

# Strange Days for Cyberpunk Cinema in the 90's

Lucas Johnson

May 2, 1996

*Strange Days* : this is the title of a recently released movie directed by Kathryn Bigelow; aptly, it is also a description of the film's bleak, near-future setting. Set on New Year's Eve 1999, it is the story of a black-market businessman, Lenny Nero, dealing in a new, illegal technology (specifically, "wire trip" technology) that allows the user to record and replay other people's sensory experience. Using this technology, one of Nero's associates has recorded the brutal murder of a popular civil rights leader at the hands of L.A. cops. As a police net closes around Nero and his friends, the fever-pitch of the film grows more frantic up until the gut-wrenching climax. This story, amplified by incredible performances, is the basis for the best cyberpunk film of this decade.

But you may be asking, "just what *is* cyberpunk ?". That's a good question, with many answers depending upon who you ask. Handily, most cyberpunk aficionados agree on a few "essential elements" that are identified with and prevalent within all things cyberpunk. For one, cyberpunk usually tells the story of an anti-hero utilizing new technology to fit his own needs. As ex-cyberpunk author Lewis Shiner explains, cyberpunk is about "high technology subverted by opportunists on the margins of society for profit or just for fun". Also, the cyberpunk is usually at odds with some all-powerful, Big Brother-type organization : the police, the government, you name it. In a cyberpunk version of Frankenstein "the Monster would likely be the well-funded R&D team-project of some global corporation". Another, more subjective criterion of cyberpunk is a fast-paced, visceral approach to storytelling. Bruce Sterling describes it as "crammed prose : rapid, dizzying bursts of novel information, sensory overload that submerges the reader in the literary equivalent of the hard-rock 'wall of sound'". Any product containing these elements is "cyberpunk".

To illustrate, let's take some familiar, well-acknowledged examples of cyberpunk and see if they meet these criteria. William Gibson's *Neuromancer*, the novel that "virtually single-handedly launched the cyberpunk movement", is a good representative of the genre. It clearly meets the first standard of cyberpunk; the protagonist, Case, is a matrix cowboy who illegally jacks into computer systems to steal information for his bosses. A drug-using outcast, he is the quintessential cyberpunk anti-hero, and he's being toyed with by an artificial intelligence developed by wealthy corporate kings. These evil representatives of the powerful, corporate machine fulfill the second criterion of cyberpunk. And finally, the insanely fast pace of the story matches the cyberpunk model.

A year here and he still dreamed of cyberspace, hope fading nightly. All the speed he took, all the turns he'd taken and the corners he'd cut in Night City, and still he'd see the matrix in his sleep, bright lattices of logic unfolding across that colorless void... The Sprawl was a long strange way home over the Pacific now, and he was no console man, no cyberspace cowboy. Just another hustler, trying to make it through.

These criteria are evident in other cyberpunk works as well : *Total Recall*, *Rock On*, ad infinitum.

*Strange Days* also possesses these qualities that define cyberpunk. Lenny Nero is a dealer in illegal electronics, used to record and relive titillating experiences (a convenient store heist, great sex, etc.). His addiction to his

own product makes him even more the cyberpunk hero. He lives outside the structure so rigidly enforced by the ever-present police brigades patrolling New York. They are the symbol of the powerful organization running everyone's lives, another criterion of cyberpunk. The police and the government are the omnipotent, faceless villains; faceless because there is no one person who can be named responsible, but an endless network of corruption. And finally, all the chasing and frequent plot twists create a high-speed story, which is another vital element of cyberpunk.

Actually *Strange Days* does differ slightly from the cyberpunk model outlined above. It turns out that the government is not really the bad guy in the film. Sure, the armored cops enforcing a virtual police state are an ever-present, oppressive reality in the film; but the murder of the civil rights leader turns out not to be a police/government conspiracy as hinted at throughout the film. Instead it is the work of a few, isolated racists, not working in tandem with any organization. In fact, at the end the Chief of Police arrests the bad guys and saves our good guys from certain death. However, the film repeatedly spotlights the police and the government in a highly unflattering way; the fact that they are not responsible for the one crime that is the focus of the movie does not redeem them, it simply adds an unexpected twist to the movie (perhaps at the bequest of skittish Hollywood big-wigs, but that's another story).

Perhaps because of this discrepancy, some people might not classify *Strange Days* as cyberpunk. The fact is that everyone has a different definition of cyberpunk. The important thing is not the label but the content; and anyone who loves cyberpunk should be happy to include such a fine film as *Strange Days* in their genre.

## Sources Cited

Gibson, William. "From Neuromancer". *Course Packet* Spring 1996 : 17-22.

[This contains several excerpts from Gibson's definitive cyberpunk novel, *Neuromancer*.]

McCaffery, Larry. "An Interview with William Gibson". *Course Packet* Spring 1996 : 7.

[McCaffery's introduction to the interview gives an overview of Gibson's work and its impact on the sci-fi community.]

Shiner, Lewis. "Confessions of an Ex-Cyberpunk". *Course Packet* Spring 1996 : 7.

[This article contains an excellent account of the cyberpunk movement from someone who was actually there.]

Sterling, Bruce. "Cyberpunk in the Nineties". *Course Packet* Spring 1996 : 3-6.

[This article explores the roots of the cyberpunk movement and its place in the present decade.]

Sterling, Bruce. *Mirrorshades*. New York : Ace, 1988.

[The preface, by Bruce Sterling, the editor, has been described as the cyberpunk manifesto. It explains some of the purposes and ideals of the movement.]