

# Visions of the Future in Contemporary Cyberpunk

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**Visions of the Future in Contemporary Cyberpunk**

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# 1. Introduction: Visions of the Future

In the final scene of the first episode of Netflix's series *Altered Carbon*, an adaptation of a 2002 book by Richard K. Morgan, the protagonist, a mercenary called Takeshi Kovacs, played by Joel Kinnaman, stands on a balcony overlooking the city after having been 'resurrected,' the memories of his previous life implanted into a synthetic body to serve a corporate overlord. Bay City, the futuristic megalopolis of the year 2384, is on full display in front of him, with its sky-high towers and neon lights dominating the cityscape. What is most striking about the cityscape and the aesthetic of the 24<sup>th</sup> century city is, however, not its futurism, but how much it resembles a contemporary urban sprawl and the cityscapes of science fiction works created in the 1980s and 90s. Perhaps the most striking element of that final scene is the fact that it was not created in the 1980s, when such a vision of the future was indeed seen as futuristic within the cyberpunk genre, but in 2018, a time in which such a view already bears more resemblance to the present than to a future more than three hundred years away.

While the cyberpunk genre is commonly related to the science fiction of the 1980s and early 90s, the idea of analysing the visions of the future in cyberpunk was not motivated by works from that era, but rather by the cultural production in the visual media of the late 2010s, more specifically film and video game production. With its plethora of remakes, book adaptations, and late sequels, that period of cultural production is more closely related to the word re-production. While different Disney film remakes could be assigned to pure nostalgia, the remakes of science fiction works, in this case those in the cyberpunk genre, carry a different element with them. Taking Darko Suvin's notion that science fiction needs to have an element of the *novum*, of some kind of novelty in it (see 63 – 79), the question arises

whether a genre which was innovative in the 1980s and presented a different vision of the future to that of earlier works of sci-fi at that time still has the capacity to do so more than thirty years later. Even if one were to find a definitive and positive answer to that question, the idea of the future is still in question, since the cyberpunk genre and its ‘original’ works were reflections of the time they were created in, a time which is now long past.

The theoretical background for such a line of questioning comes from Mark Fisher’s book *Ghosts Of My Life* in which he laments the loss of future imaginary in the contemporary cultural production. Fisher uses two terms which shall be discussed in this paper: first is Franco Berardi’s notion of the *slow cancellation of the future*, which does not refer to the temporal element of the future, but rather to the current lack of human ability to imagine a new and different future, which Fisher finds exemplified in the “sheer persistence of recognizable forms” (2014, 6 – 7). The term slow cancellation of the future can be related to Suvin’s idea of the *novum* to suggest that contemporary science fiction is unable to imagine a new future, and the persistence of cyberpunk and its visions of the future, which are inherently bound to the origins of the genre in the 1980s, suggest that. The second term Fisher uses, one which is interlaced with the lack of future imaginary, is Jacques Derrida’s term *hauntology*, which Fisher uses to explain the “nostalgia mode” of 21<sup>st</sup> century cultural production (2014, 11). He defines hauntology as a moment of temporal and spatial crisis caused by the failure of mourning, or rather a failure of letting go of past ideas and cultural forms, which then haunt contemporary culture and disrupt its ability to produce new forms and, in the context of science fiction, imagine new and different futures (2014, 18 – 22).

The paper analyses three different visions of the future in cyberpunk in order to compare how the contemporary works in the genre imagine the future compared to the ‘original’ ones. The first work analysed is a staple of American cyberpunk and, according to some critics, the first cyberpunk film, the 1982 movie *Blade Runner*, whose vision of the

future is compared to its 2017 sequel *Blade Runner 2049*. The second film analysed is an example of a strong, non-American strain in cyberpunk, the Japanese anime film *Ghost in the Shell* from 1995; compared to it is the American live-action remake of the film from 2017. The third example used for analysis is a contemporary original work of cyberpunk, the PC and console game *Cyberpunk 2077*, released at the end of 2020. The focus of the analysis is on how each of these works imagines the future and what elements of its own present it deals with in that futuristic setting. Before the analysis of the specific examples, however, an overview and a definition of the term cyberpunk is necessary.

## 2. Defining Cyberpunk

At the beginning of his novel *Neuromancer*, which would soon become a seminal piece in the development and popularization of the cyberpunk genre, William Gibson describes the setting of the early chapters of the book: “Night City was like a deranged experiment in social Darwinism, designed by a bored researcher who kept one thumb permanently on the fast-forward button” (1984, 7). If one were to search for a definition of cyberpunk, this description of the *urban Sprawl* in Gibson’s novel would provide a directional, albeit poetic, start. Cyberpunk is a topic that has been discussed in detail by many authors, a genre whose name has been assigned to countless pieces of fiction, for some even a revolutionary movement borne out of revolt against the socioeconomic policies of 1980s Reaganite America. This chapter attempts to delineate the roots of cyberpunk and the elements that make the genre, as Fredrick Jameson claims, “the supreme literary expression if not of postmodernism, then of late capitalism itself” (1991, 419). In order to do so, this chapter focuses on the historical context in which the genre first developed, as well as the



multitude of influences which combined into forming it. Such an analysis is necessary, for, as Jameson claims, future narratives are movements in which certain groups at certain historical conjunctures examine their fate (1982, 148). That examination, however, is not an imagining of the future per se, for Jameson claims that science fiction does not so much imagine a new future as it defamiliarizes the present in order to investigate it as the past of something yet to come (1982, 151-152). By examining cyberpunk's roots, influences and elements, this chapter attempts to arrive at a working definition of the genre and how it created its imagery in its original, 1980s form, which will allow for further research into the topic.

## 2.1 Origins and Historical Context

The term *cyberpunk* was first used by Bruce Bethke as the title of a short story he published in 1980. In its most basic form, the term is a simple combination of the words *cyber*, referring to the at that point relatively new field of cybernetics, and *punk*, a combination of defiant attitude and an urban street culture (Cavallaro, 13-14). The genre was subsequently popularized throughout the 1980s as a new approach to science fiction, one which, as Hollinger suggests, explores the “technological ramifications of experience within late-capitalist, post-industrial, media-saturated Western society” while at the same time being “a product of the commercial mass-market of ‘hard’ science fiction” and “one symptom of the postmodern condition of genre science fiction” (30). Hollinger’s focus on the late-capitalist and postmodern elements<sup>1</sup> of cyberpunk corresponds to the historical context in which the genre was developed, the 1980s in the USA, a period considered to be the beginning of the neoliberal socioeconomic system in the West, a decade which started with a

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<sup>1</sup> In Jameson’s theory of late capitalism, these two terms are somewhat interchangeable

deep recession followed by economic recovery. Referring to economist Cristian Marazzi, Fisher explains that development as follows:

the switch from Fordism to post-Fordism can be given a very specific date: October 6, 1979. It was on that date that the Federal Reserve increased interest rates by 20 points, preparing the way for the 'supply-side economics' that would constitute the 'economic reality' in which we are now enmeshed. The rise in interest rates not only contained inflation, it made possible a new organization of the means of production and distribution. The 'rigidity' of the Fordist production line gave way to a new 'flexibility', a word that will send chills of recognition down the spine of every worker today. This flexibility was defined by a deregulation of Capital and labor, with the workforce being casualized (with an increasing number of workers employed on a temporary basis), and outsourced (2009, 33).

The deregulation of labor, along with the massive outsourcing of manual labor outside of the US, to Mexico and later to Southeast and East Asia, as well as the rapid development of media technology, created a climate of precarity, which was superficially mitigated by the rise of a new kind of care of the self and subjectivity, the rise of what Dardot and Laval call the *entrepreneurial man*. According to them, neoliberalism makes competition appear to be the *modus operandi* of all human relations, and each person is an entrepreneur of the self in a world where everything, from media to myth and social relations, is completely commodified (101-121). That subjectivity can be connected to the image of then-president Ronald Reagan, as Baudrillard ironically claims in his travel journal *America*: “Exactor and ex-governor of California that he is, he has worked up his euphoric, cinematic, extraverted, advertising vision of the artificial paradises of the West to all-American dimensions. He has introduced a system where the easy life exerts a kind of blackmail, reviving the original American pact of

an achieved Utopia” (2010, 117-118). Regardless of the economic changes happening at the time, however, the 1980s were in many respects a conservative period in American history, a non-progressive era of stagnation in which the rapid technological development was juxtaposed by lower expectations for the future (see Whalen, 78). In such historical conditions, and with the influence of previous works of science fiction, as well as elements of the Gothic and of hard-boiled detective stories, which shall be discussed later in this chapter, the cyberpunk genre came into being.

Taking into account the above mentioned tendency of science fiction to defamiliarize and in doing so critique its present moment, is it almost by default that such a historical context gave rise to the typical American cyberpunk hero: a male, rebellious loner, an anti-hero fighting the corrupt system dominated by multinational, neo-feudal Japan-inspired corporations, on a hero quest which takes him through the neon lights of a decaying postmodern cityscape ruled by technologically modified bodies and cyborgs, and sometimes into cyberspace (Cavallaro, 8 – 12, 138, 151). In this definition of the cyberpunk hero lie the key aspects which define the genre: the male anti-hero, the technological modification of the human body and the rise of cyborg theory, the urban aesthetic of decay and the evil multinational capitalist corporation, and the influence of 1970s and 80s Japan.. What follows is a short overview of each of those key elements in order to arrive at a working definition of cyberpunk.

