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Cyberpunk as an Evolution from Science-Fiction and its Social Critiques

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Abstract

In this paper, I will take an investigative deep dive into all that is the literary genre of cyberpunk. I will touch on the origins and development of science-fiction, the genre that birthed cyberpunk, and how science-fiction led up to cyberpunk's birth. I discuss the origins of cyberpunk and where and when it first entered the scene. The literary differences between the two genres. And the main areas of social critique that are focused on for each as well. For science-fiction's areas of social critique, I discuss their ever-present use of the dangers of man's hubris first made present in Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* and the ideas of reaction to the unknown that have changed drastically during the evolution of the genre. For cyberpunk's areas of social critique, I analyze their portrayal of corporate/ capitalistic greed, the portrayal of gender roles, and the dangers of human nature. I conducted my research through assorted literature and media within the respective genres and literary reviews on the works I analyzed. I also used interviews with authors to get a better picture of the ideas that were meant to be conveyed by their works.

Keywords: cyberpunk, science-fiction, social critique

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Cyberpunk as an Evolution from Science-Fiction and its Social Critiques

Introduction

Cyberpunk is a subgenre of the overarching literary genre known as science-fiction. It handles themes of corporate greed, anarchism, anti-capitalism, and human nature in the face of the challenges associated with the aforementioned themes. In most cyberpunk stories and novels, we follow a protagonist who is usually saddled with an affliction of some sort, many of which include: grief, drug addiction, identity crises, homicidal inclinations, or a combination of all of these. These afflictions are brought about by the oppressive climate in which the worlds are set. In a majority of cyberpunk literature, the governments of the world have been replaced by super-corporations that live only for profit, leaving much of the world to live in poverty and squalor. This manner of world-building establishes an anarchic system where the world is controlled by the criminal element of society, and the protagonists follow that same general path usually. Protagonists in cyberpunk novels are by no means what one would call good, many of them would be considered villains or anti-heroes in any other manner of media. Cyberpunk paints a very scary picture of the world because we are one bad year away from it becoming a possibility in my opinion. In this paper, I will discuss the origins of cyberpunk and how it acts as a social critique of the very real possibility of a corporate monopoly of our world and way of life.

Before getting into the meat of the paper and the discussion of cyberpunk, background on the history of science-fiction of a whole and how it led to cyberpunk's birth is required. The literary genre of science-fiction has been around for over 200 years at this time. The book credited as the "first-ever science fiction book" was Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* which was written in 1817 (Simon, E. 2016). Following Shelley's *Frankenstein*, authors like H.G. Wells, Jules Verne, and Edgar Rice Burroughs began writing science fiction stories in the 19th century as well, some of which are still held in high regard by both science-fiction readers and authors to this day.

During these two centuries, the literary genre of science-fiction has changed quite a lot. There was a time in the early 20th century when science-fiction was reduced to the status of "pulp fiction," meaning that it lacked much of the substance that many of its earlier counterparts held. The strong characterization and writing of authors like Shelley, Verne, and Wells were lost upon the genre during this time with many stories essentially being a man's quest for revenge, love, or freedom. Female characters were also painted as nothing but trophies for the man to receive upon completing his mission. This era of science-fiction set the genre back by a long shot and without the help of a few authors in the mid-20th century, we most likely would not have the same genre of sci-fi that we have today.

Those authors included some of the biggest science-fiction masterminds we have seen to this day such as L. Ron Hubbard, Robert Heinlein, John W. Campbell, and last but certainly not least, Isaac Asimov. These four men ushered in the age of science-fiction that is now known colloquially as the "Golden Age" and in the process, delivered the genre from its pulp status (Latham, R. 2018). With these men, but Asimov especially, science-fiction became based on science, rather than just make-believe. When Isaac Asimov established the idea of the positronic

brain and the three laws of robotics, these ideas would be the foundation for countless other sci-fi characters and stories. Some of these derivative ideas include Data from *Star Trek The Next Generation* (Roddenberry, 1987), Murderbot from *The Murderbot Diaries* (Wells, 2017), and even the development of real-life robotics and artificial intelligence.

