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# REVIEW ON CYBERPUNK FICTION AND ITS INSPIRATION IN LITERATURE

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Abstract

This is a review paper about cyberpunk fiction as one of the most important subgenres of science fiction. It also takes a look at its inspiration in the world of Literature. Cyberpunk fiction has been popular since the invention of computer and arrival of the Internet to human life.


Keywords: Cyberpunk, Fiction, Inspiration, Literature etc

Cyberpunk Inspiration


Cyberpunk fictions have been inspired by some speculative approaches and metaphysical preoccupations of science fiction writers dating back to much earlier periods. As Italo Calvino affirms, Cyrano de Bergerac's *Voyage to the Moon* (1661) is the ancestor of science fiction that brought forth the ideas of corporeality and in corporeality, two of the main elements in cyberpunk fictions. On the one hand, the theme of metaphysics enhances human abilities, faculties, and capacities via technology while on the other hand, it deprives human of his qualities. In this sense, Calvino illuminates the poetic and philosophical qualities of Cyrano's stories:

> Cyrano extols the unity of all things, animate or inanimate, the combinatorial of elementary figures that determine the variety of living forms; and above all he conveys the sense of the precariousness of the processes behind them. That is, how nearly man missed being man, and life, life, and the world, the world.(20)


Furthermore, breaking time limitations or boundaries has been a recurring theme in the ouvres of science fiction novelists' since the late ninetieth century. *The Time Machine* (1895) by H.G. Wells, for example, had been one of the harbingers of this feature for more than one hundred years before the birth of cyberpunk fictions. Cyberpunk has its roots in hard-boiled detective fictions. Hard-boiled fiction is a literary genre in which the characters and settings

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share common features with crime fiction. This kind of fiction had major effects upon cyberpunk characters and settings which extended from late 1920s to 1930s and which noir was used in Dashiell Hammett's *Red Harvest* (1929) for the first time. In this novel, the hero is a characteristic loner, an outcast who confronts with a mutable world of violence and corruption where the enigmatic antagonist fights mayhem in a dreamlike setting of urban cruelty; as Cavallaro maintains, "hard-boiled authors take us into an open and formless urban scene" (8).

In another hard-boiled detective fiction, *The Big Sleep* (1939) by Raymond Chandler, the hero is portrayed as an isolated and rootless person as well as cyberpunk's antagonist. To Cavallaro, this idea depicted cyberpunk in two ways: "First, the ordeals undergone by several cyberpunk heroes and heroines (such as in Gibson's *Count Zero*, *Virtual light* and *Idoru*) are redolent of traditional quests. … Second, cyberpunk echoes Chandler's appropriation of medieval motifs in its articulation of a markedly Gothic sensibility" (9). The term Gothic here does not refer to style, but a whole cultural discourse which highlights images of psychological and physical destruction and an inescapable sense of, fragmentation, deterioration, and alienation. Cyberpunk is indebted to this Gothic discourse in many ways, and which is obvious in cyberpunk's setting, in its characters' psychological structures, in its narrative techniques, and in its outlooks to the body.

It is necessary to note that cyberpunk has also been influenced by dystopian writers. The connection between science fiction and dystopian explanations of the world will obtain new meaning in cyberpunk. For instance, Bernard Wolfe's *Limbo* (1952), in its representation of North America appearing from unclear destruction foretells cyberpunk in which invasive technologies of the body, including lobotomy, play an important part. The theme of body transformation also became central in the works of Alfred Bester's *The Stars My Destination*(1955). This novel also is considered cyberpunk because of its anarchic emphasis on the collapse of comprehensible restrictions between acceptable and criminal forms of behavior.

Revealing the criminal behavior and mind control experiments in the work of Anthony Burgess's *A Clockwork Orange* (1962) is another example of the link between dystopian visions of the future and cyberpunk fictions. More importantly, this story portrays a culture which is "gang-infested" and populated by "pathologically fashion-conscious" young men, which indicate cyberpunk's Brain modification aspect and focuses on the fate of people in a harsh technological society undergoing urban decay, so reflective and reminiscent of cyberpunk's environment and culture.

