

Cyberpunk: A View on Technology and Our Perception of Reality

Media Theory and Application

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Introduction

In the past decade, the cost (equipment and time) of generating good computer generated imagery drastically reduce. It allowed smaller production to use this kind of technology and create a sufficient level of realism to integrate imagery to real footage or aesthetically pleasing simulation. Shows can recreate animals that disappeared millions of years ago or speculate on a fictional future. In most cases, they provided a vision of nature is an ideological representation or a humanized view of wildlife. Documentaries produced are becoming less educational and more fictional; often the quality of the information is overcast by the visual spectacle and dramatization.

Technology and discovery gradually change the relationship between humans and reality. For instance, the invention of the map allowed mankind to have an abstract understanding of their surroundings past the limitation of the field of view, while the clock conceptualized and quantified a reality we cannot physically alter: time. Both created an imitation or a physical equivalent of reality, altering the perception of our surrounding and making it more artificial.

What is Cyberpunk?

The Cyberpunk movement fed into a part of postmodern fiction that is a significant aspect of contemporary literature. The term cyberpunk itself was created by the writer Bruce Bethke.¹ It is an amalgam of the word “cybernetic” which suggest the alteration of the body through artificial prosthetic replacing or enhancing the human functions and “punk “, a label attached to the idea of skepticism, repudiation of moral theories or religious belief, the celebration of urban environment, negation of history and philosophy, and youth’s rebellion against social institution. This Eighties counterculture value was radically different from the 60’s or 70’s with rural, romanticized and anti-science view.

The vision of urban life created in this type of fiction seems more and contemporary to today reality. As technology has brought us more portable and immersive ways to deliver mediated experience and information, are we on the verge of the age of the virtual reality? First I will introduce the cyberpunk and how the genre brought a good perspective on postmodernism. Secondly I will attempt to understand the relationship reality and technology in our era.

Cyberpunk is a type of fiction derived from science fiction; the genre emerged North American with authors such William Gibson, Bruce Sterling, Rudy Rucker, John Shirley and Lewis Shiner in the mid 1980's. It is the fruit of a generation that not only grow up within the literary tradition of science fiction but in world starting to resemble science fiction itself. Themes explored by hard science fiction are becoming reality by the Eighties probes landed

¹ *Encyclopædia Britannica Online*, s. v. "cyberpunk," accessed July 2, 2012, <http://0-www.britannica.com.library.scad.edu/EBchecked/topic/147816/cyberpunk>

on the surface of Mars and Venus, human walked on the moon six times, nuclear power plant to generate electricity ... Technology started to become more invasive, responding to the touch (keyboards) and more portable with the development of tech such as Walkman, portable phone or the design refinement of the heart pacemaker... But it is invention of affordable personal computer and our relation with it that mainly inspired the literary genre. The movement gain in popularity with the publication of William Gibson² novel “Neuromancer” and is defined by “Mirrorshades: The Cyberpunk Anthology” a short story collection, edited by Bruce Sterling.

The 1982 *Blade Runner* is an example of early cyberpunk concepts expanding into movie. The film explored and created the foundation of the esthetic the dystopian themes of dark and sprawling cities of the near future. Syd Mead (one the most prominent concept artist for *Blade Runner*) depicted through his illustration showing a vast scale control over the environment, a juxtaposition of high technology with social decay, crowded street bathing in dim light on neon tube and the whole constant omnipresent darkness.

As in *Blade Runner*, Cyberpunk novels, including Gibson's “Neuromancer” is an Asian-dominated metropolis. The “Neuromancer” Night City, The Sprawl, coffin hotel, and Ninsei are based on the Tokyo Bay area.³ The emphasize on Asian culture and urban style suggest the replacement of the hegemonic state apparatus by multinationals (Tyrell Corporation in *Blade runner* for instance) and a cultural pluralism.

While the specific literary movement ended in the 1990s, the defining characteristics of cyberpunk have since become commonplace in popular narratives about the future. Pam

² Mike Featherstone and Roger Burrows, “Cyberspace, Cyberbodies, Cyberpunk” (Sage publication, 1995,) : 3.

³ Christie, John. "Of AIs and Others: William Gibson's Transit, In *Fiction 2000. Cyberpunk and the Future of Narrative*" (Athens: U of Georgia P, 1992): 173

Rosenthal's definition applies as much today to comics, videogames, films, advertisements, and the Internet as to novels and short stories: "The cyberpunk world is always shockingly recognizable - it is our world, gotten worse, gotten more uncomfortable, inhospitable, dangerous, and thrilling."⁴