## **2.2 Key Elements of Cyberpunk**

The main figure of 1980s American cyberpunk is almost by default male<sup>2</sup>, which Nixon suggests is a conscious move on behalf of the cyberpunk authors to distance themselves from 1970s feminist science fiction and to legitimize the cyberpunk movement by

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<sup>2</sup> It is important to keep in mind here that this refers to American cyberpunk; the other greatly popular stream of the genre, Japanese cyberpunk, goes in a different direction with its protagonists, as shall be discussed in further detail later on in the paper.

tracing its roots back to earlier works of sci-fi and postmodern literature by male authors like Philip K. Dick and J. G. Ballard and their male protagonists. Nixon quotes one of the main figureheads of cyberpunk, Bruce Sterling, and his attempt to list the influences on cyberpunk, and concludes: “Sterling's allusions to the influential fathers of SF [ . . . ] betrays his need to forge a filiation with established (male) SF writers, to construct a form of legitimacy which, not insignificantly, manages to avoid mention of any potential mothers: the feminist SF writers [ . . . ] of the previous decade” (220). Following Nixon’s argument cyberpunk serves as a male fantasy, an escape from and a critique of the late capitalist labor insecurity, which led to the destruction of the ideal of the American working man capable of providing for himself and his family. The female characters are commonly relegated to the side, not unusually as tragic love interest like Linda Lee in *Neuromancer*, Rikki in *Burning Chrome* or Rachael in *Blade Runner*. Authors like Tatsumi find another element of faux machismo in the rebellious cyberpunk hero, an escape from the then recent American defeat in Vietnam (3). The cyberpunk anti-hero is compared to the figure of the cowboy, the “last free American”, fighting the evil corporate overlords, and in such is ironically close to the image Reagan constructed of himself in the mass media (Nixon, 224).

That protagonist borrows elements of the protagonist of hard-boiled detective fiction, he is a loner, typically on some sort of a hero quest, either a detective or a hacker (see Cavallaro, 8), as can be seen on the examples of Deckard in *Blade Runner*, Case in *Neuromancer*, or Kevin Flynn in *Tron*. What makes him an anti-hero, however, is that he does not undergo the quest for some greater good, but either out of necessity or from his own self-interest. That is derived from the protagonist usually being some sort of lowlife, on the lower end of the social hierarchy, struggling to survive mostly through the means of crime or underpaid labor. Bruce Sterling points to that in his introduction to another one of William Gibson’s seminal works in the genre, the story collection *Burning Chrome*, where he claims:

“Rather than the usual passionless techies and rock-ribbed Competent Men of hard SF, his [Gibson’s] characters are a pirate’s crew of losers, hustlers, spin-offs, castoffs, and lunatics.” (2016, 3) The lowlife element of the cyberpunk protagonist can be seen as critique of the economic developments of the 1980s, with a combination of rapid globalization and the dismantling of the welfare state, combined with rapid technological development and the increased availability of technology to even the lowest social classes giving birth to the lowlife high-tech figures dominating the genre.

The cyberpunk hero, however, is not merely an ideal of masculinity and freedom and a critique of the socioeconomic climate of the time. His body is usually modified, as are the bodies of most other characters in cyberpunk fiction, which suggests another key element of the genre: body modification and the question of humanity. The physical body is no longer a guarantee of humanity, it is merely a commodity whose parts are often replaced and upgraded for enhanced performance. The conflation of organism and machine, body and mind invasion, and the overall undermining of subjectivity and identity in cyberpunk fiction, most notably in the works of authors like Gibson and Sterling, in cyberpunk cinema and in Japanese cyberpunk, all suggest that there is no human nature determined by the body (see Hollinger, 35). The obsession with modified and mutilated bodies, with the radically different, transgressive Other, with the monstrous, is what connects cyberpunk to another genre from which it draws inspiration, the Gothic (Cavallaro, 164-168). With the rapid development of technology and visual media and the fears that such a development could have a negative impact on the already precarious labor market, the fear of the machine is sublimated into a combination of man and machine in cyberpunk fiction.

Connected to the post-humanist tendencies of the genre is also the figure of the cyborg, which was most notably theorized by Donna Haraway in her 1985 work *A Cyborg Manifesto*. The figure of the cyborg offers a new kind of subjectivity, one free of elements

which were previously considered to be stable markers of subjectivity like the body, sex, and gender. The figure of the cyborg and its representation in cyberpunk fiction will be discussed in greater detail in the chapter focusing on the anime and later Hollywood adaptation of *Ghost in the Shell*.

The aesthetic of cyberpunk is decidedly urban: a Shibuya and Hong Kong-inspired cityscape dominated by the decisive verticality of the seats of mega-corporations, by flashing neon lights and commercials with a multinational cast of low-lives and outcasts making their living all the way down on its dirty streets. Cavallaro calls it a combination of digital hi-tech and rampant urban decay, and, referring to Jameson's analysis of William Gibson's cityscapes, he goes on to describe cyberpunk cities as "the monstrous body of multinational corporations: all-encompassing systems that relentlessly engulf a feeble multitude of individual bodies" (133-134). Sponsler suggests that the decaying city is a metaphor for the disintegration of the human body (263), while Brown point to the complete lack of nature in the cyberpunk setting as an element of ecological critique (100). The cyberpunk cityscape combines the elements of two genres already mentioned as major influences: the noir elements and the obsession with labyrinthine structures in the Gothic and the city as not only the passive setting but an active figure in hard-boiled detective fiction (see Cavallaro, 173-175). The cyberpunk city is therefore an amalgamation of late-capitalist multinational *zaibatsu*-style mega-corporations that replace the government, rapid technological advancement and the development of visual media, and the destruction of the welfare state which made large portions of its population into the precariat. The urban noir aesthetic, already existent before the 1980s in films such as Fritz Lang's *Metropolis*, was pioneered in its more contemporary form in *Blade Runner*, and has since become a staple of most cyberpunk cinema, and the most common and recognizable marker of the genre.

Another setting popular in cyberpunk fiction, one more common to Japanese cyberpunk but appearing in Gibson's fiction after his 1998 visit to Tokyo and in some contemporary Hollywood productions like *Blade Runner 2049* and *Alita: Battle Angel*, is the junkyard as the space occupied by the lowlife, hi-tech punks. (see Tatsumi, 4) The focus on the junkyard and the switch from the urban cityscape to the surrounding wasteland in later works of cyberpunk will be further elaborated in the chapter on *Blade Runner*.

One final element to mention, one that has already been pointed to several times throughout this chapter, is the influence of post-war Japan on the aesthetic of cyberpunk. With the country's rapid development during the "High Growth Period" of the 1960s to 80s Japan was seen as a potential threat to American domination in the Western world, especially in the growing fields of technology and telecommunication. (see Tatsumi 2; Nixon 223-224) Sato points out that in the eyes of Gibson and *Blade Runner* director Ridley Scott, Japan in the 1980s was a lived future, an already existing vision of the future of the whole world, which, along with the techno-orientalism spawned by the already mentioned fear of Japanese economic domination, made Japan into a source of mostly aesthetic inspiration for the genre. (339-340). Gibson himself makes that claim, writing in an article for *TIME* that "Japan was already, somehow, the de facto spiritual home of that influence [ . . . ] modern Japan simply was cyberpunk" (Gibson, *TIME*). The transpacific relation was, however, not one-sided. Japan also invented its own style of cyberpunk in the late 1980s and the 1990s, one which was simultaneously similar to the American strand of the genre, while also expanding on it and having its own specific flavor.

### **2.3 Working Definition**

With all of the above defined elements in mind, a definition of 'original', 1980s cyberpunk can be constructed as follows: Cyberpunk is a genre of science fiction heavily influenced by not only older sci-fi but also genres like the Gothic and hard-boiled detective

fiction. It was created and developed in the 1980s in the USA, most notably by William Gibson and Bruce Sterling in literature, while its cinematic aesthetic is connected to films like Ridley Scott's *Blade Runner* and Steven Lisberger's *Tron*. The genre constructed a decaying urban vision of the future dominated by flashing neon lights and huge interactive commercials, where big multinational corporation ruled sprawling megalopolises and replaced most forms of government, and its protagonists were mostly male lowlife and hi-tech outcasts, their bodies technologically modified and upgraded, who in one way or another came into conflict with the ruling late capitalist forces. Such a dystopian vision of the future aims its critique at the 1980s changes in the American economy, while simultaneously celebrating and suggesting a fear of rapid technological development and being a symptom of the concern about the rise of Japan as an economic and technological superpower.

With this definition in mind, what follows is an analysis of three key contemporary cyberpunk works from the late 2010s and 2020 and their relation to the 'original' works in the genre with the aim of investigating how the vision of the future in those works compares to the 1980s and 90s cyberpunk future imaginary.

