

Science fiction dystopia – the influence of technology on views of the future

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Abstract: Cyberpunk has transcended its speculative roots to become a critical discourse on technology, surveillance, and corporate hegemony. Beyond mere fiction, it intertwines art, architecture, and social theory, envisioning neon-drenched dystopias where innovation and control converge. More than an aesthetic, cyberpunk encapsulates the existential tension between human autonomy and algorithmic governance, offering a profound critique of our hyper-technologized reality.

Keywords: Cyberpunk, dystopia, science fiction, speculative fiction, visual arts.

Cyberpunk is a subgenre of *science fiction* that explores the complex relationship between technology and society in futuristic contexts marked by radical technological advances. The term was coined in 1982 by Bruce Bethke¹ and is derived from cybernetics and punk, suggesting a fusion between the science of replacing human functions with computerized systems and the rebellious and nihilistic spirit of youth in the 1970s and 1980s. The genre has its roots in the writings of authors such as Samuel R. Delany and William Gibson, who turned cyberpunk into a literary movement. *Cyberpunk* first gained prominence in the literature of the 1980s, being the first science fiction genre to distance itself from optimistic visions of the future and introduce a cynical, reflexive perspective on technological advancement.

Veronica Hollinger defines the cynicism of cyberpunk as a result of its postmodernist nature. She reflects on how cyberpunk deconstructs the traditional oppositions between natural and artificial, human and machine, rather than maintaining them in a way that privileges humanity².

Furthermore, through historical contextualization, we can argue that its influences derive from the expansion of capitalism, the rise of megacorporations, technological advancement, and fears of totalitarian surveillance. Thus, this genre reflects the pessimism induced by the economic, social, and technological

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¹ Bruce Bethke (1983). *Cyberpunk*, “Amazing Stories”, Nov. 1983, p. 94.

² Veronica Hollinger (1990). *Cybernetic Deconstructions: Cyberpunk and Postmodernism*, “Mosaic: A Journal for the Interdisciplinary Study of Literature”, 23, nr. 2, p. 30.

transformations of the 20th century, establishing itself as a dystopian subgenre of science fiction.

In another type of analysis, Fredric Jameson puts into perspective a view of cyberpunk as a pastiche phenomenon. As a product of postmodern anxiety about the future, this genre constructs its aesthetics through a mixture of *high-tech* elements and images of urban decline, evoking an aesthetic that oscillates between futuristic nostalgia and a critique of hypercapitalism. In contemporary productions, this style is constantly recontextualized, becoming part of a bazaar of reusable artifacts. It is an aesthetic that not only reflects a dystopian urban reality, but also a recollection of the past, a reconstruction of a world that seems to have been lost in continuous chaos and dizzying technological change. Meson analyzes the genre in opposition to utopia and argues that cyberpunk reflects an inability to imagine a future outside the parameters set by a neoliberal order. This crisis leads to the constant repetition of the idea that there is no alternative to capitalism, and cyberpunk, as a genre, reflects precisely this impossibility of imagining radical change. In the *cyberpunk* universe, the future is not a *tabula rasa*, but a collage of historical, cultural, and technological elements, reused in a manner that simultaneously evokes the past and the future. In this sense, cyberpunk functions as a palimpsest, where each aesthetic layer is a sign of a future that never materialized³.

Drawing on a personal interpretation, I believe that the dystopian dimension of cyberpunk can benefit from further nuance through the theory of a recycled future, in which dystopias are not just nihilistic projections, but a form of social criticism that reflects the immediate problems of the present, serving to generate political and cultural awareness.

Starting from the premise that, in the late stage of capitalism, economic, social, and ecological challenges are becoming increasingly acute, it is to be expected that a system based on consumption and the continuous exploitation of resources will, in a logical projection, lead to their depletion, culminating in a global ecological disaster.

Thus, dystopias not only reflect the realities of a contemporary world under pressure from power structures and consumerism, but also serve as a warning about the effects of radical neoliberalism. In this context, recycling elements from the past and reinterpreting them in a futuristic setting is not mere nostalgia, but a method of reconstructing the past to highlight possible developments in the present. Thus, reintegrating historical images or themes into a dystopian future can be a valuable tool for understanding and critiquing the current socio-economic and ecological context. Likewise, a pre-apocalyptic scenario generated by the threat of climate crisis can cause fictional space to reconfigure itself to illustrate the system's inability to generate new elements.

³ Frederic Jameson (2005). *Archaeologies of the Future: The Desire Called Utopia and Other Science Fictions*, Verso, London and New York.

Another particularly relevant interpretation is put forward by Kumiko Sato. She argues that technological progress is not a universal, homogeneous process, but one that manifests itself differently depending on the cultural and historical context of each society, citing as an example the way Japan has reshaped cyberpunk according to its unique cultural model⁴. In this perspective, we can also invoke Michio Kaku's argument that "Japan has integrated the cyborg into its society much more easily because of its Shinto spiritual roots. In the Shinto belief, inanimate objects are seen as places where spirits live"⁵. Proof of this interpretation can be found in the title of the anime film "Ghost in the Shell," which highlights the cyborg perspective in a *cyberpunk* universe.

