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## Late Capitalism and the Evolution of Cyberpunk Poetics: A Thematic Overview

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### Abstract

*Genre cyberpunk was pioneered in the 1980s by a group of science fiction authors who intended to bridge the cultural gap emerging at the time between the formal domains of literary culture, fiction, and politics, on one hand, and the world of science, and technology on the other. As opposed to most of earlier science fictions that operated in technophilia/technophobia dichotomy at the level of the narrative, in cyberpunk literature technology itself has changed- it is pervasive and visceral, not contained, but within us. However, the poetics of cyberpunk literature and media have evolved noticeably since its inception. In this paper, I shall attempt to highlight the changing nature of the ideological and cultural formations of late capitalism from the post-war era to present times to facilitate a critical understanding of the particular socio-political context of late capitalism in which the genre was initially developed, and to examine the evolving nature of its poetics through an appraisal of the technological imagination, and attitudes towards life, and politics in two cyberpunk novels and an anime series composed in the 1980s, 2000s, and 2020s respectively.*

**Keywords** – Cyberpunk, poetics, late capitalism, technology,

### Introduction

The term cyberpunk is a portmanteau that typifies the credos of cyber and punk cultures. Cyberpunk arrived, as a departure from the technophilia/technophobia dichotomy of earlier science fictions (SF), during a time when the intimate presence and the social reality mediating role of invasive technologies of cybernetic communication such as computers was being laid bare. Politically speaking, the 1980s were an era of increasing corporate power, rising American military domination, and the premiership of Reagan and Thatcher in the US and UK respectively. By the end of the decade, the socialist alternative of the USSR had gone, and with it, the inevitability of capitalism was firmly established. The above-described political, and economic context proved to be fertile grounds for the emergence of a mass market for hard extrapolative SF which stood in a metonymic relation to social reality. Furthermore, unlike previous SFs which usually oscillated between a fever-pitch enthusiasm for scientific progress and advancement, dystopian nightmares, and the cosmic horror of

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technology gone haywire, cyberpunk literature, in its earliest iterations, not only embraced and exhibited the social paradigm-shifting role of cyber technologies but as well showed a marked preference for cybernetics, neurocircuitry, Brain-Computer Interfaces, and a disembodied state of consciousness and experience in general over narratives which generally operated within a natural/artificial, man/machine dichotomy. Concerning the punk credibilities of the cyberpunk movement, it may be said that there appears to be a general contempt towards corporate power and authority in its narratives. Cyberpunk protagonists tend to belong from the outside, the under city, and despite the antipathy towards corporate power which remains the same, their exercise of political subjectivity, and their general attitude towards politics, technology and life tend to change with the expansion of the genre. These differences, I shall argue are shaped by the ideological and cultural transformations in the structures of late capitalism from the 1980s to contemporary times. And it is through their treatment of technology and their respective dispositions towards politics that I trace the evolution of cyberpunk poetics via an exploration three of the following works – *Neuromancer* (1984) by William Gibson, *Altered Carbon* (2002) by Richard K. Morgan, and *Cyberpunk: Edgerunners*(2022) anime series directed by Hiroyuki Imaishi based on the CD Projekt Red franchise *Cyberpunk*.

### **Late capitalism and cyberpunk**

While there is much debate and contestation around what constitutes late capitalism, what may be safely said is that it refers to an era of capitalism that follows immediately after the Second World War. Adorno and Horkheimer used the term late capitalism (*spatkapitalismus*) in *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (1944) to describe a transformation of social life under capitalism which entailed the near total supervision and administration of life by a few agencies and institutions in the West. While Adorno and Horkheimer correctly pointed out the exponential rate of scientific advancement which led to an ever-increasing ability of man to influence and modify the natural domain and even modify the body with newly devised technologies of rational control such as birth control pills, a more in-depth and frankly more useful account of late capitalism is the one offered by Louis Althusser in *On The Reproduction Of Capitalism*. Althusser reveals to us that unlike earlier forms of capitalism which were more concerned with production, reproduction happens to be the ultimate concern for late capitalism. In other words, according to Althusser, the reproduction of the forces and means of production, but as well as and more importantly the relations of production constitute the primary concern of late capitalism. Since more than anything else, late capitalism sustains itself through the reproduction of capitalistic class relations; this reproduction is carried out by a loose nexus of institutions which Althusser terms Ideological and Repressive State Apparatuses (ISAs and RSAs respectively). ISAs consist of institutions which function primarily by ideology, and only secondarily by coercion. These include