Now that the history and development of science-fiction has been reviewed, it's time to finally talk about cyberpunk. The book that is credited with bringing about the birth of the cyberpunk literary genre is William Gibson's *Neuromancer* which was first published in 1984. Even though that *Neuromancer* is given the credit for birthing the genre, it was not the first. Philip K. Dick's *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep*, (or to be more reader-friendly *Blade Runner*) was published in 1968 and painted a very real image of what the literary genre of cyberpunk would develop into. Gibson took influence from Dick and other early cyberpunk authors and wove together the beautiful, grimy, shocking tapestry that is *Neuromancer*. In the world of *Neuromancer*, we follow Henry Dorsett Case an ex-data thief who has been "hired" by a mysterious group to infiltrate a mega-corporations space station and liberate an AI held inside. We follow him on this quest through the slums of corrupt cities strewn with murder, drug use, and sex to the citadels of the corporations in charge where only the wealthiest of the wealthy are allowed to be. It paints a vivid picture of wealth disparity and the dangers of the capitalistic world if left to its own devices. Even though these are what I would strongly consider the main thematic points of this novel, it does not just stop there. It handles ideas of religion in a postmodern world through the Rastafarians. It challenged gender roles with Molly the street samurai who fulfilled the role of the warrior. It even challenged the idea of intentional life through the twin AI's Wintermute and Neuromancer. The reason I believe that William Gibson

and *Neuromancer* are rightfully afforded the title of fathers of Cyberpunk is that this blend of thematic choices is prevalent through many, if not all, future novels in the genre (Gibson, 2000).

In preparation to write this paper, I have studied the origins of science-fiction as a whole and its evolution as a literary genre, the birth of cyberpunk and its similarities and differences from science-fiction as a genre, and the most common social areas that are critiqued by the genre and many other areas in relation. This research has allowed me to learn a lot about a literary genre that is very near and dear to my heart and has affirmed for me just how powerful the message conveyed by the cyberpunk genre is. I chose this topic for my thesis initially because science-fiction and cyberpunk are two of my favorite literary genres due to their challenging nature. But during this process, my reasoning developed into much more than that. My main point behind writing this paper now is to explain and put into words the importance of Cyberpunk's social critique in our modern world. Even though the worlds of cyberpunk novels are heavily dramatized, they paint a very real and scary image of the dangers of human and corporate greed. They show worlds left to anarchy by an uncaring upper ruling class. While the wealthy live in splendor, the poor are left in the remnants of the world, damaged by the greed of the wealthy. They are hopeless worlds where humanity has no choice but to revert to their base animalistic instincts. Due to this, and the lack of any sort of authoritative oversight, crime runs rampant in cyberpunk novels. And not even the so-called heroes of these stories are much better.

As was touched on previously, even the protagonists of cyberpunk novels are hardly what the rational person would refer to as good. They are usually a part of the criminal element of society and often act in areas of extreme grey morality. Case from *Neuromancer* for example is an ex-thief and a current drug addict who has had his ability to get high taken away. Case goes along with the novel's plot to save the AI entirely so that he can return to his role as a thief and

have the part of his brain that allows him to get high restored (Gibson, 2000). Another example of the flawed nature of cyberpunk protagonists is displayed through Takeshi Kovacs from Rickard K. Morgan's *Altered Carbon* and its sequels. Kovacs is an ex-mercenary that was killed and had his consciousness imprisoned digitally through the use of in-universe technology called the Cortical Stack. After many years of imprisonment, Kovacs is released from captivity to solve the murder of one of the super-rich, known as Meths (short for Methuselah). While this can be seen as a noble pursuit to follow, Kovacs leaves a trail of many bodies behind him in his pursuit of the truth. To solve the death of one man he brings on the deaths of dozens of others, seemingly without remorse or regret (Morgan, 2002). These character tropes bring in to question if the ends truly do justify the means, and put on display the true darkness of a cyberpunk world. If those are the characters that would normally be the heroes, it's terrifying to imagine the villains.

Body

The first point that will be addressed by this paper is how Cyberpunk differs from science-fiction as a whole. Modern science-fiction more times than not takes some manner of practical science, whether that's robots, space travel, disease, or alien life (not exactly practical science but probable), and dramatizes and builds upon it to create a story. Many of the worlds of science-fiction stories are ideal and hopeful with the protagonists overcoming some manner of evil or challenge to better or save the world as a whole. A majority of science-fiction protagonists are also within the normal sense of moral good. They are often scientists, soldiers, doctors, or astronauts who selflessly take the fate of their peers into their hands to do the right thing. And they do the right thing because they know it is the right thing without any manner of provocation. But cyberpunk stories are of a different breed.