### **3. Blade Runners**

#### **3.1 Los Angeles, November 2019**

Tall factory exhaust pipes spitting fire into the polluted air of a rainy Los Angeles night, a flying police hovercraft making its way towards a gargantuan ziggurat standing tall over the rest of the city, and all of that perceived in the eye of what would later be revealed to



be the film's main antagonist Roy Batty – the opening 90 seconds of Ridley Scott's 1982 film *Blade Runner* already establish its aesthetic, which would set the template for subsequent cyberpunk films (Semley 61 – 62). The film, a loose adaptation of Philip K. Dick's 1968 novel *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?*, constructs a vision of Los Angeles in 2019 which is both dystopian and was found to be eerily reminiscent of what the city really turned out to look like that year. While the film's original release was met with a mixed response from both the public and critics, its neo-noir sci-fi aesthetic soon made it into a classic of American cinema, and Senior claims it is the first truly cyberpunk film (1).

Like the first shot of the film, a large part of *Blade Runner's* aesthetic is focused on its cityscape. The Los Angeles of November 2019 is a megalopolis inspired by Fritz Lang's *Metropolis*, shrouded in darkness and pouring rain, illuminated by the bright lights of massive commercial screens covering the facades of its decaying tall buildings and displaying a mixture of American and Japanese commodities. While its skyline is dominated by advanced technology, the streets are littered with waste and teeming with mostly Oriental tramps, making it a perfect representation of a postmodern cybercity, or a city of late capitalism, which combines digital hi-tech with rampant decay. The cityscape is dominated by the ziggurat of its largest corporation, Tyrell Corporation, and all levels of the city are lit up by bright neon lights of commercials, pointing to the complete commodification of the urban area, something Jameson refers to when he claims that postmodern cities are akin to monstrous bodies of multinational corporations (see Cavallaro 134 – 138; Bruno 63; Brown 100). As several critics point out, in creating the cityscape in the film, Scott was inspired by East Asian cityscapes of the early 1980s, most notably Tokyo and Hong Kong (Klein 149; Yeates 70; Yu 46 – 58; Wong 4). While the reasons for the city's decay are not directly explained, it is made clear to the viewer that Earth itself has been largely abandoned in the *Blade Runner* universe and that the majority of humans have moved to colonies in space,

leaving the city to be dominated by a multinational but predominately Asian mix of low-lives who were left behind. As Yu analyses in his article on the Oriental influences in *Blade Runner*, the city's spatial hierarchy is decidedly vertical and reflects the racial and social status of the people inhabiting the layers of the city: the top layer is the abode of Eldon Tyrell, the city's corporate overlord and owner of a corporation specialized in constructing *replicants*, perfect human clones who serve as free workforce for the off-world colonies. The middle layer of the city is the layer of commercials, giant corporate logos and videos of geishas advertising products. It is also the layer of the flying police cars, the layer to which the film's protagonist, detective Rick Deckard, belongs. The bottom layer of the city's hierarchy, the streets, is occupied by low-lives, a fully orientalized urban maze whose oriental aspect serves as a signifier of postmodernism, which itself is commonly associated with East Asia (Yu 47, 54 – 56).

There are several elements of inspiration behind the future aesthetic of *Blade Runner*, which gave birth to the aesthetic of cyberpunk film. It is important to note that those elements of inspiration were not specific for the film, they reflect the whole period of the 1980s and even early 90s in American culture, a period marked by conservatism and regression. One of the inspirations is the already mentioned influence and fascination with East Asian post-colonial megalopolises. As Yu points out, Western postmodernity is built on fantasies and anxieties about the Orient, which were especially prevalent in the 1970s and 80s when many in America feared Japan's rapid economic growth and technological advancement, and which created the image of East Asia as the postmodern Other to Western modernism (Yu 46 – 48). A commonplace antagonist in cyberpunk fiction of the time is in fact the Japanese *zaibatsu*, a feudal-style megacorporation, which is, however, not the case in *Blade Runner*, but is so in the 2017 sequel to the film which shall be discussed later in this chapter. The Asian influence is not the only postmodern element in the film. Cyberpunk as a whole could be defined as a

very postmodern genre, belonging to the period of the 1980s and early 90s mostly associated with postmodernism, and with many of its subjects related to the works of such postmodern thinkers as Fredrick Jameson, Gilles Deleuze, Jean Baudrillard, and Donna Haraway. While the influence of the latter two shall be discussed in further detail later in this paper, it is Jameson's notion of postmodernity and postmodern aesthetic which is evident in the film, especially his use of the term *pastiche* to describe the cultural logic of late capitalism.

Jameson defines pastiche as follows:

the imitation of a peculiar or unique, idiosyncratic style, the wearing of a linguistic mask, speech in a dead language. But it is a neutral practice of such mimicry, without any of parody's ulterior motives, amputated of the satiric impulse, devoid of laughter and of any conviction that alongside the abnormal tongue you have momentarily borrowed, some healthy linguistic normality still exists. (1991, 17)

As Bruno points out in her analysis of the postmodern elements in *Blade Runner*, the Los Angeles of 2019 is dominated by spatial and temporal structures of the pastiche, a combination of different, dead styles, without any satirical intent to them, that produces "an excess of scenography" which is "the domain of postmodern architecture" and serves to "celebrate the dominance of representation and the effacement of the referent in the era of postindustrialism" (67). The combination of the Egyptian and Mayan style with 40s nostalgia and East Asian influences creates a city with no real spatial or temporal referent, a simulacral metropolis of late 20<sup>th</sup> century postmodern aesthetic which, while set in the then-future, is very much representative of its own present. The choice of Los Angeles is in itself a postmodern element, with Jean Baudrillard describing the city in his *Simulacra and Simulation* as "an immense scenario and a perpetual pan shot" (1994, 13).

The decaying city suggests the economic changes happening at the time of the film's creation which were already discussed in the previous chapter, but it also points to real changes in the urban landscape of American cities that started in the 1970s and early 80s with the exodus of upper-middle-class, mostly white, inhabitants into the suburbs, which left the city centers to be dominated by a multi-ethnic mix of mostly lower-class people struggling to make ends meet (McNamara 423 – 424). By having the streets of Los Angeles dominated by non-white races, Scott reflects the demographic changes in American cities at the time – in fact, Scott intended *Blade Runner* to be realistic social commentary (Yu, 55; McNamara 424 –424). However, the predominantly Latino population occupying the downtown of real-life LA is replaced by the strong Asian presence in the film. Sponster sees in the image of the decaying city and its complete lack of nature an element of ecological critique connected with the fears of ecological disaster which became a popular topic in that period and still remain one (262). Another influence is that of the Gothic, especially of Gothic architecture, which is seen in the layering of the architecture in the film, as well as the creation of labyrinthine structures (see Cavallaro 172 – 175). Connected to the Gothic are also the noir elements in the film which point to a sense of cultural regression and nostalgia in the culture of the time, most notably 40s and 50s nostalgia, as pointed out by several critics (Lev 33 – 34; Klein 148; Gerblinger 19; Slade 15). Friedman claims that the nostalgia in the film is connected to its dystopian character, and that it is a nostalgia for a time when films could imagine a better future (41).

All those elements combined paint a picture of a city that reflects less a vision of the future and more the inability to imagine a better future, or to be more precise, the Los Angeles of *Blade Runner* serves as a dislocation of its present-day influences and fears into the future, where they can be highlighted and where their consequences on a potential near future can be analyzed, which is in line with Jameson's claim that science fiction "enacts and

enables a structurally unique ‘method’ for apprehending the present as history” (1982, 153). The futurism in *Blade Runner* points to Jameson’s notion that science fiction’s main role is to “demonstrate and to dramatize our incapacity to imagine the future” (1982, 153). In the context of the visions of the future in cyberpunk, that conclusion is decisive, since it suggests that even ‘original’ works in the genre at least to some extent lacked the capacity to imagine a future devoid of the fears and crises of its own time, or, as Cavallaro puts it, it provides a future with past values and beliefs (173), with some critics even claiming that the genre’s visual aspects served to conceal a complicity with the conservatism of the 80s (Nixon 231). The aesthetic of *Blade Runner*, and with it the common aesthetic of many subsequent cyberpunk films, TV series and games, can therefore be said to be rooted in the 1980s and demonstrative of the state of cultural production at that time. One should not, however, simply dismiss the future imaginary in the film as purely a replica of the 1980s set in 2019. While the film’s aesthetic, which would later become a mainstay in countless cyberpunk works, can truly be said to be a reflection of 80s America, some of the inquiries the film deals with introduce the main topic of the cyberpunk genre, the question of humanity and what makes one human.

