

## UTOPIAN PATTERNS IN CYBERPUNK ENVIRONMENTS. POSTMODERN STANCES

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*Abstract: The cyberpunk ideology relates to a complex framework of reality-scenarios, usually shaped by informatics, digital technology and, eventually, dehumanization. Technology is viewed as a source of alteration for humanity, and the digitalized self as a symptom of a loss of personal identity. Postmodernism and cyberpunk share a whole array of similarities, as far as their perspective on change, humanity and its future is concerned. Both views - the postmodernist one and the cyberpunk approach – focus on the distorted concepts of truth and objective reality, as a result of the internal dynamics of the technology-induced transformations shaping the new personal and social environment, where interpretations become blurred and identities interchangeable.*

**Keywords:** *cyberpunk, utopia, postmodernism, interpretation, identity.*

The cyberpunk<sup>1</sup> ideology comprises dystopian rather than utopian elements related to a worst-scenario future, shaped by informatics, digital technology and, eventually, dehumanization. The common approach of most cyberpunk novels (and cyberpunk movies, as well) is a discussion of the extent to which technology could cause a transformation of the human – or more specifically, the ways in which a digitalized future can alter the essence of humanity beyond recognition.

The cyberpunk discourse is primarily defined by a radical position towards the possible interconnectedness between technology and culture, up to the creation of an individualized subculture, grounded on techno-consciousness and a rethinking of the human experience through state-of-the-art technology. The consistent subtextual dose of antiauthoritarian rebellion is another defining element of cyberpunk.<sup>2</sup>

There is a strong similarity between postmodern theory and cyberpunk. According to thinkers like Jean Baudrillard, Fredric Jameson or François Lyotard, postmodernism, as discourse, is the result of an entire array of changes – political, cultural, social, economic – triggering a corresponding change of *perspective*. Concepts such as truth, reality and objectivity are articulated differently from the modernist worldview, as a philosophical and psychological response to the sum-total of changes. In a similar fashion, the dynamics of cyberpunk narrative depends on the development of technology as the dominant trait of its textual environment; the ever-evolving design of technology becomes, on the one hand, the central issue in cyberpunk fiction, and on the other, a major conceptual parameter within the framework of postmodern interpretation. The implicit effects of technological development, such as the rapid proliferation of copies through extensive mass production and the extreme speed in delivering information in mass culture, become leitmotifs in both cyberpunk fiction and postmodern theory.<sup>3</sup> The reality of postmodernity is mediated by culture, which in the

<sup>1</sup> The term is usually credited to Bruce Bethke. His story *Cyberpunk* was published in 1983. However, the concept was introduced in the mainstream of genres theory by Gardner Dozois, who was analyzing the works of William Gibson.

<sup>2</sup> Douglas Kellner, *Media Culture. Cultural Studies, Identity and Politics between the Modern and the Postmodern*, Routledge, London, 1995, p. 301

<sup>3</sup> Douglas Kellner, op.cit.

case of cyberpunk is technology itself – as a whole, not just information – for decoding the real as well as assessing human evolution.

A further correspondence between postmodernism and cyberpunk resides in the use of the same categories: hyperreality and simulation, the fundamental notions in Baudrillard's theories, are both basic narrative components in the novel that was to articulate the structure of the entire genre, William Gibson's *Neuromancer*. Moreover, both Gibson and Baudrillard construct visions of high-tech societies, where information is capital, and boundaries have been erased by the elaborate influence of a consumption-driven culture. Yet another similarity between postmodern theory and cyberpunk fiction consists of a highlighted difference between these two types of discourse and that of modernity: modernist works such as *Ulysses* or *The Waves* used experimentation to display an essentially realistic content, while the cyberpunk-oriented narrative resorts to conventional or even realistic fictional modes to portray entirely different worlds.<sup>4</sup>

The mixture between utopianism and cyberpunk is simultaneously affected by a pessimistic outlook and a departure from the radicalism of *futur noir* visions. Moreover, the degree of pessimism or optimism should perhaps be analyzed according to the initial *mise-en-scène*: the cyberpunk environment is, right from the start, fragmented and decayed. Accordingly, its textual reality might be considered a paradoxically dystopian starting point for utopia, thus inherently marked by a negative perception of possible alternatives – in *A.I.*<sup>5</sup>, the seemingly idyllic future of the planet is reduced to the memories of an android, recreated using fragmented, subjective bits of information. This partial reality is then computer-generated for the sole purpose of creating a personal utopia for an entity that is not human; long after the extinction of the entire human race, the only possibility for a superior civilization to rebuild the human world is through the eyes of a machine.