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educational institutions, religious institutions, and so on. For instance, churches indoctrinate by spreading the word of God or through a book called the Bible, but to discipline a 'sinner' and the rest of the 'believers', the Church may excommunicate. Conversely, RSAs function primarily by coercion and only secondarily by ideology. These include the police, and the army, and although they chiefly function by the brutal exercise of power and coercion, legal or otherwise, they also entail ideological aspects such as 'code of conduct', 'proper channels', 'uniform dress code' which they enforce to maintain order internally. As useful as they are, Althusser's formulations do have limitations as has been pointed out by Raymond Williams in *Marxism and Literature*. Raymond proposes a tripartite classification of ideological structures based on their influence over reproduction. Dominant structures are those which Althusser referred to as ISAs and RSAs. These are often directly supported by the state and hold significant ideological sway over society. Residual structures are constellations of those ideologies which have somehow become obsolete and have been supplanted by newer ideologies but may continue to exist in isolated pockets. And finally, emergent structures are newer ideologies that are steadily gaining sway and competing for influence. The concept of discipline in Michel Foucault's *Discipline and Punish* is integral for tying together the loose ends of the discussion. In this text, he recognises several modes of power such as juridical, absolute, and disciplinary, and delineates the historical trajectory of the decline of absolute power and the emergence of disciplinary power through the nineteenth century. For explaining the nature of disciplinary power, Foucault utilises Jeremy Bentham's model of the panopticon which was an immaculate architectural layout for a prison that induced a state of permanent, yet unverifiable visibility for all inmates. For Foucault, the panopticon was the symbolic representation of the ideal technological form of power that existed across all social institutions, albeit not in a form as unadulterated as within the panopticon itself. A point of concurrence that may be deduced from a reading of all the theorists discussed in this paragraph appears in their analyses of late capitalism- they seem to adhere to may be termed the 'disciplinary framework'. This is useful in analysing the early stages of late capitalism which can be roughly situated between the end of the second world war and the early 1970s. In its essence this framework refers to the set of theories and analyses of late capitalism which highlight the disciplinary exercise of power/ideology, or in other words, the exercise of power by means of normalisation, judgement, interpellation, and standardisation within hierarchically organised physical spaces of various social institutions. However, this framework is still not enough to describe the socio-cultural context that produced the mass market for cyberpunk. It was indeed an important change in the mode of operation of power, or in other words the realignment of its ideological forms which through the late 1980s to early 1990s that made cyberpunk experientially relatable, and worth consuming for SF readers.

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The theories of late capitalism we shall discuss now may be deemed as a break from the ones discussed in the previous paragraph. While the theories discussed earlier have been grouped into disciplinary theories of late capitalism, the ones we are to engage now may be said to operate in a post-disciplinary paradigm. In other words, these theories at least implicitly are in agreement that late capitalism itself has undergone a change of some kind, in the sense that the operation of power occurs less and less through modes of discipline, and ever more through modes of control. Control differs from discipline in one chief way. While disciplinary societies exercise power by restricting mobility, societies of control exercise power by encouraging mobility. *Postscript to the Societies of Control* throws great emphasis upon this change. In this text, Deleuze opined that while disciplinary societies were centred on the enclosed and hierarchically organised spaces of the school, prison, or office, control societies are far more decentred. Control societies encourage mobility and an illusion of choice to harvest data by employing cybernetic technologies such as facial recognition systems in airports and highways. In a society of control, the mechanisms and techniques of exercise of power do not appear to us to be an external exercise of power but as subjective exercises of our own freedoms. For instance, when an individual buys a phone, travels via the airport, takes a DNA test, or makes a social media account, he does it purely as an exercise of his subjective free will, and yet by those very acts, he hands over to social institutions of late capitalism more power over himself. Once it is decided that the individual has transgressed the standards of some institution, it is extremely easy to then limit his freedom, place prohibitions, and punish him from a distance. Services like payment cards, digital banking, emails, and others which we rely on to a massive extent in our day to day lives may be shut off at any moment. Hence the exercise of power no longer requires direct physical intervention, and instead it can be exercised by manipulating the digital flows of information. Unlike disciplinary societies which exercise power by normalising judgement and examination, control societies do so by means of indefinite postponement. In a disciplinary society, one passes from the school to the barracks to the factory but Deleuze argues that in a society of control, one resides in several at once, at all times. He notes “just as the corporation replaces the factory, perpetual training tends to replace the school, and continuous control to replace the examination” (Deleuze 5) and that in

“disciplinary societies one was always starting again (from the school to the barracks, from the barracks to the factory), while in the societies of control one is never really finished with anything—the corporation, the educational system, the armed services being metastable states coexisting in one and the same modulation, like a universal system of deformation.” (Deleuze 5)

What Deleuze is saying here is that in disciplinary societies, institutions were spatial and physical, and thus one was able to mark his time of entry and exit from a given institution.