Cyberpunk is almost an antithesis of what has been established within the overarching genre of science-fiction. There is still an emphasis on science, practical or otherwise, but it is usually skewed in some way. The androids from *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* for example are sentient beings that are sentenced to lives of slavery and if they escape, they are hunted by Blade Runners and executed (Dick, 2008). The cortical stacks from *Altered Carbon* essentially allow for life to be eternal, but being resleeved is only available to those with enough money in their wallets (Morgan, 2002). As I have touched on earlier, the worlds from cyberpunk novels are incredibly less than ideal as well. In many modern science-fiction works, the worlds could be described as near-utopias, but in stark contrast to that, cyberpunk's worlds are almost nihilistic. The worlds show humanity at its absolute worst. Crime runs rampant in the streets and the corporate overlords retreat to their palaces to watch the world burn. They paint a picture of what life in true anarchy would be like, and put the dangers of true greed on display. In contrast to the protagonists of science-fiction that are often of high standing and high moral quality, the protagonists of cyberpunk stories are generally of a lower, more criminal class. Even though Rick Deckard of *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* is by technicality a police officer, he is in actuality nothing more than a hired gun who is sent to keep those deemed as undesirable off the streets of Earth.

The themes, worlds, and protagonists of cyberpunk literature portray quite a stark contrast to those present in science-fiction literature. Correlations can even be found between these differences and the sociological argument of nature vs. nurture. Seeing as the protagonists of science-fiction literature are usually born into a near-perfect world and lead lives that require them to have a strong moral compass. It is somewhat understandable that a cyberpunk protagonist born into the horrid conditions of their worlds would follow the path in life that they

do. They are not brought into a life that is comfortable or safe, they are brought into a barely survivable life. It makes a lot of sense that these protagonists and other characters are willing to do any and everything that it takes to survive because survival is all that they have ever known. I am sure that if Captain Jean-Luc Picard was born into the world of *Neuromancer* instead of the world he was born into, *Star Trek the Next Generation* would have turned out to be a drastically different story.

Now that the literary differences between science-fiction and cyberpunk have been reviewed, it is time to delve into the differences in the areas of social critique between these two genres. Social critique has been a large part of the literary genre of science-fiction since its advent with Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*. In that novel, Dr. Victor Frankenstein tells the tale of how he brought life to a monster formed of human remains. After he sees his creature brought to life, he abandons it because he finds it repulsive. The monster then seeks vengeance against Dr. Frankenstein by seeking out and killing his younger brother, William (Buhler, 2020). The tale paints a beautifully dark image of the hubris of man and how actions always have consequences. This format has been replicated and reproduced on countless occasions within the genre of science-fiction as the hubris of man/scientists is an incredibly common critique throughout the genre.

Another area that is frequently critiqued by science-fiction is humanity's reaction to the unknown or alien. In the area of pulp science-fiction, anything remotely alien is portrayed as an adversary to humanity. These stories follow the formulaic tale of the male protagonist overcoming the alien antagonist through the superior human intellect and willpower and being awarded the female prize at the end. Gladly, this manner of what some call literature did not continue into the modern world. Instead of this basic, and offensive, manner of storytelling we

now have tales like *Star Trek*, *Arrival*, and *Close Encounters of the Third Kind* that take the idea of alien interaction and present it in a more positive light. Within the overarching *Star Trek* universe, the members of Star Fleet follow guidelines known as the Prime Directive. With the Prime Directive, humanity, and the Federation of Planets, do not take to the stars for war or to take from the planets they discover, but for the sake of discovery and to extend the hand of friendship. This in itself is a critique of the earlier narrative spun by pulp science-fiction and shows that not everything alien is a threat. While there is still conflict with some alien species in the *Star Trek* universe, more times than not there is diplomacy and understanding shared between the various species (Whitworth, 2022). The Prime Directive and other similar ideas show a critique of the way that humanity will war with itself over such petty topics as religion or materials. I believe that *Star Trek* displays in a very powerful that many of the world's issues can be better solved with words and gestures than with bullets and bombs.