If *Blade Runner* was permeated by the conflict man-machine (or, perhaps more accurately, sentient versus non-sentient), in *A.I.* there is no actual conflict, only the signs of rejection: humans cannot convince themselves to acknowledge their creations, the machines, as their equals, even though the androids had been designed for this specific purpose of being human-like in all respects. It is not the functional facets that ultimately create a gap between the designers' initial intention and the perception of the end-result of their work within the human community, but the humans' inability to overcome the representation of the machines as a form of otherness, readily replaceable. By design, the androids possess the ability to act as seemingly perfect surrogates for humans. Symptomatic for the conceptualization of the machines is the mother simply "returning" her android-son as soon as her natural baby is born. The feelings she had invested in her replicant son are immediately and automatically overturned when the two natures are compared (human and machine). Eventually, the whole experience of rejection and replacement, actually as traumatic for the android as for any human being, is turned into a personal utopia, having as point of reference the memories of the replicant. The human existential framework corresponds, in the cyberpunk vision, to the above-mentioned necessity: the perspective of the machine. Human existence cannot even be the subject of representation without substantive reference to the world of machines; the

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<sup>4</sup> Steven Connor, *Postmodernist Culture. An Introduction to Theories of the Contemporary* (second edition), Blackwell Publishing, Oxford, 1997, p. 135

<sup>5</sup> *A.I. – Artificial Intelligence*, 2001, directed by Steven Spielberg and having as starting point a short story by Brian Aldiss, *Supertoys Last All Summer Long*. Essentially, it is the quest of a robot to become human.

dialectic human/ non-human redefines each of the two concepts, disabling any possibility for individual consideration.

The utopian vein in elaborating alternatives is marked by calling into question issues like identity and the nature of the real. Paradoxically, while the postmodern discourse perceives the evolution of individual identity and the possibility of adequately grasping one's reality in rather pessimistic terms – with Fredric Jameson, François Lyotard or Francis Fukuyama all stressing upon the increasingly disturbing effect of mass culture on the individual – or even in nihilistic terms, such as Jean Baudrillard's view, cyberpunk approaches the issue of identity search in a framework that offers more possibilities. Since the very definition of the individual is metamorphosized by the high-tech existence, there is no actual limit inherently imposed on one's potential to come to terms with his/her identity, whether human or non-human. In Gibson's *Neuromancer*, neither the merging between Wintermute and the Artificial Intelligence, nor the appearance of Wintermute's enhanced self does provide any sense of drama. In Philip K. Dick's *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?*, the eventual acknowledgement of the protagonist's true nature does not entail any kind of personal agony, just a heightened perception of his self. In *A.I.*, the suffering of the main character, a cybernetic organism endowed with the capacity of moral evolution, is eventually transformed into the realization of the android's own utopia – the existence, albeit replicated, in a human family. In the case of *Neuromancer*, there is the utopia of self-improvement through technology, of acquiring super-human potential by merging with an endless supply of information; with the addition of artificial intelligence to the human self, Wintermute becomes a hybrid between man and machine. In the end, he is the perfect version of his own dream, having achieved his seemingly utopian goal without cancelling his human consciousness in the process. In Philip K. Dick's *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?*, there is the utopia of self-discovery and a redefining of one's reality within the limitations imposed by one's nature: the replicant acknowledges that despite his more-than-human potential – in every respect, including empathy – he is a machine. For the child replicant in *A.I.*, the quest for his personal utopia, the transformation from robot to human being, finds resolution only after the disappearance of human civilization, when objective reality would apparently prevent him from fulfilling his dream. Yet, with the enhanced possibilities of superior technology, the replicant is able to be part of his utopian universe.