### **3.2 Tears in Rain**

The protagonist of the film is Rick Deckard, a retired *blade runner*, a term used for police detectives whose job is to hunt down and kill, or as the film calls it ‘retire’ the humanoid automata called *replicants*, who, while used as free labor in the off-world colonies, have been banned from Earth. The first time the viewer sees Deckard, he is making his way through the urban maze of the city to an Asian food stall. Although his first appearance is on

the lowest layer of the city, it soon becomes clear that Deckard does not belong to the social class inhabiting it: his whiteness stands out in the mostly faceless crowd, and he refuses to speak the language of the street, so-called *cityspeak*, described in the film as a mixture of several languages, most notably Japanese and German. As Yu claims, Deckard tries to keep himself “uncontaminated” by the lowest classes on the streets and their language, which in turn means that he cannot move freely through the streets, as is clear from the very beginning, when the vendor at the restaurant gets his order wrong, and is further emphasized by Deckard constantly bumping into people in scenes taking place on the crowded streets (57). Deckard’s role in the film is in fact two-sided, since he is a police detective, a representative of order, who conducts his business on the streets, pointing to what Cavallaro calls the “paradoxical fusion of order and disorder” (153) in cyberpunk. The film makes it evident that Deckard belongs to the middle layer of the city, since he is a member of the police force, and he is soon recruited to do one final job as blade runner: find and eliminate four replicants who have snuck back onto Earth, one of them a brand-new *Nexus-6* combat model called Roy Batty. While being briefed on the job, his supervisor Bryant forces Deckard into accepting the job and paints a clear picture of the social relations within the city, telling Deckard that if he isn’t police, he is “little people.” With the threat of being demoted to the lowest city layer, Deckard accepts the job and in doing so kicks off the detective-film plot of the movie.

While Deckard is an experienced blade runner, this final job comes with the issue of Roy Batty, the rogue replicants’ leader, who belongs to the latest *Nexus-6* model of replicants who have been perfected as physically enhanced human replicas in all ways but one – their lifespan is four years. The advanced nature of the new model puts in question the validity of the only reliable test to prove whether someone was a replicant, an empathy test called the *Voigt-Kampff* test. Deckard goes to the offices of Eldon Tyrell, whose company controls the production of replicants, and uses the test on Tyrell’s assistant Rachael, who unbeknownst to

her turns out to be a replicant, which she vehemently denies on the basis of having memories and learned skills from her early childhood. That development leads to the central issue of the film, the question of humanity and what makes human beings human.

The film, and the genre as a whole, quickly discards the human body as a decisive signifier of humanity. While in the fiction of Gibson and Sterling the human body and mind are enhanced with machine parts and brain implants, in *Blade Runner* it is completely simulated in the form of the replicants, who not only have a body undistinguishable from the ones of 'real' humans, but also have enhanced physical capabilities, making them even more body-oriented than the humans in Scott's universe. Physical essence is therefore not a determining factor for humanity in the film, as Hollinger points out (35). The replicants are still, however, products made by humans to create a free workforce. Their being perfect replicas of humans puts them into what Baudrillard calls the third order of simulacra, simulations with no referent in the 'real' (2017, 75-78). Bruno points to that in her analysis of the film, adding that in Baudrillard's theory, simulation also means internalization (68), suggesting that the replicants do not simply resemble humans, they also internalize their simulated humanity, making the question of what differentiates them from 'real' humans even more complex. The test that Deckard uses to establish that Rachael is a replicant relies on empathy, which is supposed to be the one emotion replicants are incapable of replicating, and even that test is questionable, since it takes him more than a hundred questions to determine that Rachael is one. During the test, she asks him whether he has ever taken that test himself, and whether he has ever 'retired' a human by mistake. While Deckard seems rather sure in his own humanity and in the accuracy of the test, the film makes the viewer question both. Empathy as the distinguishing factor between humans and replicants, however, fails in the film, as it is the replicants who showcase that emotion. Slade points out that while humans in the film, most notably the supposedly human Deckard, are isolated, it is replicants

who group up and seek to set up a sense of community (16), while McNamara claims that the only time in the film when the viewer sympathizes with Deckard is when he questions how justified his work is (437). The subplot of the film is a romantic one, showing the relationship between Deckard, a potential replicant, and the confirmed replicant Rachael, while the other love relationship is between two replicants, their leader Roy Batty and Pris. The fight between Deckard and Batty at the end of the film ends with a dying Batty saving an injured Deckard from falling to his death, proving his own empathy. Before dying, Batty gives a speech lamenting his fate and that of all the memories – whether prosthetic or real is unknown – which shall be “lost in time, like tears in rain.” The speech and the sentiment behind it showcase a sense of humanity in Batty which was not seen in any of the human characters in the film, creating a final blurred line between human and replicant.

While empathy is set up as that which distinguishes between humans and replicants, it is memory which is central to the film. As Featherstone and Burrows point out in the introduction to their anthology *Cyberspace, Cyberbodies, Cyberpunk* memories in cyberpunk are “an important resource for the generation of identity which enable credible actions and responses to be formed” (4). In *Blade Runner*, however, memory is “not necessarily evidence of lived experience” (Cavallaro 206). When Deckard reveals to Rachael that her childhood memories are not her own but those of Eldon Tyrell’s niece, she sits down and plays the piano, suggesting that even though her memory of piano lessons is fake, she still carries the consequences of those memories. In the 1992 Director’s Cut version of the film Deckard experiences visions of a unicorn running through a pastoral landscape. At the end of the film, when Batty is dead and Deckard wants to leave the city with Rachael to escape her murder at the hands of other blade runners, his colleague Gaff leaves an origami unicorn in front of his apartment door, which according to Wong suggests that Deckard is also a replicant with fake memories that Gaff was aware of (10), a claim which Ridley Scott confirmed in an interview



for *Wired Magazine* (Greenwald). Whether Deckard is a replicant or not, however, does not change the fact that memories in the film cease to be a determining factor of humanity and can be manipulated and implanted. The replicants, who live up to four years but have implanted memories of a whole lifetime up to that point, point to the second element of the postmodern condition in Jameson's theory: alongside pastiche there is schizophrenia, whose effects on subjectivity and temporality he describes as follows:

If we are unable to unify the past, present, and future of the sentence, then we are similarly unable to unify the past, present, and future of our own biographical experience or psychic life. With the breakdown of the signifying chain, therefore, the schizophrenic is reduced to an experience of pure material signifiers, or, in other words, a series of pure and unrelated presents in time (1991, 27)

The breakdown of the temporal order which creates a perpetual sense of the present is according to Bruno and Friedman the condition of replicants in the film, since their past is synthetically manufactured and does not correspond to their present, but it is also the condition of the whole city dominated by numerous styles and pastiche cultural elements which turn its temporality into one of a perpetual present (Bruno 69 – 70, Friedman 39). The lack of distinction between real and prosthetic memory again leads back to a Baudrillardian sense of the disappearance of the real, or as Landsberg suggests, there is “no safe position of reality” (185) in the film.

If both empathy and memory, the two elements the film focuses on as potentially distinguishable signifiers of humanity, fail to make a clear difference between humans and replicants, the film leaves the viewer with the question of whether such a difference even exists. In fact, the one remaining element which distinguishes the two and which creates a

hierarchy between them is their production and reproduction: replicants are manufactured by Tyrell Corporation, and are therefore, according to Marx's logic of production, hierarchically below humans, since the producers are above that which they produce (Gerblinger 21). The issue of reproduction is subsequently introduced in the 2017 sequel to the movie.

### **3.3 Los Angeles, Thirty Years Later**

If the Los Angeles of 2019 is a dystopian view of the 1980s dislocated into the future, then the Los Angeles of Denis Villeneuve's 2017 sequel *Blade Runner 2049* is that, but thirty years later. In fact, Los Angeles in 2049 remains in many ways the same cityscape of pastiche, but there is evidence of some kind of disaster having occurred at some point between the plots of the two movies. The perpetual rain from *Blade Runner* is replaced by snow, a rather unusual occurrence on the Californian coast, and a seawall has been built on the edges of the city to protect it from the rising sea levels. That small but noticeable and highlighted change points to one aspect which is more dominant in the 2017 sequel: climate change and its effects on the near future. The city itself remains largely unchanged, all the old and spent aesthetic tropes and clichés that Semley claims summarize contemporary cyberpunk and its inability to imagine anything new within the genre are there (61): the massive corporate buildings, the neon lights, the complete commercialization of the cityscape, the Asian influence, the noir setting. However, while the whole first film takes place inside the city, and a large part of it on the street, *Blade Runner 2049* leaves the confines of the cyberpunk city to visit its outskirts, most notably three different spaces. The first space outside of the city, and the scene with which the film starts, is the mechanized farmlands where a new, synthetic way of producing large quantities of food to sustain its population is being implemented. The first scene brings with itself another slight difference to

the first film: while the foreign influences in *Blade Runner* are almost exclusively Japanese, the logos on the greenhouses in *2049* are in Russian Cyrillic, which, while not seen in the first film, still suggests a kind of foreign influence more suited to a film from the 1980s than to 2017. The second non-urban space *2049* visits is the junkyard, where the protagonist, a replicant blade runner called K, has to fight off a band of scavengers before visiting an orphanage and child labor manufactory. While the junkyard is another space that differs from the ones seen in the first film, it is still an essentially cyberpunk setting, and Tatsumi claims that alongside the megalopolis it is the second most common space showcased in the genre, one more common to Japanese cyberpunk and seen in classics like the 1988 anime film *Akira* (3). The third space is a deserted casino city in the middle of the desert, perhaps a post-apocalyptic Las Vegas, where a perpetual sandstorm has created the most stunning visuals of the film, visuals which move away from the usual cyberpunk noir settings and neon lights but still vividly resemble the post-catastrophe scenes from cyberpunk classics like *Akira* and *Cowboy Bebop*. That is also the space where K finds Rick Deckard, who, after running away with Rachael at the end of the first film, has ended up alone with a dog in an abandoned casino. The casino is also another example of pastiche in the *Blade Runner* universe, with holograms of Elvis Presley blasting music while Deckard and K fight upon first meeting.