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From the 1950s onwards, the concerns about the influences of technology on human life and the planet inspired some prominent science fiction writers, such as Brian Aldiss and J.G. Ballard, to be associated with the New Wave – a movement in science fiction which was produced in the 1960s-70s. The main focus of the new wave was on current issues, such as the relationship between technology, crime, drug addiction, and sexuality. It also surveys environment depletion, and urban overcrowding. Therefore, the New Wave, in some ways, serves as a preface to cyberpunk with the influence of present day computer technology – themes best exemplified by Gibson and his contemporaries in their fictions.

Some of the postmodern fictions written in the second half of the twentieth century also had vital influences in creating cyberpunk fictions including William S. Burroughs's *Naked Lunch* (1959) and Thomas Pynchon's *The Crying of Lot 49* (1966). *Naked Lunch* applies the theme of 'the junk virus', and drug addiction, as the commencement towards the realm of abjection. This idea provides the connection between the fusion of reality and imagination and makes in roads into cyberpunk speculations about related themes. Pynchon's novel, for example, signifies a deep unsettling image of a world where there are no inevitabilities for people to stick to. There are only hints and hypotheses to guide Pynchon's heroine, that may or may not be real. The novel's main questions related to credibility of reality create a lot of unusual ideas for the growth of cyberpunk. This novel intertwines the high and mass culture with the technological metaphors and portrays the alienated characters. According to Brian McHale, the main aspect of Pynchon's work is paranoia and mind control by worldwide corporations.

Another postmodern novel which predicts cyberpunk is portrayed in John Brunner's *Shockwave Rider* (1975) as a society which is immersed in electronic means of communication and surveillance. This novel questions the meaning of humanity in a world where humans are programmed as bytes in streams of data and controlled by government. And the last novel, *White Noise* (1984) by Don De Lillo (in sync with Gibson's *Neuromancer*) depicts ideas of dystopian connotations of late capitalism where society becomes completely dependent on cyber technology (TV-saturated society) and disapproved drugs are used to cure the fear of death, all of which eventually result in violence and psychological disorder. De Lillo's narrative unites drama and humour to portray an absurd world akin to that found in cyberpunk fictions. Therefore, it would seem that cyberpunk fictions have had the most powerful influences on technological progresses over the past two decades. They are the first production of the cultural and social changes which are extended by new technologies like media and computers. Herein Kellner states that,

> The cyberpunks are very much a product of the technological explosion of
> the 1980s with its proliferation of media, computers, and new technology.

Their work is heavily influenced by the saturation of culture and everyday
life through science, technology, and consumer culture and their writing
presents an overlapping of the realms of high-tech and popular mass
culture. (314)

Moreover, Bruce Sterling argues that, "The cyberpunks are perhaps the first SF generation to
grow up not only within the literary tradition of science fiction, but in a truly science-fictional
world" (*Preface to Mirrorshades,* 1986). Cyberpunk fictions have not only restated the
present meaning of science fiction, but they have produced a new language and image to
describe contemporary culture. Unlike some science fiction writers, the cyberpunk fictions
are not trying to persuade others to produce rockets or futuristic weapons. In contrast, they
portray a world of technological advances related to the body through bio-engineering, bio-
technology, and bio-genetics.

In general, H.G. Wells' *The Time Machine* (1895) and Don DeLillo's *White Noise* (1984)
which is in sync with the writings of the most celebrated cyberpunk fiction, Gibson's
*Neuromancer*, have aspired and predicted cyberpunk fictions in many aspects. These fictions
played significant roles in familiarizing the human's mind to cyberpunk fictions where the
human body, mind, and life are immersed in technology. In this regard, Blackford states that
"cyberpunk and cyberpunk-influenced narratives showed technology interfacing directly with
the brain or otherwise penetrating the body." (111)

Review on Cyberpunk Fictions

Bruce Bethke wrote the first cyberpunk fiction *Cyberpunk* (1980), which was published in
1983. Gibson's *Neuromancer* was written in the same year and since then, many cyberpunk
fictions have come out. But, as David Porush argues, a major concern that provokes authors'
minds has been the question of "what aspect of humanity makes us human?"(Porush 258);
this question undeniably connects to cyberpunk fictions and emerges through the interaction
between real humans and artificial Intelligences, cyborgs, androids, computer-simulated
bodies, replicants, and mutants. This question, for the very first time, is evidently depicted by
Philip K. Dick's *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* (1972).