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This however is increasingly not the case with the institutions of control societies that coexist as metastable states, all within each other. For instance, corporate employees are now expected to work from home on their computers, keep on 'upskilling' themselves for holding on to their present roles, and present themselves as responsible corporate employees even in their personal lives, especially through their social media handles. In this sense work never leaves the worker, and neither does perpetual training. Writing on the changing ideological structure of late capitalism, Deleuze further notes

“What counts is that we are at the beginning of something. In the prison system: the attempt to find penalties of 'substitution', at least for petty crimes, and the use of electronic collars that force the convicted person to stay at home during certain hours. For the school system: continuous forms of control, and the effect on the school of perpetual training, the corresponding abandonment of all university research, the introduction of the 'corporation' at all levels of schooling. For the hospital system: the new medicine 'without doctor or patient' that singles out potential sick people, and subjects at risk....For the corporate system: new ways of handling money, profits and humans that no longer pass through the old factory form.”(Deleuze7)

Consulting Slavoj Zizek's *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, we learn more about this change in the ideological structure of capitalism which differentiated this era of capital's advance from the ones painstakingly analysed by Althusser and Foucault. Zizek points out that ideology does not function by making an explicit case for something in a way that propaganda does, but rather by obscuring the fact that capitalism as a system is highly impersonal and operates beyond the influence of any subjectively held belief. He notes-

“If our concept of ideology remains the classic one in which the illusion is located in knowledge then today's society must appear post-ideological: people no longer believe in ideological truth; they do not take ideological propositions seriously. The fundamental level of ideology, however, is not of an illusion masking the real state of things but that of an (unconscious) fantasy structuring our social reality itself. And at this level, we are of course far from being a post-ideological society. Cynical distance is just one way....to blind ourselves to the structural power of ideological fantasy: even if we do not take things seriously, even if we keep an ironical distance, we are still doing them.” (Zizek30)

He further maintains that the overvaluation of internally held beliefs (inner subjective attitudes) at the expense of the beliefs through which we express and externalise our behaviour is unique to post-disciplinary capitalism. That is to say, so long we believe in our hearts that money has no intrinsic worth and is only a few digits in a bank account wilfully created as and when required by the banking system, we remain free to fetishize money and participate in capitalist exchange. Late capitalism Zizek ultimately concludes relies upon this

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structure of disavowal. Mark Fisher's *Capitalist Realism: Is There No Alternative?* builds upon the ideas of Jameson and Žižek to describe the accelerated, and intensified late capitalism of the post-2008 subprime mortgage crisis and the subsequent market crash. Some of his most important elements in his analysis of this accelerated late capitalism include concepts such as *business ontology* which may be thought of as a naturalised ideological position that demands all social institutions from healthcare to education be run as profit making ventures, and perhaps even more importantly the notion of *depressive hedonia* which he defines as a juxtaposition of depression and hedonism. While depression is defined as the inability to derive pleasure, depressive hedonism is the inability to pursue anything other than pleasure. (Fisher 21) This concept shall be engaged with in more detail in the next section of the essay where I trace the evolution of cyberpunk poetics. For now, what is to be kept in mind is the fact that since the late 1980s, late capitalism had undergone a fundamental change in terms of its ideological structure which was further accelerated towards the late 2000s. Unlike disciplinary late capitalist societies, which may be said to have existed till the late 1970s, and whose ideological structures exercised power on individuals often by using coercion/external force, or at least by the threat of it, in late capitalist societies of control, that only begin to emerge in the 1980s, the individual chooses to be controlled on his own volition. This transformation was significantly aided by the rapid advancement, and cheap and scaled production of cybernetic technologies of control such as computers, inexpensive surveillance cameras, and later on interfaces such as smart phones and social media. Post-disciplinary late capitalism may thus be defined in subjective and objective terms. Subjectively, it may be defined as the psychic, attitudinal disposition characterised by a depressive hedonism through material consumption, and a political and imaginative impotence caused by an addiction to a constant connectedness to the network of the cybernetic control matrix. Objectively, it denotes a pervasive and dominant ideological structure that demands unconscious participation in the grand ideological fantasy that determines social reality itself and asserts that every social institution be run as a business. This is precisely the socio-cultural context that led to the birth and subsequent popularity of cyberpunk. Writing in 1980, Teresa de Lauretis in her work *Signs of Wonder* argues that

“Technology is now, not only in a distant science fictional future, an extension of our sensory capacities; it shapes our perceptions and cognitive processes, mediates our relationships with the objects of the material and the physical world, and our relationship with our own or other bodies.”(de Lauretis 167)

The socio-cultural context described above induced a great demand for hard extrapolative SF that emphasised this postmodern sense of a decentred experience, and spatial aesthetics which stood in a metonymic relation to present reality, and in a few years emerged a wide corpus extrapolative SFs which focused on the current state of scientific and cultural

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discourse and knowledge, and then attempted to establish a direct linear or logical connection between the empirical world and fictional worlds of the future. The rapid adoption of said cybernetic technologies through the 1980s impacted the socio-cultural discourse to a degree that authors and readers of SF alike were equally fascinated but as well truncated in their imaginations of the future as direct extrapolations or logical extensions of the present state of affairs. This is the story of the birth of canonical cyberpunk.