All three of those spaces share the same underlying topic, that of environmental change. It can be said that the setting of *Blade Runner 2049* is essentially still the same as the one of the first film, but after a rapid and drastic environmental catastrophe, one which was suggested in the first film with its perpetual rain and exhaust fumes, and has occurred at some point before the second film. While the element of climate change is not something unique to the 2017 film and has already been thematized in the 1982 *Blade Runner*, what is novel in *2049* is how much focus is put on it and how determining it is to the plot. Almost all the events that change the plot of the film happen outside of the city, in one of the three

mentioned spaces, and all of them involve some kind of violence and death. In the first scene in the farmlands K kills the replicant Sapper Morton, and it is later revealed that that is the place where Rachael died at some point after escaping with Deckard at the end of the first film. Upon arrival to the junkyard K is surrounded and attacked by a group of scavengers who are then defeated by a *deus ex machina* rocket barrage orchestrated by Luv, another replicant, who serves the corporate overlord Niander Wallace. K is then ambushed by Luv when he goes to find Deckard in the abandoned casino city. The climax of the film is, like the climax of the first one, a fighting scene, one in which K fights and kills Luv. The scene takes place on the outskirts of the city, on the shore beneath the massive seawall in the middle of a storm at night, a stark contrast to the game of hide and seek between Deckard and Roy Batty in the grand building and over the rooftops of the cyberpunk city. This move outside of the city, while a change to the setting and to the aesthetic of the original film, does little to move away from the main templates of the genre. The city is still constructed on the same vertical basis, with the two grand buildings of the police department and of the Wallace Corporation dominating the cityscape. Just like in the first film, the police is the only element of the state. The protagonist of the film is both a replicant and a blade runner, suggesting a more accepting approach to replicants in the *2049* universe, but he is discriminated against by his human colleagues, who insultingly call him ‘skin-job.’ The change in personnel does not, however, change the fact that, just like in *Blade Runner*, the main function of the police department is the control and extermination of potentially rogue replicants.

The role of the corporate overlord is changed in comparison to the 1982 film. While Eldon Tyrell was in many ways a passive figure in the first film, whose death ultimately bore no great consequence on the world around him, Niander Wallace is an active participant in the plot. His corporation, Wallace Corporation, has taken over the production of replicants, and his aim is to create a new line of replicants capable of reproduction, which was the one

hurdle that Tyrell supposedly never managed to overcome in creating the replicants as similar to humans as possible. *Blade Runner 2049* takes a cliché step back in comparison to the first film in regard to the figure of the corporate overlord: while in *Blade Runner* the corporation was merely a passive producer of replicants, playing no active role in the development of the plot, in *2049* it becomes the main antagonist of the film, a typical trope in cyberpunk fiction. The design of the rooms in which the film shows Wallace is decidedly Japanese, with wooden, seiseysha-style furnishing and an onsen-style room surrounded by water, and Wallace is a distant megalomaniac obsessed with creation and imperialistic procreation. Unlike the first *Blade Runner* film, where the nature of the antagonist Roy Batty suggested a cyberpunk sense of post-humanism and raised new questions about what makes one human, the ‘bad guys’ in *2049* are a typical zaibatsu-style megacorporation, which is a simplistic way of relying on the basic tropes of the genre and a throwback to the 1980s when there was viable ground for a Japanese-esque megacorporation to be the main antagonist in a film.

It can therefore be concluded that the aesthetic and the plot devices of the 2017 sequel rely heavily on the 1982 original and on typical cyberpunk tropes mentioned while defining the genre, and as such bring very little new to the vision of the future imagined in the original *Blade Runner*, as pointed out in the introduction to Mark Fisher’s book *Flatline Constructs*, where it is called an “overwritten, scripturally prophetic blockbuster, which does nothing to envision a world, but plots overdetermined and pre-sent realities, layered above a realist Los Angeles, while the center was already lost last century” (2018, iii). One element of *Blade Runner 2049* which moves away from the first film and which can be seen as a continuation of the first film’s inquiry into what makes one human is the topic of reproduction on which the film’s plot is focused.

### 3.4 The Child

The central plot of *Blade Runner 2049*, similarly to the first film, revolves around a blade runner on a hunt. While Deckard was looking for rogue replicants in order to ‘retire’ them, this film’s protagonist K is looking for Deckard. In the opening scene of the film, when K kills the replicant Sapper Morton, he encounters the buried bones of what would later turn out to be Rachael. What sets up the film’s plot, however, is the nature of her death: she died in childbirth. That leads to a race between K and Luv to find Rachael and Deckard’s child: K on the orders of the police department to kill it to keep the fragile peace in the city, and Luv on an assignment by her boss Niander Wallace, whose main goal is to create replicants capable of reproduction to have a never-ending supply of workforce to colonize space. Throughout the film K starts suspecting that he is the child, since the memories he has correspond to the ones which the child is supposed to have, but upon meeting Deckard it is revealed that the child was a girl. At the end of the film, it is revealed that the child is Ana Stelline, a young woman kept out of contact with the outside world due to an undefined illness, who spends her days creating artificial memories for the replicants produced by Wallace Corporation, and the reason why K had the same memories as the child is that she used her own memories to be implanted into him. That plotline revisits the questions of what makes one human from the 1982 film, and once again suggests that memory is not one such element. What is inserted into the plotline of the 2017 film is the element of reproduction. While in *Blade Runner* replicants were created with a four-year lifespan and were exclusively produced by Tyrell Corporation, in *Blade Runner 2049* it is revealed that Rachael was a special type of replicant with the built-in ability to give birth, suggesting that even biological reproduction is something that can be simulated. Throughout the film Wallace uses the phrase

“more human than human” to describe the replicants he produces, but he is unable to match Tyrell’s achievement with Rachael; he needs to find her child in order to analyse it and find out how such artificial yet biological reproduction was achieved. That plan is in the end thwarted by K. He also thwarts the plans of another group in the film, the replicant rebellion group, whose aim is to free replicants from their role as labor force for the capitalist overlords in the film’s universe and who demanded him to kill Deckard so he would be unable to reveal the location of his child to anyone.

The post-humanist elements of the original *Blade Runner* were discussed in this paper as an innovative element in the film, a questioning of humanity and what makes one human, caused by the ever-increasing technological development and mechanization of labor in the time of its creation. That line of questioning also corresponds to some of the key theoretical works of the time, like Baudrillard’s questioning of reality, most famously tackled in the late 90s in *The Matrix*, and Foucault’s questioning of the concept of man. Even so, the first film’s ending is, as Gerblinger claims, a conservative and regressive one and fails to find a new direction for such a plot (23), with Deckard and Rachael simply escaping the city, their fate unclear, giving no conclusion to the film’s post-humanist inquiry. In *Blade Runner 2049* their fate is cleared up, but the film suffers from the legacy of such an ending in the original and is unable to escape the confines the first film set. Just like with the aesthetic which, while putting emphasis on environmental change, still remains locked down in the ‘original’ cyberpunk aesthetic produced by the 1980s, the plotline of this film fails to provide a new sense of post-humanist critique, instead relying on the Messianic myth of a special, chosen child who in this case plays a passive role in the development of the plot.

The film introduces the moment of reproduction as an element which ceases to be a signifier of humanity, but the birth of a child to a replicant is referred to as a miracle and even with all the technological development that happened in the thirty years between the two

film's plots Wallace Corporation is unable to recreate it. While it is not unusual for cyberpunk to rely on myth, and according to Cavallaro such a reliance is one of the key elements of the genre (41 – 44), what *Blade Runner 2049* fails to do is to expand the post-humanist strain in the original film and make it correspond to any potential movements in that field in the late 2010s. Instead, it uses the notion of artificial reproduction which, while a new element in the *Blade Runner* universe, is a commonplace element in many cyberpunk works from the late 20<sup>th</sup> century, most notably Mamoru Oshii's 1995 anime film *Ghost in the Shell*. The vision of the future of cyber-technology and simulated humanity in *2049* is one which could have been imagined had the film been created at the same time as the first *Blade Runner*, a simple and logical continuation of the love-story between replicant and maybe-replicant in the first film, one which introduces the element of reproduction and presents it as something that is not exclusively human and can be simulated, but fails to expand on it. Throughout the majority of the film, the inquiry into what makes one human reverts back to questions of memory and empathy. K is convinced he is Rachael's child because he has the child's implanted memories, and he finds solace in Joi, a holographic woman produced by Wallace Corporation to provide lonely men with simulated wives. That is an element which seems regressive in the *Blade Runner* universe where a more perfected simulation of humans already exists in the form of replicants. The character of Joi, who needs to be transferred via a mobile emitter and is purely a hologram, is the most alien element in *Blade Runner 2049*'s vision of the future, since such technology seems redundant and archaic in a universe where perfect physical copies of humans can be made to serve all sorts of purposes.