Even though the examples provided for science-fiction are very real social critiques, cyberpunk delves a little deeper into true social issues. The main focal point of cyberpunk's social critique is capitalism and corporate greed. In almost every cyberpunk novel, story, or movie that I have ever ingested, the main antagonist has been a member of the super-rich, may that be an individual or a corporation. These antagonists exemplify the dangers of unchecked greed and how money can oftentimes place an individual outside the law. They act with complete and total disregard for the potential consequences of their actions because they know the consequences will never be brought back against them. A good example of this is presented by the Tyrell Corporation from *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?*. The Tyrell Corporation is the company that was responsible for building and developing the androids, but their plans do not stop there. Within the novel, there is a religion known as Mercerism that is based around an

item known as an Empathy Box. Since the androids are not able to feel empathy, this is how Blade Runners, such as Rick Deckard, properly identify if an individual is an android. Society has rejected these androids and sentenced them to slavery and death solely due to their lack of empathy, and what is Tyrell's response to this? They attempt to make androids indistinguishable from humans through the use of empathy testing. While at a first glance this seems like a valiant path to follow, it surely is not. Tyrell is not giving these androids empathy, just making them so that they can trick the tests and live hidden amongst the people of Earth. While the androids do have a sad story, they truly do pose a threat to society and human life as it is. Tyrell's reasoning behind creating androids that can trick the test is to discredit Mercerism too so that they can sell androids to people living on Earth. All along they were just looking out to increase their bank account, regardless of the harm that they may inflict along the way (Dick, 2008). This is just one of many examples of a twisted corporation having its way with the world in cyberpunk literature for profit gain. But that is where our questionable protagonists come into play.

Seeing as the literary genre of cyberpunk is a critique of the capitalistic system, the protagonists of the story raise themselves out of poverty and perdition and bring the fight to the so-called man. It even follows many of the themes of Auguste Blanqui's Proletariat Revolution. We see a member of the proletariat, our protagonists, fight through the use of violence and rebellion against members of the bourgeoisie, our antagonists. This is a bit of a dicey analogy seeing as the protagonist does not carry out their fight to reclaim the means of production, but these are stories about the working man overcoming the members of the establishment. They are stories about the so-called little man doing what is required to establish some semblance of order in their dark worlds, even if that was not their initial intention, by taking down the corrupt members of society that hold the majority of power and capital (Makandal, 2014). Anti-

capitalism is probably cyberpunk's main, and one of its most important, critiques but it does not stop there.

The way the gender roles are portrayed in cyberpunk, in contrast to early/pulp science-fiction is quite drastic as well. Men in early and pulp science-fiction are portrayed as warrior heroes setting out amongst the cosmos to save humanity all on their own, while women are portrayed as a trophy for the hero to receive upon his return. This trope does not persist in the majority of modern science-fiction, but that does not invalidate the issues that were initially present. Cyberpunk handles the role of female characters quite differently than this.

Even though in the dark worlds of cyberpunk female background characters are often put on display as prostitutes or what have you, the female characters that take part in the plot are very strongly realized and written as powerful. For instance, take Molly from *Neuromancer*. She is an augmented human that is known as a razorgirl who is at first shown as stoic and uncaring. As the story progresses, however, we find that she has a tragic past where she fell in love with a man named Johnny only to have him killed by an assassin in front of her very eyes. Her reasoning behind taking part in the plot of *Neuromancer* is to find revenge for this lost love and free herself from its weight. And throughout the novel, she achieves her goal by catching and defeating the assassin. Molly is also portrayed as the warrior of this story. Instead of following the generic trope of the strong man overcomes all odds, we find ourselves in a new trope where the man, Case, is almost totally reliant on Molly for his survival. Case is only capable of handling things on the technical side so that leaves all of the heavy lifting to Molly. Even though the two characters do share somewhat of a connection during the novel, it also diverges from the esoteric way of displaying women as trophies by having Molly leave Case in the end. Even

going so far as stating her reasoning behind this is because Case is slowing her down (Sanders-Schneider, 2018).

Another example of this shift in gender roles is displayed in Reileen Kawahara from *Altered Carbon*. Unlike Molly, who is essentially the deuteragonist of her respective story, Kawahara is the antagonist. And a quite menacing one at that. She is responsible for the entirety of the plot from the death of Laurens Bancroft, to the selection of Takeshi Kovacs as the investigator, down to the murders of essentially anyone who tried to help Kovacs along the way. If there was ever an example of a female character in absolute power, it is Reileen Kawahara. She is responsible for the manipulation of the lives of multiple people and for the deaths of many more than that (Morgan, 2002). Setting her up as a villain isn't exactly the most positive format for displaying the change in gender roles but it does it just the same. Women are hardly ever portrayed in this same role and it was very new and refreshing to see a female antagonist that is truly menacing.