The common definition of utopia does not entail time limits, the only limitations being related to space, the ones ensuring the functionality of the utopian environment. Utopia can exist in a completely different time, in the past or in the future, or even in an alternate universe, but it cannot occupy the same space and time with reality, in the *same* universe. In *A.I.*, David's utopia is limited to one day: that is the maximum amount of time for which the superior technology of the alien civilization can replicate his dream. Acknowledging this limit and adequately grasping the whole dimension of the alternative – continuing his life with the certainty of never being able to live his dream again – the replicant chooses to shutdown, as witnessing the end of his utopia would be inconceivable. After having lived his one-day dream, without even questioning its reality (since he can *feel* it, it *is* real), he simply refuses to continue his existence, eventually transcending even the alleged immortality of the machines. Non-existence is preferred over the disillusion of objective reality.

The setting of cyberpunk dystopias is a hybrid between two simultaneous phenomena: on one hand, there is an accelerated rate of technological development, up to the point where technology escapes human control and the combination between unforeseen developments in cybernetics, the derailed process of technologization leading to an autonomous version of cyberspace. On the other hand, there usually is a planetary ecological disaster, caused precisely by humanity's obsession with technology and the neglect of natural environment. The inherently dark atmosphere of such visions becomes the background of strange intellectual experiments, self-destructive behaviours or a hypnotic state of dream-like – albeit nightmarish – existence.

The conceptual pattern in designing cyberpunk dystopias seems to borrow from the theory of the spectacle.<sup>6</sup> The setting most commonly represents one step beyond the mere “ideals” of an essentially consumerist, over-technologized society. With the spectacle transgressing into the digital, the individual is even more likely to lose control over his own psychological reality and to dissolve his capacity to adequately comprehend the functionality of whatever environment.

The visions of utopia set against the background of cyberpunk fiction exhibit the same features used by Michel Foucault in defining heterotopias.<sup>7</sup> The cyberpunk utopia is beyond any distinguishable space and time, but here technology plays the part of the mirror in Foucault's theory. In the cyberpunk narrative, the only actual *crisis* is represented by the complex dialectic man-machine - the impossibility to distinguish between the authentically human identity and the computer-generated version of it.<sup>8</sup>

The articulation of the cyberpunk-generated utopian discourse – or dystopian, respectively – sees technology not as mediator between humanity's prospects for a better version of the future, but as a mechanism marginalizing human progress, controlling society and manipulating perspectives. Destabilizing human control and imposing, in one form or another, its own control, technology eventually generates a novel system of idealization, extrapolating human utopian ideals and projecting camouflaged dystopian visions into what humanity still calls “objective reality”.

Basically, humanity's nightmares become triumphant over its dreams, through the same element that had been hypostasized as the most vital mechanism to fulfil those dreams: technology. The interaction between man and machine does not raise questions related to its meaningfulness anymore, as it is equivalent to the formation of an entirely new organism, with bipolar goals, but living as one, as each constituent part needs the other one in order to survive. Moreover, entering cyberspace signals a conceptual deletion of the organic and the transition to assuming a digital, virtual identity (or several identities). This means inhabiting an environment generated through technology and *available* exclusively through technology.

The duality man-machine is only functional in cyberspace, while having a negative psychological effect in the “real” through a realization of one's potential addiction to

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<sup>6</sup> Guy Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle*, Black and Red, Detroit, 1970, p. 35

<sup>7</sup> In *Of Other Spaces: Heterotopias*, Michel Foucault defines the mirror as a symptomatic example of heterotopias, because it acts as a virtual space that opens behind a real surface, thus allowing the individual to grasp a representation of himself within a space that is actually never there. Simultaneously, the individual is confronted with two different perceptions, one real and one unreal.

<sup>8</sup> Foucault defines “crisis heterotopias” as privileged, sacred or forbidden places, reserved for individuals in a state of commonly acknowledged crisis, whatever the definition of crisis, socially, culturally or historically.

technology, on one hand, and humanity's general status, that of depending on technology for its survival, on the other. The visions of future inscribed in the cyberpunk mode of representation are bleak and pessimistic, encapsulating individual destinies trapped inside repetitive scenarios where dreams easily turn into nightmares, and any trace of expectation is inherently covered in nostalgia for the past and stained with paranoid delusions.