In conclusion, the vision of the future presented in 2017's *Blade Runner 2049* is in many ways the same one shown in the first *Blade Runner* from 1982. While some elements from the first film are given more focus and are more in line with contemporary issues and potential future imaginary, most clearly the element of environmental change, the film is still



unable to move away from the 1980s vision of the future presented in the first film. The notion of reproduction between replicants, while introduced, fails to serve as the kind of post-humanist inquiry that memory and empathy are in the first film, and the sequel mostly falls back to those two elements to blur the difference between humans and replicants. The question of reproduction as something that is not exclusively human and can be simulated is, as mentioned, not new in cyberpunk, and is the focus of the next films to be discussed, the 1995 Japanese anime film *Ghost in the Shell* and its 2017 America remake under the same name.

## **4. Ghosts and Androids**

### **4.1 Japanese Cyberpunk**

While the works of American cyberpunk authors are ripe with Japanese references and influence, the genre found fertile ground in Japan itself in the 1980s and 90s. The period from the early 1960s to the late 80s was a period of rapid economic and technological development in Japan, the so-called “High Growth Period” in which Japan managed to rebuild after the catastrophe of World War Two and became the frontrunner in the field of technological advancement (Tatsumi 2). At the time when American science fiction was glorifying Japan as an ideal of the future of the whole West, Japanese cyberpunk made its way into the manga format and later into animated series and films, Japanese anime. As Sato points out, while American cyberpunk envisioned a Japan-influenced future, it also changed Japan’s perception of itself and helped it rediscover an image of itself as the future of the

West which juxtaposes its unique combination of Japanese culture and Western technology to the West's universality (340 – 341), which came as a new development after the rejection of 'Japanism' within the culture in the 1960s (Sato 344). The West's perception of Japan in cyberpunk was based on the notion that Japan combines neo-feudal capitalism with hi-tech, a sort of orientalizing which Park claims Japanese cyberpunk appropriates (62). In the introduction to their essay collection on Japanese cyberpunk, Bolton et al present a vision of 1970s and 80s Japan as a "synthesis of robotic industrialization, neofeudal corporate culture, and the enthusiastic acceptance of new communication and simulation technologies in daily life" (ix). Seen as such, it comes as little surprise that "cyberpunk [ . . . ] immediately appealed to a Japanese sensibility that had been nurtured on science fiction manga and Japanese animation" (Bolton et al, ix) Works of Japanese cyberpunk, most notably Shinya Tsukamoto's *Tetsuo: The Iron Man*, Katsuhiro Otomo's *Akira*, Masamune Shirow's *Ghost in the Shell*, animated by Mamoru Oshii, and animated series like *Neon Genesis Evangelion* and *Cowboy Bebop*, all present a vision of the future which is decidedly a cyberpunk one. They were created in the 1980s and 90s, a period in which the country's rapid development came to a sudden halt and was followed by a long period of crisis and recession in the 90s which gave birth to the dystopian character of Japanese cyberpunk works, a product of both a fascination with technology and an ambivalent attitude towards it caused by the long period of crisis and the 1995 Aum Shinrikyo incident in which sarin was released into the Tokyo subway by a mad guru (Napier 104), something which is specifically thematized in the 2001 *Cowboy Bebop: The Movie* film. While Japanese cyberpunk was in many ways influenced by its American counterpart, it has its own differences. Park claims that the two key elements of Japanese cyberpunk are the Japanese setting and images, and the figure of the hero who is not a loner male detective but a transgendered female cyborg, while Orbaugh adds that the

Japanese version of the genre deals with apocalypse more than the American one (Park 62, Orbaugh 173).

## **4.2 Ghost in the Shell**

The Japanese setting and the android transgendered female hero are both elements exemplified in the 1995 anime film *Ghost in the Shell*. The setting is a typical cyberpunk one, the film takes place in 2029 in a futuristic city in Japan called New Port City, shrouded in darkness with flashing lights reflecting on the surface of the ocean, which according to Wong is based on Hong Kong (1). Like in *Blade Runner* the city has a vertical hierarchical axis, but unlike the 2019 Los Angeles, the hierarchy here is not between social classes but between physical entities and their daily lives on the bottom and the flow of information on the top (Gardner 52). The cityscape is made to represent the flow of data, the images of lowlives on the streets replaced by imagery of data flows symbolized most notably by the glowing city lights and the surface of the ocean (Wong 13), which reflects them and which the film's protagonist, the cyborg detective Motoko Kusanagi dives into during her moments of respite. The city is divided into several Sections, a code-name for the combination of police departments and scientific research facilities which mostly deal with data processing and the control of the flows of information, and Kusanagi is a detective at Section 9 in the city.

The film starts with a scene in which the body of the female android detective is being either created or repaired, a perfect cyborg replica of the female body on display. The film is centered on the figures of two cyborg, the aforementioned police detective Motoko Kusanagi and the AI construct known as the Puppet Master. While both figures have a completely artificial body, there is a key difference between them: Kusanagi is a human in a cyborg

body, a Ghost in a Shell, while the Puppet Master is a purely artificial construct made of pure data which was created by scientists at Section 6 and has then managed to gain a sense of self-awareness and hack into the systems at a cyborg-making facility and create itself a cyborg body to inhabit. The main difference between the two figures is the possession of a Ghost, the purely human, which Kusanagi has and the Puppet Master does not. Throughout the film it is suggested that what makes that Ghost is exactly that which fails to be a signifier of the human in *Blade Runner*: memories and a sense of empathy. Orbaugh points out that the term used to describe the Ghost in the original Japanese audio is *tamashii*, which means a person's spirit or soul, and refers to one's experiences and memories as well as the unconscious (186). Kusanagi's body and the bodies of her colleagues are either partly or fully artificial, but it is suggested that the human brain is still preserved inside that body to serve as the Ghost and to make them human. The Puppet Master, upon inhabiting the newly-made body with female characteristics and a male voice, is caught by police officers from Section 9, but attempts to claim political asylum on the basis of being a living being, something which is denied due to the fact that he<sup>3</sup> does not possess a Ghost. Kusanagi questions her own humanity throughout the film, and wonders if she is still human if all her parts have been replaced and her whole body is automated, raising the age-old Ship of Theseus question of how much one can change and replace parts of something before it ceases to be that thing anymore. The plot and the questioning of what makes one human throughout the film culminate in the Puppet Master's conclusion that what makes one human are mortality and the ability to reproduce (Gardner 45 – 46). The Puppet Master proposes that Kusanagi merges bodies with him, an act of artificial reproduction which would culminate in a being that combines the Puppet Master's body with Kusanagi's Ghost in the creation of a sort of post-

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<sup>3</sup> While the Puppet Master possesses a female body, the entity is referred to as 'he' in the film and in the secondary literature about the film, hence why he shall be referred to with the male pronoun in this paper as well.

human cyborg Übermensch.<sup>4</sup> Kusanagi agrees to that proposal, and the film ends with the two female cyborg bodies lying next to each other, half-destroyed by a conflict with government forces sent to reclaim the Puppet Master, combined into one consciousness.

While it could be said that the post-humanist moment in *Ghost in the Shell* mirrors the questioning of humanity in *Blade Runner*, what this film introduces is the figure of the female cyborg as the frontrunner of post-human development. That notion, like the questioning of humanity and what makes one human which was already discussed and situated as a key element of cyberpunk fiction, corresponds to the ideas and theories created in the 1980s and 90s, most notably in Donna Haraway's 1985 work *A Cyborg Manifesto*. In that essay Haraway attempts to define a new form of post-human subjectivity, that of the cyborg, and she suggests that the cyborg is exemplified in the figures of women of color, more specifically the working Asian woman (54, 59). The cyborg in Haraway's theory is an attempt at breaking down set identities, which are demolished through the development of technology, and creating a notion of an identity which is not bound to gender, race or sexuality (59 – 61). The cyborgs in *Ghost in the Shell* correspond in many ways to that theory: although both Kusanagi and the Puppet Master possess female bodies, there is a sense of transgenderism to both of them. In the opening scene of the film, when Kusanagi's body is on display, it lacks any sexual organs, suggesting that her body is fundamentally sexless. The Puppet Master also possesses a female body, but has a male voice, creating a mismatched effect that Gardner claims is one of the reasons for the violence that body suffers later on in the movie (47). The Puppet Master's body gets fractured multiple times throughout the film, which according to Wong suggests the fractured state of the AI's subjectivity which resembles Baudrillard's notion of the postmodern fractal subject (15). The central question of

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<sup>4</sup> According to Hollinger, the figure of the Übermensch is one of the central figures in cyberpunk (31); Roy Batty in *Blade Runner* and the combined entity of Motoko Kusanagi and the Puppet Master in *Ghost in the Shell* are both examples of that.

the film, that of artificial cyborg reproduction, also posits the cyborg figures as post-human and post-gender ones. The product of the reproduction is as Orbaugh suggests a perfect Baudrillardian simulacrum with no reference to the original since cyborg reproduction does not involve any mixing of DNA or any other way of including the original (186). However, as he adds, both Kusanagi and the Puppet Master are gendered in their interactions with each other and the rest of the world, and, like many other cyborgs in Japanese scifi of the time, they still to some extent involve a sense of gender binarity with their presumed genders and sexualities (187). Nevertheless, *Ghost in the Shell* is a film which firmly belongs to the cyberpunk genre and the postmodern moment in which it was created. Its discussion of human subjectivity and the potential of technology-induced post-humanism, accompanied with the aesthetic of a decaying cyberpunk megalopolis, posit it as a product of its time, the 1990s in Japan, and show a vision of the future which is a direct product of the historical, cultural and theoretical development contemporary to the film's creation.