The final area of social critique present in science-fiction that will be covered in this paper is human nature. This has been touched on several times throughout this paper, but it is such a broad topic that it requires further attention. As was stated earlier, in cyberpunk media we see worlds with almost no authoritative oversight that are completely plagued by crime and humanities more base desires and vices. It seems that these worlds pose a critique of humanity's need for some manner of governance to survive as a civilization. As nice as it would be to do whatever you want whenever you want to, the world would quickly fall into chaos. People have been shown to make choices that benefit themselves without thinking of the consequences that are reaped upon others throughout our entire existence. Just to provide a few concrete examples: the European colonists that traveled to the Americas, the worldwide slave trade, wars for

religious or idealistic purposes, wars to obtain resources, and even in some cases of common petty crime. In these cases, and many more, humanity's true base nature is shown. These all occurred under some umbrella of governance too so if humanity was truly allowed to go unchecked, the results may be catastrophic.

Cyberpunk takes this real-world evidence of human nature and puts it on display in the worst possible environment to display just how dangerous humanity could be. Many examples of this have appeared throughout this paper but another prime example is present in the world of *Altered Carbon*. As Kovacs takes his first steps out onto planet Earth, he is almost immediately confronted with holographic advertisements for prostitution and dealers trying to sell him drugs. Throughout the story Kovacs encounters and even liberates a prostitute, only to have her killed in front of his very eyes for helping him. He is taken to the fighting pits where contestants are forced to fight to the death for the enjoyment of viewers. He is taken to the Bancroft's sleeve facility that allows them to essentially live forever simply because they can afford it. Kovacs travels to the high-class brothels, known as The Houses, where the wealthy go to commit unspeakable sexual acts on women, who more times than not die only to be brought back to life to continue living that same hell. And this isn't even including the shocking amount of violence that takes place during the span of the novel. There's a scene where our protagonist is kidnapped and taken to a medical facility to be tortured and upon his escape, he murders every single person inside in a gruesome fashion. In another scene, one of the secondary antagonists blows up a building, causing dozens of deaths, only to attempt to kill Kovacs. (Morgan, 2002). The world presented in this novel is a world completely lacking in moral integrity, but also not a world that's too far out of sight of our very own. Our world has experienced drug epidemics through the opioid crisis that has existed since the 1990s that has claimed the lives of more than 760,000 people and the

crack epidemic of the 1980s and 1990s, women and children are still bought and sold as slaves through human trafficking, violence runs rampant in our city streets and is carried out by our governments on foreign soil, and until very recent years, the wealthy were more than capable of getting away with any manner of sexual misconduct they wanted to take part in. This is one aspect of cyberpunk's social critique that I would deem somewhat more minor in representation than the rest I covered, but it is an incredibly important one. It puts our world into the looking glass of what we could become if nothing is changed.

Closing

My purpose behind writing this thesis was to take a deep dive into all that is the literary genre of cyberpunk. Cyberpunk is a genre that I have held in very high regard ever since I first experienced it with the movie *Blade Runner* and have only enjoyed it more since that time. Discovering more cyberpunk novels in my general honors 301 class and truly understanding the importance of the material they cover is what truly shaped my idea behind choosing this topic. I truly believe that cyberpunk is an overwhelmingly important literary genre as it does cover some subject matter that is very important to critique in this modern day and age. I enjoyed getting to write this thesis as it allowed me to take a closer look at something I truly enjoy and allowed me to appreciate it in a new light. Seeing as my thesis is not quite as data-heavy or analytically based as many for my conclusion I will reiterate and wrap up the points I provided beforehand in my paper.