### **Evolution of cyberpunk poetics**

One of the recurring themes in cyberpunk is that of body invasion. Drawing inspiration from the state-of-the-art sciences of the day such as cosmetic surgery and genetic engineering, the genre departs from the natural-artificial/technophilia-technophobia dichotomy, central to the poetics of the many preceding waves of SF literature. The other common theme that springs up in cyberpunk is the even more powerful one of mind invasion. The ubiquitous presence of technologies such as brain-computer interfaces (BCIs), artificial intelligence, techniques of altering the brain's neurochemistry, and bio-mechanic alteration of neurocircuitry et cetera attempt to radically redefine the notions of self, embodiment, and consciousness. Some other themes in cyberpunk that are more direct inheritances from earlier waves of SF literature include parallel worlds, and interzones which represent the domains outside the clutches of ruling authority, often as metonymic representations of countercultural enclaves. As a genre that affords utmost primacy to spatiality over temporality, immaculate attention to descriptions of material objects, and spaces is a commonly utilised literary technique of cyberpunk literature. Explicating the genre's literary techniques, Bruce Sterling in his preface to *Mirrorshades: The Cyberpunk Anthology* notes-

“Cyberpunk work is marked by its visionary intensity. Its writers prize the bizarre, the surreal, the formerly unthinkable.... It is a coldly objective analysis, a technique borrowed from science and put to literary use for classically punk shock value.... It favours crammed prose: rapid, dizzying bursts of information, sensory overload that submerges the reader in the literary equivalent of the hard-rock 'wall of sound'.  
(Sterling xiv- xv)

Bruce's counsel here must be received with some degree of suspicion. As propagandist in chief for the cyberpunk movement, it is well within his interests to cast a glorifying light upon the genre. While objectivity and emphasis on spatiality in cyberpunk area central to its poetics, the visionary intensity which Bruce speaks of is definitely not very potent. In this regard, the observations contained in Jameson's *Postmodernism* remain invaluable here-

“(W)hat is implied is simply an ultimate historicist breakdown in which we can no longer imagine the future at all, under any form - Utopian or catastrophic. Under those circumstances, where a formerly futurological science fiction (such as so-called cyberpunk today) turns into mere 'realism' and an outright representation of the

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present, the possibility Dick offered us -- an experience of our present as past and as history -- is slowly excluded. Yet everything in our culture suggests that we have not, for all that, ceased to be preoccupied by history; indeed at the very moment we complain, as here, of the eclipse of historicity, we also diagnose contemporary culture as irredeemably historicist, in a bad sense of omnipresent and indiscriminate appetite for dead styles and fashions” (Jameson285)

For Jameson, cyberpunk represents the supreme literary expression of postmodern aesthetics and culture. This is quite a striking position for him to hold as he seems to be identifying cyberpunk as the literary representative of postmodernism itself, which for him otherwise is a predominantly visual, spatial, architectural, and non-literary phenomenon. Echoing Jameson’s sentiments, Brian McHale notes that

“Cyberpunk may be....a number of things- including a school phenomenon in the community of SF readers and writers, a generational phenomenon in the history of SF, a barefaced marketing device....”(McHale149)

but“one thing that it surely must be is a convenient name for the kind of writing that springs up where the converging trajectories of SF poetics and postmodern poetics finally cross” (McHale149). Having set out a general outline of cyberpunk poetics, we shall now analyse particular pieces from the genre and outline a trajectory of its evolution.