Induced by a societal environment that holds commodification as the main ideology, attempts to envision other ideals, free from any pattern of consumerism, are futile, as the individual is caught in a deceptive, fragmented reality that alters even the virtual projection of another, potentially better reality. The dogma of consumerism becomes dominant, resembling a religion that eventually sacrifices its followers – the consumer is „consumed”.<sup>9</sup>

Cyberpunk dystopias are somehow similar to the *future noir* genre, especially as far as the overall pessimistic vision and the typically postmodern displacement of identity are concerned. The uncontrollable neurosis and fragmented perspective of the characters make them stereotypical victims of their own social environment, and, simultaneously, of their own psychosis. But, as opposed to the *future noir*, in the case of cyberpunk one is given clues – complex, but distinguishable – that the psychosis *could* actually have real motives, that the reality perceived by the characters *really is* distorted. Alienated, irrevocably lost between an ongoing past and an undecipherable future, the cyberpunk "heroes" cannot adequately grasp the present either, as it is already marked by too many discontinuities. Without having truly heroic traits,<sup>10</sup> the protagonists are further driven towards a self-perpetuating existential crisis, permanently antagonized by incomprehensible feedback from the society their fragmented individual history cannot adapt to.

There is a paradoxical interconnectedness between technology and humanity. The supreme goal of robotics is to create a cybernetic organism, a machine that is as human-like as possible, so the human basically becomes an electronic metaphor of perfection. On the other hand, a society focusing on mechanistic visions and artificial intelligence desires to build the perfect man – but this version of perfection is dictated by techno-scientific rules, by genetic engineering and cybernetics, so that the "new perfect man" would be a vaguely humanized robot, a human who is more-than-human thanks to the superior design offered by science. Information technology has shaped the human perspective, proliferating a certain sense of ambiguity concerning authentically human values and stressing upon performance rather than sentiment, competitive rather than merely social. Along the pathway towards perfection, from both sides (robotics and humanity), the boundaries between man and machine become blurred, uniformity is technologically unavoidable, while humans degenerate into bodyless, senseless robots, preoccupied with means of communication, not the meaning of communication. All that matters is capability, the methods of achieving it remain unimportant in this posthuman approach of the progress-through-science ideology. All relationships are redefined; all perspectives are transformed within a new system of meaning. The individual's ability to choose consciously is superseded by the dynamics of the entire techno-community he lives in.

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<sup>9</sup> Lee Horsley, *The Noir Thriller*, Palgrave, New York, 2001, p. 190

<sup>10</sup> According to the classical definition of the hero, at least.

The cyberpunk utopia does not necessarily imply a rational, strictly organized development, its evolution entails more possibilities of a somber chaos than of an orderly utopia, designed to pinpoint human evolution within its frame. The technocratic perspective eradicates nature (together with natural laws) from any equation; nature becomes a primitive reminder of mankind before the age of total subordination to science. The modern and pre-modern views on the possibilities of humanity's existence in a technological age have lost their momentum, as human identity itself is on the brink of extinction, together with the natural environment. Technological overdose is perceived as a norm and it is institutionalized within the core of the newly-fabricated notion of progress, whose basic assumption is the conformity between material and moral, between reason and intuition. Genuine human progress is suppressed by the rigid codes of informatics, technological organization and cyber-culture.

The purposefulness of technological advance not only ignores individuality, but it also decodes reason in terms of binary codes, robotics and quantitative measurement. Thus, the human counterpart in designing the "perfect" amalgam of man and machine is systematically overlooked. The multiplicity of choices is denied, while the assumptions on the relationship between humanity and technology are reformulated. Yet, a final definition of man within this cyberpunk framework is never elucidated; the newly created individual can never fully come to terms with his dispersed identity.

The binary opposition between nature and culture does not hold its ground in the relationship between humanity and technology, between man and robot. The delineation between society and its technology is necessarily eroded, since the former does not lack autonomy, but uses the latter as groundwork for each and every potentiality of progress. The interconnectedness between the two is dictated not only by need, but by will, by a coherently stated and consistently envisioned *desire* to become better-than-human, even if it means some part of human identity is lost in the process, in an infinite cycle of re-inventing one's self through technology. Centered upon this potentially disruptive evolution, the individual is forced, however, to function within a framework of provisional imperfection and instability.