In this paper the material covered was the difference between science-fiction and cyberpunk as literary genres, the origins and development of both genres and the importance of the material that they cover and critique, and the differences and similarities of their areas of social critique. Firstly, I will reiterate my findings on the genre that cyberpunk was born from,

science-fiction. Science-fiction was born as a literary genre over two centuries ago in 1817 when Mary Shelley wrote *Frankenstein*. Science-fiction in the 19th century following the release of *Frankenstein* saw success through the works of authors like Jules Verne, Edgar Rice Burroughs, and H.G. Wells whose work is still heralded as classics of the genre to this day. But unfortunately, during the century that followed, the strong literary genre of science-fiction was reduced to pulp-fiction status, meaning that it was lacking in the substance that it initially contained. This was a dark time for the genre, as it is not a path that is easily escapable. But through the works of several authors, Isaac Asimov, Robert Heinlein, L. Ron Hubbard, and John W. Campbell, the literary genre of science-fiction entered what is now known as the golden age. This golden age saw science-fiction become realized as a true literary genre, and even had some advancements to the body of knowledge through some theories posited by those authors. If these authors were not successful at delivering the genre from pulp-fiction status, cyberpunk would never have been born and this thesis would've never been written.

Cyberpunk was born out of science-fiction in the mid to late 20th century by authors like Philip K. Dick and William Gibson. William Gibson is heralded as the father of cyberpunk as his novel, *Neuromancer*, is what many refer to as the first true cyberpunk novel. Even though Dick was writing novels that encapsulated much of what is now known as the tropes of cyberpunk, Gibson was the first to truly realize them and spin them all together into a single work. The cyberpunk genre is not nearly as long and storied as that of science-fiction, but that does not discount the quality or importance of the genre and its role in social critique, which is the next part of my thesis.

While science-fiction has taken part in some manner of social critique since its outset in the 19th century, it doesn't quite cover the same level that cyberpunk does in my opinion. The

areas of science-fictions social critique that I covered, and that I believe to be some of the most profound, are that of man's hubris and the reaction to the unknown. While these are real areas that need critique, cyberpunk covered things that are what many would deem a little more substantial. Cyberpunk critiques themes of capitalistic greed, traditional gender roles, and even delves into human nature.

The critique of the hubris of man has been there since the birth of the genre as *Frankenstein*. We see man, Dr. Viktor Frankenstein, reach above his station and create life only to have that life take vengeance against the man for his actions. It is a classic tale that has been passed down in many books and movies ever since and shows how some actions have grave consequences, regardless of intention.

The critique of humanity's response to the unknown is almost a genre-inclusive critique in some ways. Science-fictions portrayal of robots, aliens, and any other manner of unknown forces before the golden age almost always painted them in a hostile manner. These stories were almost always about a man overcoming the unknown entity that proposed a threat to Earth and being heralded as a hero. While this did pose for fun, easy reading, it didn't quite capture any manner of groundbreaking information. With science-fictions development and upward climb, however, this changed. I think this change is exemplified best through Asimov's *I, Robot* anthology series, and the Prime Directive in the *Star Trek* universe. *I, Robot* treated robots as helpmates to humans instead of the usual world-ending enemy that they had been. Through Asimov's establishment of the three laws of robotics, robots filled the role of a friend rather than foe. In the case of the Prime Directive from the *Star Trek* universe, it is displayed that diplomacy and kindness can handle tough situations better than violence. Star Fleet extends the hand of friendship to all alien species that they encounter on their travels and while there is still some

conflict, more times than not it all works out for the best in the end. This takes that earlier trope of aliens being the villains and upends it, showing that just because someone may look, behave or speak differently than you they may not be bad. In this same vein, the Prime Directive is a powerful tool for cultural awareness and sensitivity in our everyday life. If the members of Star Fleet can take to the stars and form peace with and help literal aliens, what's stopping us from doing that on our planet?

Cyberpunk's critique of the dangers of capitalistic greed is made evident through almost every aspect of the stories. The world building of cyberpunk displays corporate greed quite well by showing how the wealthy members of society live in splendor and the rest live on the streets in squalor. Aside from this literal and hard-to-miss aspect, the super-rich often live literally above the rest of society. May that be palatial skyscrapers above the clouds and airships like in *Altered Carbon* or literal space stations in orbit like in *Neuromancer*, this is imagery at its finest showing that not only are the corporate entities above the rest of the people financially but also literally physically. The characterization follows the same general path with our protagonist being a member of the lower world and our antagonists being of the upper. The protagonists are products of the harsh environments in which they were reared and they rise against the super-rich antagonists, usually without their consent. These stories see our protagonists forced into a role that will, in many cases, turn high society onto its head. Case from William Gibson's *Neuromancer*, for example, is prodded back (not that he ever left) into a life of crime to remove restrictions placed on an artificial intelligence named Wintermute. In the past Case was a cybercriminal but was caught stealing from his boss and had the part of his nervous system that allowed him to access cyberspace destroyed. He joins this plot that takes on the Tessier-Ashpool Corporation initially so that he can regain the use of cyberspace, but it turns into him fighting a