Understanding the genre

The genre creates a construct vision of a dystopian society of a speculative near future, characterized by negative, anti-utopian elements, varying from environmental to political and social issues. The vast technological development goes hand in hand with the absence of any natural life, with artificial animals substituting for their extinct predecessors. It interrogates the relationship between humanity and technology (electronic), in particular artificially intelligent. The counterculture groups and lower class living in those universes do not reject urbanism, science or technology but rather transform and use whatever resources available as a mean to enrich their life and survive. The Manga series *Akira* written by Katsuhiro Otomo illustrates norms of the cyberpunk genre, through an extensive array of subplots; the author expands on technological addiction, ethics of science, and the resistance to status quo. While the universe created in Cyberpunk stories are fictional, they offer insightful views on the human stress caused by new technologies. They are often not fully comprehended and their potential dark side can also be an anxiety catalyzer. In *Akira* the manipulation of DNA to wake dormant extrasensory perception results in a horrifying

⁴ Pam Rosenthal, "Jacked in: Fordism, Cyberpunk, Marxism" (socialist review 2, 1991,): 85.

explosion when the human test loses control of his new abilities (It echoed the devastating use of the discovery of nuclear fission). The cyberpunk also gives a perspective on the relation of people with a system (political, social or economic). The narrative in such stories extrapolates on contemporary debates and explores a vast range of topics from history, science, memory, simulacra to authenticity.

The appeal to genre comes from the questioning of ethics in our world. Some inventions in the modern human history have greatly benefited the quality of life while others had more devastating results. The same is truth for ideologies great massacres and genocides have taken place during the twentieth century to impose or support a system of beliefs over another. Progress is constantly blurring the division between the biological, technological, natural and artificial with the development of cosmetic surgery, biotechnology, genetic engineering, and nanotechnology resulting in the questioning of self-identity.

Another key term that came in prominence with cyberpunk is cyberspace. In “Neuromancer” Gibson defined it as: “A consensual hallucination experienced daily by billions of legitimate operators in every nation, children being taught mathematical concepts... A graphic representation of data abstracted from bank of every computer in the human system. Unthinkable complexity. Lines of light ranged in the non-space of the mind, clusters and constellation of data.”⁵ Gibson here describes the notion of a virtual space and in many ways giving a first glimpse on the internet (the space where we look for almost everything today). The technology creating the simulation escaped human total control and cannot be wholly comprehended. The cyberspace is based on the model of our city at night by being line of light. The artificial data world existed in it is on right by tacking a graphic

⁵ William Gibson. “Neuromancer” (Harper Collins, 1984): 51.

form and represents the fusion of imaginary and real by substituting a model for another and not being able to be distinguished from each other. It is a hallucination because the awareness of the simulation disappeared; the perception is a vivid conscious experience with quality of reality. In contrast it is not an illusion because the cyberspace is not perceived by misinterpretation or distortion sensory stimulus, or dream because it involves wakefulness. Gibson cyberspace questioned the foundation of our notion of reality.

Science fiction has questioned the impact of technology on society and humans behavior before but by contrast the cyberpunk technology is visceral and intimate close to or under our skin or inside our minds. The days of centralized power and idea are over and are replaced by an era of revaluation and mongrelized influences radiating from economic power hub. Now, we are left with simple questions. What does it mean to be human in an increasingly globalized capitalistic world? How has our relation with technology changed the answers of that question? The interrogation of which brings good perceptiveness on the theory of postmodernism. But what is the postmodernism? Jean Francois Lyotard simply defined it as the end of grand narrative, as an incredulity toward metanarratives.⁶ It is a reaction against the modern mindset, the march of progress, the grand ideology. It is a skeptical attitude toward an absolute truth. By this principle even the postmodernist theory is not beyond questioning. The consequence is a society where meaning has become destabilized to a point that we are not quite sure of what is real and what is fictional. The French sociologist Jean Baudrillard advocated many different versions of postmodernism, one of them, the simulacra, refers to the way a particular society realizes or brings out reality or simulates the

⁶ Jean Francois Lyotard. "La condition postmoderne: rapport sur le savoir." (les Editions de Minuit , 1979)

real with never leaving the real.⁷ A fundamental point of both cyberpunk fiction and postmodernism is that the structure of the world, derived from the division between technology (artificial) and nature, is dissolving. By dissolving I mean the fact that the real and the unreal are constantly bumping against each other, reflecting the instability of meaning.

Resonance with modern media and technology

Today with the ever growing presence of media and internet in the everyday life, the individual is increasingly locked in isolation. More can be done without leaving the comfort of your home. We are experiencing a mediated world passively and remotely via small windows: front of our television screen, computer monitor, smart phones, etc. The involvement with reality is becoming virtual rather physical, information is delivered or lived in less tangible ways through equivalent. By information I mean any sort words and numbers that are written or spoken, and images that are still or moving. For example, news broadcasting is heavily based on imagery, in many case events and claims reported are back up with video which have been manipulated and edited to follow a visualization of narrative convention of overt and covert ideologies. The material in the most case is difficult to prove totally wrong or right (real or not real) by the simple fact that an event is physically far remote from where the viewer resides or it requires a certain level of research or knowledge to attest.