Unlike modernism, where technology is viewed as the privilege of a certain social and economic status, postmodernism makes no distinction among classes, as far as technology is concerned. The decentralization processes and the focus on the local lead to a systemic inclusion of technology in virtually every field; within this framework, cyberpunk has gone beyond a mere trend in the science fiction genre (that of insisting upon an ideology consistently shaped by the merging of man and computer) to also become part of media culture, with its fragmentation, dissolution of formerly valid norms and systemic violence. Along with the blurring of cultural distinctions and the creation of the Internet, cyberpunk could be regarded as the symbol for the absence of central authority, on one hand, and for the possible dangers of the new version of social existence, as hybrid between humanity and computer science, on the other. Another element that is always central to any cyberpunk plot is technophilia: computers and advanced technology in general provide the tools for action within the dark hyperreal of the stories. Perspectives are filtered through constant appeal to technology – in a way, technology is the medium *and* the message, as it remains crucial in all versions of plot development.

Cyberpunk does not simply reject tradition, it also establishes its own coordinates, structuring them on a particular ideology, neither utopian nor dystopian, but rather a hybrid between the two, a newly conceived conceptual model for the visualization of reality itself. The rather pessimistic tone of cyberpunk ideology stems from the observation that technology, instead of solving humanity's problems, merely diversifies them; communication, improved through computerization and digital networking, only functions as a by-product of technology, with significantly more preoccupation for weapon technology, surveillance, biotechnology. Easy access to information technology also means easier ways to distort information as well, transforming it into a tool for mass manipulation and a step further towards the fragmented social visions preached by postmodernists.

On one hand, postmodernity has brought along a certain degree of skepticism, of distrust; on the other hand, the cyberpunk ideology has its own baggage of uncertainty, of negative expectations concerning the role a high-tech society could play in the life of the individual. The combination between postmodern simulation and the hyperreality envisioned by cyberpunk expands into dystopian scenarios for the future of humanity, where technology is more likely to contribute to man's downfall than his progress. The world of cyberpunk is characterized by the same phenomena that Baudrillard attributes to postmodernity: implosion, a dissolving crash of images, identities and energies. The machine itself becomes conceptualized, a symptom for the functional patterns of the human environment as well, comparable with the car-as-vector metaphor –the subject behind the wheel is no longer a “drunken demiurge of power”, becoming a computer-like entity.<sup>11</sup> Likewise, in the cyberpunk scenario, the human is no longer a deity, it turns into a mere part of a much larger system. Man and machine merge into a single functional mechanism, each of them depending on the existence of the other and neither of them acknowledging the actual dimension of this symbiosis. The half-human, half-machine entity no longer preserves the respective definitions or conceptualizations of identity for either man or machine, it amalgamates the two identities to produce a new one. The hypostases of man-as-robot and machine-as-human are symptomatic for the cyberpunk-influenced utopianism.

Besides celebrating technology and transforming it into a type of cultural fetish, cyberpunk texts also act as a wake-up call for their audience, encouraging it to develop a sceptical, critical or self-reflexive attitude towards human implication in the processes of digitalization, on the one hand, and on the dynamics of technological development as integral part of our present, on the other. Against the background of generalized consumerism and mass production, the individual faces a complex choice: to stick to a philosophy of non-involvement, thus not becoming part of the system, or to seek integration at any cost, cancelling all resistance against the invasive technologization of existence. The result of this subtextual message is a new mode of interconnectedness between cyberpunk discourse and its audience, an interconnectedness which allows the individual to “buy in, without selling out” – to “consume” technology, without actually conforming to the consumerist norms of the computer-culture.<sup>12</sup> Yet, this incentive towards a heightened individual and social awareness, provided by the peculiar textuality of cyberpunk, does not rule out the possibility of spiritual

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<sup>11</sup> Jean Baudrillard, “The Ecstasy of Communication”, *The Anti-Aesthetic*, ed. Hal Foster, Bay Press, Washington, 1983, p. 127

<sup>12</sup> Sidney Eve Matrix, *Cyberpop. Digital Lifestyles and Commodity Culture*, Routledge, New York, 2006, p. 4

decay – on the contrary, it tends to transform depersonalization into a common trait of the cyberpunk narrative mode.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Claire Sponsler, "Cyberpunk and the Dilemmas of Postmodern Narrative: the Example of William Gibson", *Contemporary Literature*, Vol. 33, No. 4, 1992

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### **Filmography**

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