crusade against them to free Wintermute and expose what the people in charge of the company are up to. Similar tropes are displayed in Takeshi Kovacs from Richard K. Morgan's *Altered Carbon*. Kovacs is an ex-envoy, a type of super mercenary, who is forced to investigate the death of a member of the establishment named Laurens Bancroft. This is no standard murder mystery though, Kovacs unravels a plot larger than he ever could have expected to and by the end, he is taking on Reileen Kawahara who is behind both the central plot and also much of the corruption of the world he is in, and he succeeds. Rick Deckard from Philip K. Dick's *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* follows a similar path as well. Deckard is a bounty hunter, or Blade Runner, who is tasked by the police to eliminate six advanced androids that have traveled to Earth. During this seemingly basic plot, Deckard uncovers the Tyrell Corporation's plot to create androids that are undetectable by the in-universe technology. The Tyrell Corporation is doing this almost solely to destabilize the religion of Mercerism so that they will finally be able to have androids placed on Earth. There is much more to it to the plot of these novels than what has been discussed, but at face value it is a story of a man discovering corporate corruption and making a stand against it in one way or another.

The next social critique within cyberpunk that was covered was the portrayal of gender roles. In cyberpunk, gender roles follow a much less formal approach than what would be expected in many other genres. Female characters, even those that don't follow the antiquated roles that were present in pulp science-fiction, are generally not menacing but that is different in cyberpunk. Molly from *Neuromancer* is what is known as a razor-girl or street samurai. She is an augmented human that acts as the true muscle for the main case of the novel. Molly claims to be taking part in the mission simply to get paid, but as the novel unfolds we see that she is truly on this mission to find revenge for her love that was killed by Tessier-Ashpool. She is a powerful

character who breaks the gender norm for female characters on many fronts, including the ending where instead of the hero, Case, getting the girl, Molly, she leaves him and claims he would only slow her down. Similar role swaps are also present in Reileen Kawahara from *Altered Carbon* and Rachel from *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?*.

The final piece of social critique present in cyberpunk that was touched on was human nature. This ties in heavily with my critique of corporate greed. The worlds of cyberpunk stories are rife with greed, violence, drug use, and slavery or prostitution. It seems that this critique is meant to act more as a looking glass into what our real world could turn into if humanity was just left to its own devices without some manner of authority. It displays the purpose of oversight as it is well within our human nature to enact our fellow man for something as petty as a minor difference in beliefs. Even though this is somewhat of a less touched on topic within the genre, I think it might be one of the most important. The reasoning behind this is because it takes real world problems and puts them on display in a dramatized setting to show us the dangers.

One research topic that I wanted to touch on but was unable to find enough corroborating evidence was the social and economic climate out of which cyberpunk was born. I know that Philip K. Dick was writing his cyberpunk novels around the start of the counter-culture movements of the 1960s, but was unable to find any real manner of research that corroborated that connection. In the same vein, William Gibson wrote *Neuromancer* in the 1980s, during Reagan's presidency, when pro-capitalist and pro-corporate motivations were heightened but still was unable to find true corroboration between real-life events and cyberpunk. I can physically see how the two connect, but I was unable to find and provide enough evidence to add it to my thesis.

In conclusion, the social critiques presented by the literary genre of cyberpunk are very important in our modern world. Our world has become increasingly consumeristic with the advent of the internet and we have just been giving more and more money and power to the corporations associated. Cyberpunk puts the dangers of corporate power fully on display and shows the danger of leaders more interested in paper capital than human capital. It also shows that gender roles do not have to be followed in the same esoteric way they have forever. Cyberpunk shows that anyone can stand up and fight, regardless of what gender you subscribe to. Finally, cyberpunk points out the dangers of our society and human nature. It points out the dangerous nature of humans and how we, as a people, are willing to put others through immense pain to forward our objectives.

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