⁷ Jean Baudrillard. "Simulations" (Semiotext[e], 1983)

The picture of a chair is not a chair but yet we recognized it as such (in reference of 1965 work by Joseph Kosuth “One and Three Chairs). Mass media technology works with the same principal, it creates an illusion of reality we accept or use to produce our image of the real. Virtual reality represents the extension of this process (conducting activities online or experiencing any sort of mediated information) it provides a pure information space where a person can navigate with a high degree of vividness and total sensory immersion. The notion of virtual reality can be introduced as being a utopia. It can be described as a technology that will finally and truly deliver us from the limitation and frustration of the imperfect world.⁸ This mean it is a combination of the physical world with the limitless and unrestricted content normally associated with imagination. It is ordinary to conduct day-to-day activities online, from mundane tasks to social arrangements to personal recreation, such as checking the news, doing their banking, communicating with friends and family, and playing games. It is through video games that technology brings us closer to enter virtual reality. The example of video game is appropriate because our interaction with non-game applications and processes is increasingly made more engaging by imitating games mechanics.

MMO (massively multiplayer online game) success is based on the promise to be able to assume a new or construct identity with in a simulated universe and interact with other. It delivers the users (in the limitation of the game) from the constraints and defeats of the physical reality and the physical body. Such games provide the illusion of the opportunity to go back to the infantile experience of power and infinite possibility. It frees the user from the limitation of identity.

⁸ David Bell, Babara M. Kennedy. “The Cybercultures Reader” (Routledge, 2000): 68.

While MMO offers the possibility simulating a new identity devise such as the Microsoft Kinect promises more immersive simulation physical (an extension of movement or kinetic). A depth-sensing camera transfers a player's movements instantaneously to an avatar on screen, allowing them to move an avatar around inside a virtual world almost as they would do themselves in the real world. Slavoz Zizek says that “soft” programming proceeds intuitively and leaves the result itself “to amaze”, its relations to the object are more of “dialog”.⁹ A technology like the Kinect is just an example of soft programming; it is an anti-pattern giving the user a better imitation of his or her movement and avoiding the repetition of preprogramed animation. The control of the avatar is nothing more than a simulation of oneself movement front of the screen in semi static position. Mass media and interactive technology capitalizes on the omnipotence of fantasies. They suggest we shall receive all the gratification we are entitled to, but have been deprived of in this world, the illusion of magical creative power. To operate any tool one is obligated to follow the rules imposed by a program. This kind of limitation contradicts the promise of total immersion in infinite opportunity of a virtual world.

Technology in development today such as the Google glasses attempt to create an augmented reality. The idea is to overlap on our field of view all the application a smart phone offer making them easily interactive and constantly available while keeping your hands free. The user will be continually immersed in the virtual space of internet making her or him less aware of it. Such devise can give access to constant flow of information; from scholarly knowledge which could help the user to conduct is daily occupation to more intrusive media form. For example the glasses could constantly scan our surrounding. When

⁹ Slavoj Zizek, “From Virtual reality to the Virtualization of Reality” (New York: Aperture, 1996): 19

a product is recognized video advisement could play automatically on the top of it. In this case the control over the alteration of reality is not entirely left to the user. The lack of total control is a problem inherent to how internet delivers information. Research engine algorithm creates the illusion of control by generating a filter bubble based on an individual live online. The result is a unique universe of information where a person does not decide what gets in and is not aware of what is edited out. It rather limits our world instead of extended it by restricting the flow of information available.

Conclusion

We are still far from living exclusively in a virtual world not only because technology does not completely allowed us to but also because we are not completely ready yet. The real world or I should the physical world is still a place to accomplish daily tasks or enjoy recreation and it is often far more enjoyable than the online alternative, mostly because we are still able to perceive the difference between the two. We are toggling between the offline and online worlds for activities, leaving us in this sort of multi-channel reality where can communicate in many ways (from a face-to-face conversation, to email), gather information from many sources (meetings, books, websites, television ...). The switching between channels depends on the nature of the task ahead or the circumstance of the moment. Technology may offer in the future ways to navigate through those channels seamlessly and

constantly. It will mediate how we engage with simulation and unconsciously weaken our awareness between the real and virtual.

Most of the understanding of our surroundings or reality is based on language which is a system of conventional symbols. Language by the illusion knowledge creates the model and boundary we base our reality on. In the absolute it is nothing more than a set of noises (when it is spoken) and graphics (when it is written), they are signs combined to correspond to concepts needed to pass information, express emotion. Even without technology we make sense of the real through abstraction. The difference between now and let's say two centuries earlier is that greater amount our relation or the way we interact with the world is not purely physical, our experience is mediated

Past the comprehension of the real and the unreal, we are all playing or trying to find a role in a system, sometimes more than one. As actors we pretend to an occupation, to a character (being a professor, a policemen, a student, a librarian, etc.). The notion of self is an artificial construct. Humans in nature are inclined and have always found delight in storytelling and playing let's pretend. May be the dissolving boundary of technology and identity is to satisfy this desire.

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