Visually, the genre was established by Ridley Scott's film "Blade Runner" (1982), which imposed an emblematic aesthetic. Focusing on the visual universe created by cinematographer Jordan Cronenweth, we can analyze the ways in which *cyberpunk* aesthetic coding contributes to the narrative. It combines influences from film *noir* with dystopian urban landscapes: constant rain, pollution, neon lights, and monumental brutalist architecture. The settings are dense and layered, including giant commercial signs, holograms, multicultural markets, and advanced technologies integrated into degraded spaces, all suggesting a globalized but ultimately alienating future. This fictional universe achieves its complexity through meticulous details, such as the design of buildings, which evoke corporate domination. The presence of brutalism is revealed at the level of the power structures constituted by corporations. This use of architectural elements, which have concrete as their base material, is closely linked to their impersonal character.

The city has always been a symbol of progress, civilisation and human power over the environment. However, in dystopian literature and art, the metropolis becomes a space of alienation, surveillance and control, an architectural expression of anxieties about the future. From the industrial ziggurats in *Metropolis* (1927) to the hyper-technological and suffocating cities in *Blade Runner* (1982) or *Akira* (1984-1993), urban dystopias reflect fears of authoritarianism, social inequality, and depersonalization in an environment where the individual becomes a prisoner of their own habitat.

In his article, "The Aesthetics of Science Fiction. What does SciFi Look Like After Cyberpunk?", journalist Rick Liebling talks with analysts of the genre in order to identify some characteristic elements of the use of brutalism in the *Blade Runner* universe.

They identify brutalism as a symbol of influential institutions, associated with iconic buildings such as government offices, university libraries, cultural

⁵ Sato Kumiko (2004). *How Information Technology Has (Not) Changed Feminism and Japanism: Cyberpunk in the Japanese Context*, "Comparative Literature Studies", vol. 41, no. 3, p. 335.

⁵ Michio Kaku (2012). *Physics of the Future: The Inventions That Will Transform Our Lives*, Penguin Books, London.

facilities, and office buildings from the mid-20th century. Over time, the brutalist architectural style has acquired a particular gravity and solemnity, becoming representative of institutional authority and respectability.

Blade Runner also uses this aesthetic to generate a sense of temporal and spatial confusion – a postmodern collage of architectural and technological styles that defies clear placement in time or space. Concrete, the basic material of brutalist architecture, is essential in terms of its lack of geographical belonging, an essential aspect for futuristic images that seek to dissociate themselves from a particular culture or location. In human perception, concrete is not warm or welcoming, especially when isolated as a material or combined with metal and glass. This austere materiality outlines a subtle critique of humanity's detachment from nature. The absence of artifacts, decor, or materials that could indicate a temporal context causes empty surfaces to eliminate time and place from the equation, contributing to the viewer's alienation.

Although contemporary design sometimes tends toward similar elements, there is still a significant disconnect between the everyday experience of the average viewer and these neutral spaces or materials, which are otherwise perceived as cold, distant, and almost inhuman; they symbolize, in fact, opposition to humanity. Being indifferent to the needs of the individual, they become, to some extent, boundless, accentuating alienation⁶.

What makes the *cyberpunk* genre special is that it has managed to transcend its contextual limitations, being a genre that is constantly reconfiguring itself, borrowing elements from each era. Science fiction imagination adopts this aesthetic on a broad level precisely for this reason. Also, its multicultural character encourages an intersectional perspective and can generate a complex narrative thread.

In this sense, a contemporary approach to *cyberpunk* aesthetics is revealed in the graphic novel *Square Eyes*⁷.

In an urban landscape transformed by augmented reality, where the boundaries between the physical and digital dimensions are becoming increasingly blurred, Anna Mill and Luke Jones initiate a long-term investigation into the profound implications of this technology on contemporary society. Their endeavor began in 2010, a time when augmented reality was still an emerging concept, materialized through rudimentary technological demonstrations accessible via webcams and mobile devices. Fascinated by the transformative potential of this digital environment, Mill and Jones leverage their architectural expertise to construct a complex narrative universe in which the physical city and the internet merge into a double layer of reality, challenging traditional notions of space, perception, and control.

⁶ Rick Liebling (2018). *The Aesthetics of Science Fiction. What Does SciFi Look Like After Cyberpunk?*, “Medium”, retrieved from: <https://www.medium.com>

⁷ Anna Mill, Luke Jones (2018). *Square Eyes*, Jonathan Cape, London.

The graphic novel *Square Eyes* brings a vision in which digital reality is no longer just a tool for everyday interaction, but manifests itself as a sophisticated mechanism of influence and surveillance. Although the futuristic metropolis in the pages of the book seems advanced and brilliant, its substratum hides an altered reality, shaped by a system that manipulates individuals' perceptions.