### **4.3 Ghost: Remade**

Like the *Blade Runner* sequel, the year 2017 also saw the release of a Hollywood version of *Ghost in the Shell*. The film, directed by Rupert Sanders and controversially starring white actress Scarlett Johansson in the lead role of Motoko Kusanagi, is imagined as a sort of remake and prequel to the Japanese original. The first scene of the film mirrors that of the original, with a female android body being created, but it soon becomes clear that the American film is not a direct copy of the anime one. The protagonist of the film is again a female cyborg, an element that is rather unusual for American science fiction and cyberpunk, and Wong claims that that is due to Western male anxieties about a female science fiction

lead (15). The film showcases all the standard visuals of cyberpunk and the characters are a combination of low-life and hi-tech, but unlike the anime original, the focus of this film is not on the potential of cyborg reproduction or the idea of post-humanist cyborg identity. Rather, 2017's *Ghost in the Shell* takes a regressive step and turns Motoko Kusanagi into Mira Killian, a freshly constructed cyborg detective with a completely artificial body and human brain who is a test subject for the creation of such super-soldiers. The technology of full body replacement is not as common as in the anime film's universe, and the question of what makes one human in relation to the body and the 'ghost' is also missing.

Instead of that, what the Hollywood version of *Ghost in the Shell* focuses on is the question of mind-control and of memory. Similar to the replicants in *Blade Runner* the cyborgs in the American *Ghost* question their humanity in relation to memory, and it becomes clear throughout the film that Killian's memories have been manipulated and partly erased and replaced with artificial ones. Her thoughts and memories can also be read and partly controlled by Hanka Robotics, the company in charge of the project of combining a human mind with an augmented cyborg body. The figure of the AI Puppet Master with an artificial female body and male voice is replaced by the figure of Kuze, who turns out to be a failed test subject in the same experiment Killian is a part of. He also possesses a human mind within a male cyborg body, and his goal is not to achieve a new sort of artificial reproduction with Killian, but rather to show Killian she has been manipulated and to destroy Hanka Robotics. The plotline of the film therefore abandons the innovative post-humanist plotline of the anime original from 1995 and reverts back to usual tropes of an evil megacorporation creating artificial bodies with questionable humanity. The switch from the de-gendered Puppet Master to the male Kuze showcases another way in which the film reverts from the critical potential of the anime original and emphasizes the gender binarism that the Japanese film to some extent tries to deconstruct. The end of the film differs greatly

from the anime one: while in the Japanese version the film ends with a merging of Kusanagi and the Puppet Master in a new form of artificial and post-human reproduction, in the American film Kuze dies and Killian manages to reclaim her memories and reconnect with her mother. The agent Killian at the end turns out to be Motoko Kusanagi, a Japanese girl who was presumed dead and who would later become the protagonist of the anime film, making the Hollywood version into a sort of prequel.

While the final plot-twist suggests that the plot of the original *Ghost in the Shell* film takes place after the plot of the 2017 one, the latter film still fails to be anything but regressive in comparison to the former. The question of humanity and what makes one human and how much one's body can be manipulated and replaced by artificial parts before one ceases being human, combined with the question of whether the notion of humanity can be attributed to a highly developed AI which both possesses an artificial human body and advanced cognitive abilities, is lost. Instead, the American *Ghost in the Shell* returns to the already established and worn-out element of memory as something that can be manipulated, but, in this film, is still a signifier of humanity. In doing so, the film not only fails to continue the critical moment of the anime original, it fails to even replicate it, reverting instead to the even older *Blade Runner* formula. Just like *Blade Runner 2049* from the same year, the film fails to offer a vision of the future suited to its time, instead using the aesthetic and the critical potential of 1980s American cyberpunk classics to create an already familiar retro-future. The question to be asked now is why is it that the popular science fiction production of the 2010s has consistently failed to produce a new vision of the future, instead reverting to the mode of nostalgia for cyberpunk futures.



## 5. Why No Future?

By the time it was released in late 2020, *Cyberpunk 2077* was one of the most-expected PC and console games on the market. Advertising its state-of-the-art visuals, boosted by the relatively new technology of ray-tracing, and its futuristic plot set in a cyberpunk megalopolis in the year 2077, the game attracted the attention of not only avid gamers but also a wide range of people interested in the genre. Nevertheless, upon release, not even the stunning visuals and the Keanu Reeves voice-lines could have saved the game from the glitches, errors and bugs which would soon make its release one of the worst ones in recent gaming history. Despite all of that, the game sold almost 14 million copies in 2020 despite being released in December that year (Puleo, *Game Rant*), proving that cyberpunk still remains a very popular style and aesthetic. Perhaps the most stunning element of the game, however, are not its visuals which present the most detailed cyberpunk cityscape in gaming yet, but how familiar and worn-out the whole aesthetic and plotline of the game appear. As Semley points out, even before the game's release William Gibson gave his verdict on what it was advertised as by tweeting that "the game was little more than a cloned Grand Theft Auto, 'skinned-over with generic 80s retro-future' upholstery. '[B]ut hey,' Gibson added, a bit glibly, 'that's just me'" (60). Such scathing criticism does not feel out of place upon playing the game. The tropes are all there: the decaying postmodern city surrounded by a massive junkyard and run by different gangs with the police being the only visible element of the state, the neon signs, the technologically enhanced bodies, the evil Japanese megacorporation, the use of computer technology to hack into 'cyberspace' etc. The main questline of the game revolves around finding a solution for a deadly brain-implant

which has left the main character with the implanted consciousness of a dead terrorist and fighting the Arasaka corporation which all but controls the whole city. All the tropes that date back to the 1980s works of cyberpunk are still present in a 2020 representation of the near future. That in itself is not surprising since the game is called *Cyberpunk 2077* and never made a claim to be anything but a self-mythologizing celebration of an already familiar and regressive genre. In the last two chapters it has been made abundantly clear that the cyberpunk futures envisioned in the 2010s do barely more than recycle elements of the original works in the genre, trying to reinvent the wheel of a future that already belongs to the past. That *Cyberpunk 2077* does the same, without even a pretense of doing anything but that, is merely a culmination of decades of failure to imagine a different future to the one offered in works like *Blade Runner*. As Semley points out in his requiem for cyberpunk:

A formerly lively genre that once offered a clear, if goofy, vision of the future, its structures of control, and the oppositional forces undermining those authoritarian edifices, it has now been clouded by a kind of self-mythologizing nostalgia [ . . . ] Where early cyberpunk offerings rooted through the scrap heap of genre, history, and futurist prognostication to cobble together a genre that felt vital and original, its modern iterations have recourse only to the canon of cyberpunk itself, smashing together tropes, clichés, and old-hat ideas that, echoing Gibson's complaint, feel pathetically unoriginal. (61).

The fate of cyberpunk is, however, not a tragic exception, it is a symptom of a wider crisis of cultural production and its inability to imagine a future different from the ones imagined before. While that crisis is hardly new and has been discussed by Jameson in his 1982 article on the possibility of imagining the future where he claims that nostalgia is becoming the dominant mode of the postmodern condition and that science fiction is unable to imagine a future (150 – 152), it appears to have reached a point where the future has been cancelled and

replaced by an all-encompassing sense of nostalgia and cultural regression, or as Mark Fisher calls it formalized nostalgia (2014, 8). A large part of Fisher's published work focuses on exactly that issue. In his book *Capitalist Realism* he claims that postmodern cultures are characterized by pastiche and revivalism (7), an echo of Jameson's theory of pastiche as one of the key elements of the postmodern condition. As mentioned, the idea that science fiction and the Western cultural production on a whole are unable to create something radically new and to imagine the future is not unique to the 2010s and has already been discussed by Jameson thirty years prior, which points to the term *slow cancellation of the future* which Fisher borrows from Franco Berardi to explain that inability (2014, 6 – 7). According to that theory, the slow cancellation of the future has started as early as the 1970s and 80s, the period in which the prevailing form of capitalism shape-shifted into today's neoliberalism, and the period in which the genre of cyberpunk was developed. Seen from that perspective, Jameson's claim that cyberpunk is "the supreme literary expression if not of postmodernism, then of late capitalism itself" (1991, 419) is confirmed. As analyzed in the chapter on the original *Blade Runner*, the aesthetic and the plot devices of that cornerstone of cyberpunk are products of pastiche and of nostalgia for the 1940s and 50s, meaning that the whole genre relies on regression and the vision of the future in its original works was already to some extent retro-futuristic. However, as Fisher points out in his *Ghosts Of My Life*,

if the late 1970s and early 80s were the moment when the current crisis of cultural temporality could first be felt, it was only during the first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century that what Simon Reynolds calls 'dyschronia' has become endemic. [ . . . ] Jameson's postmodernism – with its tendencies towards retrospection and pastiche – has become normalized (2014, 13 – 14).