*Neuromancer's* legendary opening line is perhaps why it is considered (among critics and consumers alike) the template cyberpunk novel. The text begins with the classic line -"The sky above the port was the color of television, tuned to a dead channel." (Gibson1)The significance of this line is not only in the fact that it portrays the intimate role of technology in mediating social reality itself but also because it perfectly encapsulates the bleakness in the cultural mood of the time it was composed in. The 1980s were a period when the dominant sentiment in American society was that of dejection and hopelessness, in large part due to Reagan's tax cut policies and massive reductions in welfare spending which were popularly perceived as systemic designs to further enrich the mega-rich, while the societal underclass fell through the cracks of the system. One aspect of punk sensibilities is to challenge and question authority, and not to acquiesce with it. This is something that Gibson portrays with great finesse in his novel. The plot of *Neuromancer* revolves around Case, a talented former hacker who lives in Chiba City, Japan, externalises a visibly contemptuous outlook- looking down upon those who sell out and work for the mega-corporations where they are contained for their entire lives. When he spots a man with some kind of a public indication of having high-level corporate connections, Case notes that the man would probably end up in some black-market clinic by the night, where his expensive bodily tech implants would be harvested. The atmosphere here describes both the contempt for and callousness of life in cyberpunk narratives. No matter who you are, in Chiba City you are little more than meat that



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is still moving. The mood here is of dejection, resignation, and apathy, as metonymical and logical extensions of the cultural and social reality of the 1980s. Two of Gibson's most important technological extrapolations are called *cyberspace* and the *matrix*. Gibson defines the former as

“A consensual hallucination experienced daily by billions of legitimate operators, in every nation, by children being taught mathematical concepts... A graphic representation of data abstracted from the banks of every computer in the human system. Unthinkable complexity. Lines of light ranged in the nonspace of the mind, clusters and constellations of data. Like city lights, receding...” (Gibson 43)

The *matrix* on the other hand may be thought of as a one-way custom deck within *cyberspace*. Functionally, the *matrix* projected one's disembodied consciousness by drastically simplifying and electronically mapping the human senses, acting as humanity's extended electronic nervous system. What we have here, therefore, is essentially the conception of hyper reality as Jean Baudrillard understood it. As a talented hacker, Case used to do freelance work, assisting shady individuals to access the *matrix* in order to retrieve whatever illegal, questionable thing they might ask for until the day he gets caught stealing from one of his employers, and as punishment they use some Russian mycotoxin which despite not causing death, rendered him incapable of accessing the *matrix*. This was perhaps the worst predicament imaginable for Case who was addicted to the *matrix*. Describing his mutilation as a fall from grace, Case displays his intense disdain for the flesh, or in other words, disdain for an embodied consciousness and sensory experiences. For him, the sensory and spatial possibilities of a disembodied and decentred consciousness in the *matrix* are limitless, and not being able to access it is like being trapped in the prison of his own body. Left incapable of accessing the *matrix*, he hustles around Chiba city (infamous for its numerous black-market synthetic biology clinics), looking for a cure for his condition. Unable to find any, he jumps from addiction to addiction, and has developed an amphetamine habit. Commenting on Case's disdain for flesh (read addiction of the *matrix*) and his amphetamine habit Mark Fisher observes,

“Cyberspatial capital operates by addicting its users; William Gibson recognised that in *Neuromancer* when he had Case and the other cyberspace cowboys feeling insects-under-the-skin strung out when they unplugged from the *matrix* (Case's amphetamine habit is plainly the substitute for an addiction to a far more abstract speed).”(Fisher 25)

In other words, it is simply an addiction to being constantly plugged into the "communicative sensation-stimulus *matrix*"(Fisher 24) of the *cyberspace*. It is hard to not appreciate the post-disciplinary framework at play in Gibson's universe; the carceral regime of discipline is on the wane, the result of which is the 'new meat' such as Case who is simply "too wired"(Fisher

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24) for living in the concrete speed of experience in an embodied consciousness. Now let us return to Sterling's celebratory proclamation of technology escaping the clutches of control in *Mirrorshades*. While narratives of cyberpunk literature often incorporate sentient technologies which are capable of decision-making without human instruction that is perhaps not enough to suggest that technology cannot be utilised as a mechanism of control. If Sterling had thought that technologies in cyberpunk world-building have somehow undergone fundamental changes in their essence by acquiring innate qualities of detournement without subjective intervention from a socially and historically anchored individual (situationist), then he has inevitably fallen in into the trap of interpassivity and cynicism. Since cynicism and interpassivity are among the main hallmarks of post-disciplinary societies, Fisher correctly points out Case's addiction to the limitless sensorium of the *matrix* (or his need for amphetamine fixes) to be an addiction to sensorial stimulation at a far more abstract speed. Also, for cyber spatial capital operates by addicting its users, there is little need for an Orwellian big brother in Gibson's *Neuromancer*. Case jacks into the *matrix* not by compulsion or because of external coercion but as an exercise of his own freedom. As he roams the endless possibilities of the *matrix*, he is perfectly controlled. Molly Millions quite easily locating Case by tracking down his profile within *cyberspace* is a classic anecdote for cyber spatial control.