Visually, the novel proposes a distinctive aesthetic, in which physical reality is rendered through a black-and-white filter, in contrast to the digital layers, represented by vibrant colors. This stylistic choice is not a simple visual artifice, but reflects a profound dissociation between the material world, characterized by fragility and ephemerality, and the virtual dimension, omnipresent and brilliant, which overlaps with perceptible reality. Through this approach, the authors facilitate a clear delimitation of the two ontological registers, especially considering that the entire novel is created using a manual illustration technique, including digital elements. In addition, *Square Eyes* introduces a new approach to cyberpunk, while retaining its referential nature. Cyberpunk, as an aesthetic and narrative genre, fits into the paradigm of "semiotic ghosts"⁸ described by William Gibson, as well as the phenomenon of archaeology of the future proposed by Fredric Jameson. As a product of postmodern anxiety about the future, this genre constructs its aesthetics through a mixture of *high-tech* elements and images of urban decline, evoking an aesthetic that oscillates between futuristic nostalgia and a critique of hypercapitalism. In contemporary productions, this style is constantly recontextualized, becoming part of a bazaar of reusable artifacts. It is an aesthetic that not only reflects a dystopian urban reality, but also a recollection of the past, a reconstruction of a world that seems to have been lost in continuous chaos and dizzying technological change. Thus, the city described in the novel becomes an amalgam of multicultural influences, a visual mosaic that refers to various stylistic codes from *science fiction*.

A significant conceptual decision in the construction of the diegetic universe is the omission of the explicit representation of the devices through which the characters access augmented reality. Instead of resorting to recognizable images of emerging technologies, such as smart glasses or integrated lenses, the authors normalize augmented perception as an intrinsic dimension of everyday life. This choice not only ensures narrative timelessness, preventing the text from being anchored in a perishable technological context, but also lends a dimension of verisimilitude to the fictional universe.

In terms of the design of the digital interfaces in *Square Eyes*, Mill and Jones opted for an aesthetic that transcends contemporary technological paradigms. Instead of imitating conventional models of digital programming,

⁸ William Gibson (1993). *Disneyland with the Death Penalty*, "Wired", 1 April, retrieved from: <https://www.wired.com/1993/04/gibson-2/>.

they drew inspiration from natural structures and clockwork mechanisms, outlining a visual system of interaction with augmented reality that evokes the organicity and fluidity of natural forms. Thus, the novel not only imagines a possible future of digital interaction, but also proposes a mediation between technology and aesthetics through a novel visual synthesis.

Although conceived at a time when augmented reality was still in its infancy, *Square Eyes* manages to maintain its relevance by exploring fundamental issues concerning the perception, control, and manipulation of reality in a digitized era. More than just a speculative exercise on technological evolution, the novel offers a critical reflection on how AR (*augmented reality*) could reconfigure the individual's perceptual and cognitive space.

A defining dimension of this artistic project lies in its conceptual proximity to what the authors call “paper architecture”⁹. This concept refers to a creative exploration of virtual spaces and structures without the constraints imposed by material feasibility. Through this approach, Mill and Jones had the freedom to imagine an augmented metropolis, free from the physical, economic, or social limitations of the real world. Anna Mill argues that architecture on paper is not fundamentally different from digital architecture, since even in the case of static representations, the author can mentally construct complex spaces and explore them in depth, similar to an interactive digital environment.

In this vein, Luke Jones emphasizes the critical function of the concept of paper architecture, which can take the form of an ironic dystopia or a speculative utopia. Thus, although some of the imagined interfaces are designed to be functional and aestheticized, the augmented city remains ambiguous, allowing for its interpretation both as a space of freedom and as an environment of surveillance and technological control. Such ambivalence highlights the complex dynamics between the emancipatory potential and the inherent risks of augmented technology.

Therefore, the graphic novel transcends the status of a visual experiment, becoming a framework for reflection on the interaction between the individual, technology, and space.

In conclusion, the analysis of *cyberpunk* aesthetics has highlighted the interaction between technology, architecture, and society in an intercultural urban context. The genre is not only a projection of a technologized future, but also a reflection of contemporary socio-cultural realities, with a versatile aesthetic that allows for reinterpretations and adaptations. By juxtaposing the contrasts between old and new, reality and virtuality, light and shadow, *cyberpunk* becomes a distinct visual code, in which transhumanism redefines

⁹ Kent Bye (2019). *Paper Architecture & Speculative Design of AR in the Graphic Novel 'Square Eyes'*, Voices of VR [Podcast], produced by Kent Bye, 26 August, retrieved from: <https://voicesofvr.com/802-paper-architecture-speculative-design-of-ar-in-the-graphic-novel-square-eyes/>

human identity and social relations in a complex urban context that becomes a character in itself.

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