undertaking this work it has been impossible to fully escape the legacy of the texts I wish to decentralise. In order to demonstrate the limitations of the previous expectations cyberpunk had inherited, it was necessary to still discuss those texts, such as *Neuromancer* in particular, that typified these perspectives. It was important to use these texts once more to demonstrate their pervasiveness in definitions of cyberpunk, and in the sweeping summaries of the genre used to support modern technologies. It is my intention to use this analysis to reveal prior overreliance on these works, and in so

doing give closure to this focus. Moving forwards with cyberpunk research, we can now begin to reduce the frequency with which the same texts recur; they should not be fully excised, as we need to understand the parodic self-referential elements of later cyberpunk demonstrated in Chapter 4, but it is important that they become relied on less frequently in cyberpunk studies. This thesis supports the belief that cyberpunk research can move past the genre expectations set by the limited focus of earlier criticism, and thus when those same texts<sup>596</sup> do resurface, they will require a justification for their reappearance that encourages fresh approaches to the core of cyberpunk. This is an important step to expand upon this research. Texts such as Larissa Lai's *The Tiger Flu*,<sup>597</sup> Lavie Tidhar's *Central Station*,<sup>598</sup> Kali Wallace's *Dead Space*,<sup>599</sup> and even texts that may be more outliers to cyberpunk such as Tim Maughan's *Infinite Detail*<sup>600</sup> are important developments of, and considerations for, the genre.<sup>601</sup> Deeper investigation of such texts (divest of an excessive focus on previous 'canon') would strengthen our understanding of cyberpunk's reflection on our contemporary world and be an important project following this research.

We can begin to see this movement in recent criticism of the genre, looking again to the Routledge Companion series that spreads its analysis over a far wider array of cyberpunk material. This work has also begun the process of escaping the

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<sup>596</sup> Such as *Neuromancer* or *Blade Runner*

<sup>597</sup> Larissa Lai, *The Tiger Flu*, (Vancouver, Arsenal Pulp Press, 2018)

<sup>598</sup> Lavie Tidhar, *Central Station*, (San Francisco: Tachyon Publications, 2016)

<sup>599</sup> Kali Wallace, *Dead Space*, (New York: Berkley, 2021)

<sup>600</sup> Tim Maughan, *Infinite Detail*, (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2019)

<sup>601</sup> And pursuing this into analysis of video games in particular would benefit a broadening approach to contemporary cyberpunk as it has been frequently mentioned that it is in that medium that the genre is particularly thriving (see Chapter 4 and examples such as *Technobabylon* [2015] and *The Red Strings Club* [2018]. Full citations in bib)

restrictions of a historicised view of cyberpunk and bringing it into contemporary discussions to best acknowledge its continued popularity. The definitional research provided here is intended to support this movement away from specific texts and to demonstrate why this is so necessary; with this groundwork laid, cyberpunk analysis can look to spread its gaze wider, safe in the knowledge of a solid frame of reference and comparison underneath.

The open, definitional approach that I propose for cyberpunk in this thesis can also be extended from this base to understand the distinctions of other genres in a similar way. This method can be applied further to form inclusive understandings of multiple subgenres, and in particular support analysis of the proliferation of ‘-punk’ genres. There is a suffusion of other ‘-punk’ formats (steampunk, atompunk, and solarpunk to name a few) that this thesis did not have the space to analyse in detail.<sup>602</sup> Establishing definitions such as the one in this thesis can open cross-comparisons between these offshoots and picture genre as a web of interconnecting fears and design elements woven by cross-pollination and inspiration. In breaking down these other ‘-punks’ similarly, we could understand how they relate with regard to their representations of political structures, relationships to technology, and (importantly for their names) their counter-cultural desires. This could help unravel whether these genres connect

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<sup>602</sup> For further introductory reading into Steampunk, see: Barry Brummett ed. *Clockwork Rhetoric: The Language and Style of Steampunk*, (University Press of Mississippi, 2014) ProQuest Ebook Central, <https://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/bham/detail.action?docID=1820925>. And for Solarpunk, see: Gregory Lynal. "Solarpunk." *The Cambridge Companion to Literature and Climate*. Ed. Adeline Johns-Putra and Kelly Sultzbach. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2022. 191-200. Print. Cambridge Companions to Literature.

specifically across their 'punk' desires, or if that suffix has become detached from its previous meaning and simply become a marketing strategy to pitch hot new forms of SciFi. Such an analysis would also provide an important extension of this work to better understand how a flexible web of genre elements can enhance our understanding of the pathways of influence and transmission between fictions (and also between fiction and reality as explored for cyberpunk in Chapter 3).

Through the course of this research, I have come to understand why cyberpunk has been such a constant flavour in the palette of SciFi since its first recognised appearances. Cyberpunk speaks to a world that is enmeshed with an intimate web of technologies where identity splits across the digital and the biological. A world that fears the iron grip of a corporate hegemony that rides neoliberal politics to unassailable heights. A world that longs to unify, destabilising these structures of control and repurposing its technologies for the good of exploited communities. These conditions remain important in the contemporary world, and cyberpunk continues to explore and critique them, building off the familiar structures of its past to dive ever deeper into these increasingly pressing fears. Cyberpunk is just as important, and just as creative, now as it ever has been, yet it finds itself wielded by people who are having a disproportionate impact on the world due to an appropriation of its prior definitions. It is vital to revisit it in order to refresh the limitations of its historical analysis and to fully understand how it can function as an important tool for understanding our contemporary society.

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