The explanation that the inability of science fiction to imagine the future and its perpetual reliance on cyberpunk retro-futures is due to the normalization of the postmodern condition

and the all-encompassing nature of neoliberal capitalism is one potential answer to the question why cyberpunk is unable to imagine the future anymore.

The nostalgic and revivalist nature of the genre in the 2010s and now 2020s points to another potential explanation for the lack of future imaginary in both cyberpunk and the Western cultural production as a whole. It is the term *hauntology*, developed by Derrida and discussed in Mark Fisher's *Ghosts Of My Life*. According to Fisher, hauntology refers to "the agency of the virtual, with the spectre understood not as anything supernatural, but as that which acts without (physically) existing" (2014, 18). Fisher goes on to explain his understanding of the concept of haunting in Freudian terms as "a failed mourning. It is about refusing to give up the ghost or – and this can sometimes amount to the same thing – the refusal of the ghost to give up on us. The spectre will not allow us to settle into/for the mediocre satisfactions" (2014, 22). The notion of contemporary cultural production being haunted by spectres of the past raises the question of whose and which spectres are doing the haunting. The most obvious answer here would be the one that points to the great changes that occurred in the world at the end of the 1980s and in the early 1990s with the collapse of the Eastern Block and the proclamation of the victory of capitalism. In the context of Derrida's understanding of the term, referred to in his book *Spectres of Marx*, Fisher summarizes that "the era of that I have called 'capitalist realism' - the widespread belief that there is no alternative to capitalism – has been haunted not by the apparition of the spectre of communism, but by its disappearance" (2014, 19; also see Derrida 64). The ghost of a failed alternative haunts the lost futures of contemporary cyberpunk which are unable to imagine their way out of the templates set by its original works, let alone create a new and different vision of the future.

A final potential answer lies in the genre's entanglement with the works of popular theorists of the time, perhaps most notably those of French philosopher Jean Baudrillard,

whose theory of the hyperreal points to the questioning of subjectivity and reality in the 1970s and 80s. Cyberpunk worked as a sort of fictional representation of such theoretical works which, in line with Baudrillard's blurring of the lines between theory and fiction, turned into what Featherstone and Burrows call "a theoretically coherent vision of a very near future which is, some argue, about to collapse on the present" (8). The idea of cyberpunk as simultaneously a genre of science fiction and a theoretical representation of its contemporary culture is suggested by the theorist of postmodernism Douglas Kellner who suggested that "cyberpunk fiction is a far more insightful and dynamic analytic resource for coming to terms with the postmodern than is the recent work of cultural critics such as Baudrillard" (Featherstone and Burrows, 8, also see Kellner 299). Kellner claims that "at the very moment when Baudrillard dropped the theoretical ball, losing his initiative, Gibson and cyberpunk picked it up, beginning their explorations of the new future world which Baudrillard had been exploring" (299). Such an explanation is suggested by Baudrillard himself in his chapter on science fiction in *Simulacra and Simulation* where he makes the following claim:

Perhaps science fiction from the cybernetic and hyperreal era can only exhaust itself, in its artificial resurrection of 'historical' worlds, can only try to reconstruct in vitro, down to the smallest details, the perimeters of a prior world, the events, the people, the ideologies of the past, emptied of meaning, of their original process, but hallucinatory with retrospective truth (123).

That claim, made by Baudrillard in a book first published in 1981, is heavily applicable to examples of contemporary cyberpunk like *Cyberpunk 2077*, where a retro-future is constructed in perfect detail but empty of any real meaning or potential contemporary visions of the future. The questioning of subjectivity and reality in cyberpunk reflected the postmodern theories of its time, but as Hollinger points out, it "was a response to postmodern reality which could go only so far before self-destructing under the weight of its own

deconstructive activities” (42). What remains is what Sponster calls a “storehouse of themes and images that are open to recycling” (252), and cyberpunk has become merely a signifier for a certain kind of aesthetic and attitude which lacks any critical power, but still sells well.

## 6. Conclusion

In 1998, as Japan was still enduring almost a decade of economic turmoil, director Shinichiro Watanabe created what is now one of the most popular anime series in the whole format, *Cowboy Bebop*. Combining the elements of space opera, low-life and hi-tech characters, and American jazz music, this series, set in 2071, showcases a cyberpunk future whose main element is in fact the complete lack of future. The main characters of the series, all haunted by past decisions, abandoned families and abandoned past lovers, aimlessly float through space around a ravaged Earth, going from adventure to adventure, but constantly unable to move forward. The no-future attitude displayed by those characters, an element which Sponster claims is typical of cyberpunk (252), can be used as a metaphor of what the genre would become in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Just like the characters in *Cowboy Bebop*, contemporary cyberpunk is caught in a loop, haunted by the spectre of its classics and of genre tropes and restrictions, unable to imagine a future which is still relevant and has not already been past, floating aimlessly and existing for the sake of it.

The goal of this paper was to analyze the contemporary cultural production within science fiction, with an emphasis on the cyberpunk genre. The idea was to analyze how contemporary works of cyberpunk compare to the original works of the genre from the 1980s and 90s and to the tropes those works established. The analysis suggests that all the works analyzed showcase an inability to imagine a different future to the ones imagined by cyberpunk classics from the end of the last century. While some of them emphasize elements

which are rather contemporary, like *Blade Runner 2049*'s focus on climate change, they still remain trapped within an aesthetic which was futuristic forty years ago and within a theoretical and critical tradition which was developed in that same period. The answer to why that is so is impossible to give directly, and this paper gives several different potential answers. What those answers have in common is a sense of loss of time, akin to Jameson's schizophrenic temporality which dominates the postmodern condition. The cultural production of the 2010s seems to be stuck in a perpetual now, history is merely a source of material to be recycled, and the future cannot be imagined. Such a statement is rather bleak, and surely does not represent the whole of the cultural production of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, but within popular science fiction and within the genre of cyberpunk it appears to be correct.

The final episode of *Cowboy Bebop* ends with the main protagonist Spike losing the girl he loved and finally killing his old nemesis and leader of an infamous megacorporation. In doing so, he finally gets rid of the ghosts that have been haunting him throughout the whole series, and in the final scene he collapses on the floor after sustaining numerous fatal injuries. The screen blacks out, and unlike almost all previous episodes, where the words "See you space cowboy" would be displayed, the viewer is told "You're gonna carry that weight." The ending of the series, and that message at the end of it, offer a glimpse of the destiny the cyberpunk genre has gone through. Having outlived the futurism of its aesthetic and the critical power of its plotlines, it has in many ways become a dead genre, carrying the weight of its heyday and still producing commercially successful films, series and games, but offering very little in terms of future imaginary. With cyberpunk unable to imagine the future anymore, what remains is to wait for a new genre to arise within science fiction, one with contemporary concerns and contemporary future imaginary.

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### **Films, TV Series and Games**

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## Summary

This paper analyzes the way the future is imagined and the questions that are raised in works within the cyberpunk genre. It compares original works in the genre from the 1980s and 1990s to contemporary works from the late 2010s in order to see how and whether the future imaginary has changed and whether it is possible to imagine a new and innovative vision of the future within the genre anymore. The main works analyzed are the 1982 film *Blade Runner* and its 2017 sequel *Blade Runner 2049*, the Japanese cyberpunk anime film *Ghost in the Shell* from 1995 and its American live-action adaptation from 2017, and the video game *Cyberpunk 2077* from 2020. The paper relies on a series of analyses and theories, most notably the theories of Fredric Jameson, Mark Fisher and Jean Baudrillard, to analyze to what extent cyberpunk is connected to the socio-economic state and the prevalent theories of the 1980s and 90s and whether the contemporary works within the genre have managed to move past that and develop the genre in a way that reflects the almost forty-year difference in the time of creation.

Key words: cyberpunk, film, Blade Runner, Ghost in the Shell, future imaginary, postmodern theory

## Sažetak

U ovom se radu analizira način na koji se zamišlja budućnost i pitanja koja se otvaraju u djelima unutar cyberpunk žanra. Rad uspoređuje originalne uratke unutar žanra iz 1980ih i 1990ih sa suvremenim uradcima iz kasnih 2010ih kako bi analizirao je li se i na koji način

promijenio način zamišljanja budućnosti i je li uopće i dalje moguće zamisliti budućnost na nov i inovativan način u cyberpunku. Radovi koji se analiziraju su film *Blade Runner* iz 1982. i njegov nastavak *Blade Runner 2049* iz 2017., zatim japanski anime film *Ghost in the Shell* iz 1995. i američka igrana adaptacija iz 2017., te u konačnici video igrice *Cyberpunk 2077* iz 2020. Teorijska podloga rada su razne analize tih djela i teorije Fredrica Jamesona, Marka Fishera i Jeana Baudrillarda. Na temelju tih izvora rad analizira do koje je mjere cyberpunk povezan sa socioekonomskim stanjem i popularnim teorijama 1980ih i 90ih i je li suvremeni cyberpunk u stanju napredovati na način koji reflektira gotovo četrdeset godina razlike između nastanka žanra i trenutne cyberpunk produkcije.

Ključne riječi: cyberpunk, film, *Blade Runner*, *Ghost in the Shell*, zamišljanje budućnosti, postmoderna teorija