A careful reading of Richard K. Morgan's *Altered Carbon* (2004) reveals the evolution of cyberpunk poetics over the turn of the century. Set in three hundred years into a future where humanity has effectively conquered death, the novel is a balancing act between speculative and extrapolative narrative building. Nonetheless, the novel ably handles the intermixing of these two different modes. Through his speculative scientification (the literary practice of the addition of science to actually existing social phenomena), Morgan offers a refreshed cyberpunk imagination. The idea of death has been rendered obsolete in his universe for human beings can now practically live for infinity as their subjectivities, experiences, memories, and identities (collectively called Digital Human Freight or DHF) are stored in a cortical stack placed at the base of the neck that is surgically implanted into every individual immediately following birth. The idea is that the stacks can be easily removed from diseased or damaged bodies and be placed into synthetically made fresher ones that are traded as 'sleeves'. Sleeves come in different configurations and with different utilities; thus, the limit to which one may enhance their physical capacities is only limited by one's financial resources. The catch to this situation is that to successfully transfer someone's consciousness from one body to another, one's original cortical stack (DHF) must remain physically intact for implantation into the newer sleeve. As the storehouse of experience and consciousness, the stack effectively becomes the subject itself, while on the other hand, it is as well an object because when the stack is disembodied from the sleeve, the encoded consciousness becomes

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a commodity, a possession for trade and exchange which may be handled and destroyed. The body or more aptly, the sleeve is even more commodified/objectified as the likelihood of acquiring a replacement sleeve for the original body is determined by finances and the fact that replacement sleeves are no less valuable than the original. This lack of differentiation between primary and secondary bodies may be thought of as a metaphor for the replaceability of embodiment. A sleeve is often valuable as an object in so far as it is expensive to obtain but is hardly unique. Morgan's treatment of more direct political questions is also significantly different from 1980s cyberpunk political apathy. Unlike most cyberpunk protagonists, Takeshi Kovacs is ethnically marked and he constantly emphasises his mixed Japanese and Hungarian ancestry. Although the objectively assumed belief in the novel is that race and ethnicity are simply mental constructs which that be encoded into and stored as data, there are multiple instances throughout the novel which suggest that such an assumption may not necessarily be true. In *Altered Carbon*, Kovacs feels "exiled into Caucasian flesh, on the wrong side of the mirror"(Morgan 180). Morgan's representation of the power structures within his universe is constructed with great attention to metonymic detailing. The novel is full of acidic remarks from Kovacs towards the Protectorate (the de facto colonisers of all colonised planets) which uses its oppressive law enforcement agency (called CTAC envoys) to facilitate localised regime change under the authority of the UN. For instance, the colonised planet Sharya whose ways are overtly styled after fundamentalist Arabic regimes, come off as oppressive themselves. However, when the Protectorate sent its envoys to reinstate the capitalist order, the intervention of the protectorate is only portrayed as even more oppressive and not as liberating or benevolent. Also, Kovacs's anti-apathy towards politics and the outside world is visible in this excerpt-

"The personal, as every one's so fucking fond of saying, is political. So if some idiot politician, some power player, tries to execute policies that harm you or those you care about, TAKE IT PERSONALLY. Get angry. The Machinery of Justice will not serve you here- it is slow and cold, and it is theirs, hardware and soft. Only little people suffer at the hands of Justice; the creatures of power slide out from under with a wink and a grin. If you want justice, you will have to claw it from them. Make it PERSONAL. Do as much damage as you can. GET YOUR MESSAGE ACROSS."  
(Morgan 131)

The novel also far exceeds the limits of canonical cyberpunks through its treatment of the Cartesian mind/body duality. Canonical cyberpunks have always shown a marked disdain for the flesh and an affinity for cybernetic sensorial stimulation. This is upended in the novel through its positing of the body as equally essential in the constitution of identity and subjectivity. The most significant aspect of Morgan's mind/body dualism is the ultimate impossibility of a clear demarcation between the two. The mutually exclusive duality, typical

