

Social Darwinism in Cyberpunk

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In the 1870s, the English sociologist Herbert Spencer applied Charles Darwin's theories of biological evolution to human behavior and institutions. Spencer used the idea of survival of the fittest in biology and theorized human society had evolved the same way (Cooper 15). Social Darwinism, as Spencer's theory is called, pits everyone against each other to survive in the world where humans are soldiers in a war for survival. If a person is poor, it is their fault and no one should help that person rise above the poverty status. If a person is rich, they are worthy of the position based on their actions, even if morally wrong. So if one is poor, the person will be weeded out of society while the rich survive.

The Social Darwinism of the nineteenth century contains several facets such as political, corporate, and individual forms of the theory. Although all these facets are found in Cyberpunk literature the genre mainly depicts the lower class of America's culture fighting for survival.

Many may argue this drive to survive, this Social Darwinism, can be found in other genres than Cyberpunk. In some ways that idea is true about Social Darwinism. For instance, the movie *The Godfather* had the Mafia families fighting for control of the crime syndicate. Sure they were struggling for survival, but what sets Cyberpunk apart is that absolutely everyone is struggling for survival. All the characters are looking for some sort of angle to get them ahead.

Also, Cyberpunk's survival of the fittest is based mainly on the technology of the times. Whoever has the faster interface or what corporation has the newest developed cyber-eye enhancement will win the evolutionary race. In something like *The Godfather*, the bigger Italian family will always win. With Cyberpunk, a fourteen-year old kid with stolen software could dump a cool million into a bank account. Not just the strong will survive, but the one with the strongest technology will triumph. This is Cyberpunk.

For example, the story *Burning Chrome* by William Gibson illustrates the genre's theme of characters manipulating technology to survive. The protagonists of Gibson's story are Automatic Jack and Bobby Quine, a couple of hackers waiting for their big score to come through. They need the financial windfall quickly too, since Bobby is losing his edge at the computer console and isn't getting any younger. "He was twenty-eight, Bobby, and that's old for a console cowboy", (Gibson 170). Jack's job is to simply keep up with the hottest software to give the pair a greater edge.

In general Gibson is describing two hackers losing the evolutionary battle for survival. At age twenty-eight, Bobby is already outdated. Cyberpunk is quick and dirty when it comes to survival. The evolutionary fight is hard and normally a character has one shot, like these two characters. What Jack and Bobby need is something to place them above the rest of the hacker world, and in Cyberpunk that can only be found through manipulating technology. This edge above competition comes in the form of a black object :

"It was obviously some kind of plug-in military program. Out of the mailer, it looked like the magazine of a small automatic rifle, coated with nonreflected black plastic. The edges and corners showed bright metal, it had been knocked around for a while." (Gibson 172)

This black plastic object is what gave Bobby and Jack the edge needed to step up from lowlife hackers to rich men. Jack buys this strange object and the two realize its potential for hackers. The black object is a Russian military software that disassembles any program and therefore any security counter-measures. After loading a fortune into a Swiss bank account the two are rich, and a local crime boss named Chrome doesn't have a penny to her name.

Like many other Cyberpunk stories, the protagonists are in the lower levels of society -- the one-celled organisms at the bottom of a pond in Missouri. The characters struggle any way they can to make ends meet under the long shadow of world corporations or crime syndicates. In Cyberpunk, the only way out is to kiss technology on the lips and use it till the characters live or die. For Automatic Jack and Bobby Quine, the edge needed to find survival was with the Russian program. In other words, the single-celled organisms in the pond went through mitosis and became fish. Like the single-celled organisms, Jack and Bobby were rarely noticed in the world. When the hackers received the Russian program they raised their status in society, as if becoming fish in a pond.

Cyberpunk does not give its characters second chances. One either makes it in society, or loses terribly in the gritty world of Cyberpunk. Jack gives the best example when speaking about Chrome after he and Bobby stole her money, "We'd taken her for everything she had. She was back on the street again. I doubted she'd live till dawn", (Gibson 189). Even if one does make the big score, a cyberpunk could fall from the evolutionary chain due to the continual drive for survival in the movement. Chrome was not strong enough so someone beat her in the struggle to survive, and Darwinism probably killed her.

Not all Cyberpunk stories follow the mainstream formula of the protagonist surviving the fight of the fittest. *Freezone* by John Shirley is one such example. *Freezone* follows the story of an outdated rocker named Rickenharp as he tries to keep "classic rock n' roll" alive. The problem stems from minimono, a new technology in music that lets the user synthesize songs directly from the brain. Of course, the old rocker believes in guitars and drums and refuses to utilize the popular new art form.

Minimono might have killed rock n' roll in *Freezone*, but Rickenharp sealed his own fate in society when he rejected the technology. The minimono artist embraces the new technology fighting the war with Rickenharp and his guitar. The old rocker's reluctance to adapt to the technology led to his demise. He had a chance in the survival of the fittest war but Rickenharp passed victory by. Social Darwinism prevailed and ate the rocker whole. Again, Cyberpunk is about winning in the war of evolution, with technology as a major weapon. Those who do not use the technology fall flat and are piled into the lower class of the Cyberpunk world. Rickenharp gave up the struggle, although it was almost hopeless, and became another single-celled organism in Missouri.

The role of technology in a struggle of social Darwinism is the basis for several Cyberpunk stories created in the past and present. What is fascinating about this theme of technology and Darwinism is that it is slowly becoming a reality. As seen in the later decades of the Twentieth century, technology has been a major factor in the lives of ordinary people. In the job market for instance, think of the skills needed to be hired in any business. A secretary needs to be familiar with the latest desktop computer software to write reports or files. A car mechanic almost needs to be an electronic engineer in order to fix a broken fuel injector. In the present work force, a person needs to understand and utilize current technology in order to survive. In the coming decades, acceptance and application of new technology could decide, like in Cyberpunk, if one floats like algae or swims like an Angel Fish.