

Dark Images of Cyberpunk

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With the publication of seminal works such as Mary Shelly's *Frankenstein*, science fiction has always contained an appeal to the underground culture. Her gothic visions of human behavior became the inspiration for works such as Ray Bradbury's *Fahrenheit 451* and Isaac Asimov's *I, Robot* series. Though the beginning emphasized utopian societies, science fiction progressed to include a future quite different from the present. Visions of flying ships, lasers, and travels to far off space colonies inundated these works.

However, one subset of authors, such as William Gibson, Bruce Sterling, and Lewis Shiner, molded an entirely different genre of science fiction, placing more emphasis on the darker future of life on Earth. This work, later labeled "cyberpunk", brought with it a very bleak view of future societies and culture. The features of their style of writing, which include the masculinization of women, the perversion of technology, the oppressive descriptions of settings and life, and the negative characterizations of people, defined the notion of cyberpunk.

Women have a certain status in cyberpunk, one that is very contrary to the current sociological expectations of them. Women in these societies have had to adapt to the environmental pressures put on them. They behave in an unconventional manner, as their sociological role dissolves any need for refinement and they must act and think as men would if they are to survive. Illustrations of this assertion abound. On an emotional level, women are portrayed as being very aggressive, both sexually and physically. One example of this can be found in Tom Maddox's *Snake Eyes* : Lizzie and George are described as "rubbing up against one another... twinned, as if there were cables running between the two of them", and even describes their initial introduction, where Lizzie gives him a very passionate kiss immediately following their introduction. The passage also recounts in great detail the sexual encounter which occurs just minutes after their first encounter. On a physical level, the description of women in this genre seems to lack femininity as well. Another example from the same story is the initial sketch of Lizzie, "her blond hair was cut almost to the skull". This (superficial) absence of femininity is traditional in cyberpunk works. She is also described as having numerous tattoos, one on her left shoulder and curving down between her breasts, where it ended in a single blood-tear. This masculinization of women implies that the harsh conditions of the future, brought on by both advances in technology and changes in expectation, have created conditions that are not conducive to refined women or their femininity.

While today's technology is most often believed to be beneficial and advantageous, the future drawn by Gibson, Sterling, and Shiner takes a different view. The technology of their worlds is corrupted and corrupting; it is a technology that has been perverted. In *Neuromancer*, William Gibson describes a drug that has been engineered to slowly destroy its human host, much like a biological virus. Furthermore, innovation is considered not as a progression, but as a regression. In John Shirley's *Freezone*, the advent of the *minimono* is seen by the protagonist, Rickenharp, as adding to the decline of the old (read preferable) music of the 1950's and 60's. His dogged reliance on music and technology of this bygone era makes up for the absence of any religion.

In fact, in many cyberpunk novels, spirituality is virtually nonexistent. In the Cyberpunk society of the future, technology replaces deity. But it is an angry, vengeful god. Its anger strikes fear into the hearts of the people who must live by it, and this causes a kind of worship. For this reason, it is held in reverence, and inhabitants of this world are forced to obey the commandments that technical innovations have created. For example, In *Snake Eyes*, George tells of the snake, and of the Air Force technology that has led to his interminable fall from grace.

It is almost as if the technology of tomorrow has abrogated personal autonomy. Take again the protagonist from *Snake Eyes* : George is a human guinea pig experimented on by the Air Force, and then disposed of unceremoniously.

This type of exploitation is very characteristic of how people are described in cyberpunk. People are expendable; many people have little to live for. They're not worth saving, and society feels that most of its constituents don't even know who they are. The term "mirrorshades" is an oft-repeated one, turning up in both *Neuromancer* and as the title of a well known anthology. It is almost as if the people in these works have to keep looking in the mirror to make sure that they exist. It is also an indication of people's impenetrability; "The eyes are the mirror to one's soul", said William Blake, and since the eyes are covered by mirrorshades the soul cannot be seen.

If mirrorshades are used to mask feelings of depression and worthlessness, then drugs serve the opposite purpose : to enhance feelings of significance. Narcotics are ubiquitous in literature of in this genre and many of the members of these societies have fallen prey to drugs. In *Neuromancer*, Case talks extensively of his drug addiction (how he was "burned out" by a person that had given him too many drugs and describes other afflicted with the same disease : "'It's like my body's developed this massive drug dependency', he noted someone saying").

These attributes lead into what is perhaps the most disturbing characteristic of cyberpunk fiction : the gloomy, oppressive settings. Readers of cyberpunk novels often find themselves in cities very different from anything they have ever seen. Huge corporate conglomerates govern the cities, aided by technology. Great structures of steel and glass rise far into the sky, and grass and shrubbery are absent. It is interesting to note, also, how light-deficient these colonies are : in *Neuromancer*, Gibson often describes the settings as "bleak" and the sky as the "color of television, turned to a dead channel". Many of the stories take place in a space-like atmosphere, as in *Snake Eyes*, which contain no light. It is plausible to assume that the absence of this light is analogous to the absence of hope -- of abject destitution -- and that it is up to the "underground" to rise up and bring down the system.

The writings of Shiner, Gibson, and Sterling contain these threads. These features enable their works to be labeled cyberpunk. As a corollary, cyberpunk can be defined using these works because of their common features, some of which include the masculinization of women, the perversion of technology, the portraits drawn of people indigenous to the cities, and the oppressive descriptions of settings and life. It is for this reason, as well as the razor's-edge cynicism, that their work has come to be so widely accepted and so poorly imitated.