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of canonical cyberpunk is rejected by Morgan in favour of a far more complex feedback system in which the body and mind are inextricably intertwined. Kovacs often feels a strange sense of detachment from his body and it is implicated that the Caucasian sleeve he is wearing unconsciously reacts to particular stimuli, the effects of which are felt in his conscious mind. For instance, when Kovacs wakes up in his new sleeve in *Altered Carbon*, he feels a strong craving for cigarettes although he had himself never smoked before. This is because the original owner of the sleeve was a nicotine addict. Similarly, his sexual relationship with Ortega is largely implied to be the result of pheromonal attraction as at the time, Kovacs was wearing the sleeve of Ortega's ex-boyfriend, Elias Ryker. Capitalist power structures in this universe follow a different ruling logic compared to relatively similar structures in sovereign, disciplinary, and control societies in the real world. Foucault explained that sovereign societies ruled on the fear of death, or in other words, by dishing out the death penalty and other corporal punishments for disobedience and insubordination. In disciplinary societies however, power is dispersed and is exercised over life. In other words, disciplinary societies ruled by administering life, organising births and deaths through the harvesting and manipulation of statistics like birth-to-death ratios and others. Contrasted against disciplinary societies, Deleuze taught us that post-disciplinary societies, or societies of control rule by control that appears to us as the choice of exercising individual freedoms. However, Deleuze also noted that although discipline was on the wane, it had not completely gone away and that we were at the infancy of a new kind of society (of control). In my opinion, therefore, the functioning of power structures in *Altered Carbon* seems to be precisely what Deleuze described as a perfected society of control. In previous forms of societies, death acted as the ultimate safeguard against the worst evils of human nature. However, with the invention of cortical stacks, death has been rendered obsolete. The protectorate, in addition to the few mega-rich individuals called meths, have possession of and legal authority over an enormous number of cortical stacks containing encoded personalities. These personalities are often re-sleeved into new bodies by the regime and the rich for various reasons including using them as convenient labour and for committing acts of sexual depravity. Thus, even in death, no one ever truly escapes from the clutches of control. He may be reincarnated into a suitable body, sometimes centuries after being de-sleeved for whatever reason, rechristened only for him to run errands for the Protectorate and the meths. In this sense, the mature control society that Morgan has carefully constructed combines the most disconcerting aspects of sovereign, disciplinary, and control societies. This mature control society rules on death and, by administering life simultaneously. This text is perhaps the most artistically sophisticated vision of late capitalism ever designed across any piece of SF literature.

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Japanese animation, popularly known as anime has many representatives in the cyberpunk genre. While works such as *Ghost in the Shell* (1995) and *Psycho-Pass* (2012-19) have received much acclaim and scholarly attention over the years, *Cyberpunk: Edgerunners* (2022) directed by HiroYuki Imaishi, and produced by Netflix, stands out from the rest for it happens to be one of the very few effectively portrayed tragedies in cyberpunk anime history. And at the same time *Edgerunners* can be described as a return to canonical cyberpunk roots. Set in 2022, in a near future extrapolated version of downtown San Francisco, called Night City, the influence of the 2017 neo-noir film *Blade Runner* is clear to see. Towering glass boxes with bright neon purple lights, and giant holographic advertisements plastered across the skyline of Night City are as well a throwback to the *Ghost in the Shell* franchise. On the level of narrative, however, Night City is much similar to Chiba City within *Neuromancer*. David Martinez, the protagonist of the anime is an exceptionally brilliant student enrolled in the highly esteemed and absurdly expensive Arasaka Academy, the educational division of the Arasaka megacorporation, one of the two leading military grade cyber-implant manufacturers that happen to have de facto control over Night City's economics, politics, and society at a macro level. David is subjected to much derision and insult in his daily life by his classmates, as those who belong to his social status do not enrol in Arasaka. David's mother, a low-ranked police officer, struggles to make ends meet, largely due to the high cost of tuition of her son's education. One unfortunate afternoon, David and his mother get caught in the cross fires of two of Night City's cybernetic ally enhanced gangs resulting in the death of the latter. Left without means to pay for rent, tuition, and even meals, David decides to implant a military-grade cybernetic implant prototype (which her mother picked up from a crime scene earlier) made by Arasaka, knowing that such an implant with continued usage and enough time would inevitably lead to *cyberpsychosis* (the psychological condition, specifically the dissociative disorder caused by an overload of cybernetic augmentations to the body). Cybernetically jacked, David meets a mysterious *netrunner* (cybernetically enhanced hackers) named Lucy and decides to team up with a group of mercenaries led by Maine, to be able to fend for themselves, thus himself becoming an *edgerunner* (cybernetically modified hit men, mercenaries, and all sorts of criminals with reactionary tendencies and a punk way of life). With time David eventually becomes an adept mercenary hitman, and assumes leadership of their gang following the death of Maine. However, it is ultimately revealed that he was being manipulated and used as a cyber implant test subject by Arasaka all along, and is tracked down by them due to the betrayal of some of his allies. Upon thwarting all of Arasaka's best weaponry, the mega corporation finally assigns the fabled yet infamous Adam Smasher (a fully cybernetic superhuman described as the ultimate cyborg) to bring down David and reclaim Arasaka's prized prototype implant, an assignment which he swiftly completes. Despite not being able to save himself, drifting in and out of

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*cyberpsychosis* due to his continued usage of the military-grade cybernetic implant prototype, David buys enough time for Lucy and the rest of his gang to escape. As he is brutally clobbered to death, he can feel happiness being able to fulfil his mother's dream of reaching the top floors of Arasaka tower (albeit not by climbing the corporate ladder), and being able to stall Adam Smasher so his crew could escape. He does not regret living his life and dying as an *edgerunner* as he had earned and saved enough for Lucy to be able to live a life of relative comfort and as well fulfil her dream of visiting the moon. As he dies, also expresses grief as he could never go to the moon with Lucy.