In some cyberpunk fictions, the characters' identity easily changes through the fusion of
human body and computer network. Hans Moravec, for example, believes that in the close
future it will be possible to transfer mental functions to computer software. This process
called 'transmigration' by Moravec will take some time before it is put into practice. For

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instance, in G.A. Effinger's trilogy *When Gravity Fails* (1987), *A Fire in the Sun* (1990), and *The Exile Kiss* (1991), all characters transfer their mental functions to computer programs to gain alternative identities through a chip that connects directly into their brains. The software involves personality patterns (*moddies*) that can be bought from *modshops,* and their identities undergo changes through this treatment. The trilogy also portrays a brutal hierarchical society where poor people are killed for their organs. In general, this trilogy indicates that software can be shaped out of the brain of a real person by means of 'mental rape'. For example, Effinger's protagonist is subjected to torment, and his emotions are downloaded onto a moddie.

*Strange Days* (1996), a sci-fi film by Kathryn Bigelow offers a nearly similar theme. In this movie, any actual and imagined event can be translated into portable software. People can go through it with the help of a wired gadget which is positioned on the head like a cap. Indeed, what these characters re-experience is not some shallow form of facts that have happened, but feelings, thoughts, and emotions that are relative to the event being experienced. Sometimes these feelings and emotions enter other individuals' brains, thereby modifying their future projections. Walter Jon William's novel *Hardwired* (1986) is a great example for the theme of personality modification. The characters in this novel are able to transform their identities by a powerful programme called 'Project Black Mind' that "sets up a mind in crystal. Then goes into another mind and prints the first mind on top of it, [then] imposes the first personality on the second" (293) and consequently eliminates the primary character of the invaded mind.Pat Cadigan's *Mindplayers* (1987) is another example which explores the theme of mind invasion, replacement and obliteration. In this novel, characters are able to abandon their original identities and purchase artificial ones from the Power People Company. Nevertheless, these are limited to the players' freedom which underlines technology as both a liberating and disciplining force simultaneously. In fact, the forms of mindplay are assumed illegal by the Brain Police and are punished through *mindsuck*, a tactic that destroys the player's personality.

Another cyberpunk novel is *Software* (1982) by Rudy Rucker which talks about an old scientist who looks for an immortal robot body in order to upload his brain functions onto it. In the end, he figures out that immortality doesn't give him utter power, and that his mental patterns have been stored in a Mr. Frostee ice-cream van. In this case, the character faces the prospect of changing his personality. Moreover, drug addiction is highlighted by Rucker as an inevitable phenomenon in cyberpunk fiction.

The motif of physical transformation is developed by Bruce Sterling's stories. He uses this motif through the employment of intrusive technologies and in fact observes "the theme of

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body invasion: prosthetic limbs, implanted circuitry, cosmetic surgery, genetic alteration" (Sterling ix) as the cyberpunk keynotes. In some of Sterling's work, the idea of body invasion is considered and it represents the worlds where humans' bodies have become both obsolete and posthuman. In *Schismatrix* (1985) and in *'Twenty Evocations'* (1988) for instance, the Earth and a minority of people are the only remnants in the world. These stories are set against the backdrop the posthuman Shapers and Mechanists: the former, as Claudia Springer states, "use genetic engineering to design their organic bodies and extend their lives [while the latter] become increasingly mechanical as they incorporate technology into their cyborg bodies" (36). In such novels, biogenetic or transformations of an individual's DNA code, and also biotechnology, are other aspects of cyberpunk fictions. Moreover, Sterling's works also represent societies seized by schizophrenia as a result of prosthetic devices implanted in characters' bodies. These narratives convey that "the cyborgian façade of biotechnologically and mechanically engineered bodies still linger the same old longings. These may have to be voiced through the new vocabularies so as to be intelligible but their physical import remains virtually the same." (Cavallaro 18)

And finally, John Shirley highlights the punk component of cyberpunk especially in his trilogy of *Eclipse* (1985), *Eclipse Penumbra* (1987) and *Total Eclipse* (1989) where human identities are crushed by illegal practices. These stories foretell the trading and consuming of *Sink* (synthetic cocaine), a substance so addictive, yet it improves characters' abilities and faculties, and augments their mental and physical powers through the installation of brain chips as well as drug consumption in *Frame 137*(1992), a comics sequence by James O' Barr.

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