Imaishi's ten-episode near future extrapolation is layered with metaphors at multiple levels, and in certain ways is also a repudiation of canonical cyberpunk poetics. The phenomenon of *cyber psychosis* is proof of that. The attitudes towards technology, especially towards cybernetic augmentation within cyberpunk media in general have ranged between decidedly favourable and ambivalent. *Cyberpunk: Edgerunners* charts a refreshingly different path in its treatment of technology. The notion that technology eats into the human soul itself is implicated across many points of the series. Secondly, the metaphor that is Adam Smasher is a question that the makers of the anime ask- If there is nothing organic left in a cyborg, is he even human? Adam Smasher is a remorseless entity who is bored to the degree that he stipulates collateral casualties as a condition for participation in any assignment. Since he is completely cybernetic, he can never die and has nothing to look forward to other than slaying those who come in the crosshairs of his masters, the Arasaka Corporation. He is incapable of any form of sensory experience and thus it may be conflated that he feels nothing. He does not bear any hatred towards anyone except for those who claim to be mightier than him. Even towards those, he does not feel hate, perhaps condescension. In terms of its aesthetics however, the series sticks to classic cyberpunk motifs. The bleakness, dejection, and apathy, along with the presence of numerous black market cybernetic augmentation clinics and the general callousness of life in Night City are all canonical cyberpunk themes. At the political and cultural levels as well, this series has much in common with canonical cyberpunk. There is no plot for a rebellion, as everyone just looks out for only their own in Night City. There is no exercise of political agency as that would mean giving up on the sweet necrosis of Virtual Reality, cheap drugs, and plain sexual intercourse. The idea here is that if the outside world is unbearable then better contains you inside. The anime seems to be a near perfect metonymic representation of current reality. The accelerated capitalist society in this universe at the cultural and political levels seems to operate exactly in the terms in which capitalist realism is defined. (Fisher, 2009). At the political level, take for instance, the state-of-the-art Arasaka Academy which is an educational institution that charges absurdly high tuition fees to its students in order to increase profits for their military-grade implant research and for filling with bonuses, the pockets of the mega corporation's executives. This is precisely the logic of

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*business ontology*, the notion (actually the dominant ideological truth) that everything in society must be run as a profit-making venture. This can be seen across all social institutions and services in Night City, be it emergency services personnel who refuse to aid road accident victims not covered by the correct insurance plan, or hospitals that would not admit or treat uninsured patients if the approximated expenses of the treatment plan are not paid in advance by their friends or family. At the cultural level, every character of the series seems to be operating on the logic of *depressive hedonia*. As explained earlier, *depressive hedonia* is the inability to do anything but pursue pleasure. Despite all the material and libidinal attractions that Night City has to offer, it cannot offer a hopeful and potent vision for the future. Everything is in the present, and the future, for all one can say, will only be bleaker. While the characters drown themselves with the latest implants in the market or in the various VR indulgences in Night City, they cannot imagine a future. Instead, they are haunted by a strange nostalgia for a future that never arrived. Perhaps the most potent metaphor of them all is the *braindance* addiction epidemic in Night City. *Braindance* (BD) may be thought of as a VR technology that allows the viewer to relive someone else's memories, including emotions and sensory functions. While we have seen the application of many such technologies across cyberpunk media in general, *Cyberpunk: Edgerunners* utilises VR to depict a social reality that approximates the short-cycle dopamine release mechanisms of contemporary social media in the real world. For many of Night City's residents suffering from inescapable poverty and homelessness, BD serves as a means of escape from their wretched lives. Many of them use it to experience acts of sexual depravity and sadistic violence, which has led to mass BD addiction, an ever-growing social problem within Night City. Symptomatically, this is as much a refusal to interact with the outside world, as it is an act of depressive hedonism. Thus, *Cyberpunk: Edgerunners* is simultaneously accepting and dismissive of classic cyberpunk tropes. It is a tragic tale without any comparable counterpart within its genre. The poetics of this series, being an accurate metonymic extrapolation of contemporary times, I believe, will influence SF writers and animators for the coming few years as long as social circumstances remain unchanged in the actual world.

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