A Brief Introduction to Cyberpunk
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Dedicated to the memory of Douglas Barbour

Cyberpunk first gained prominence in the early 1980s as a response not only to the 'traditional' science fiction of the nineteenth century and the first half of the twentieth, but also to the New Wave movement beginning in the 1960s, which took a more self-consciously 'literary' approach to the genre. On the website *Cyberpunk Review*, a user known by the name "Illusivemind" defined it as follows: "Cyberpunk is about expressing (often dark) ideas about human nature, technology, and their respective combination in the near future."

In contrast to the tendency of more traditional science fiction works to be set on worlds far removed in space and time from those of author and reader, cyberpunk stories generally take place in nearer futures, or even alternative presents, on Earth. The distinguishing feature of cyberpunk, and the origin of its name, is its emphasis on the relationships between humanity and technology—the *cyber*—within societies that are in the process of radical change or breakdown, told from the perspective of the underground and/or the lower classes—the *punk*. In the introduction to her 2002 anthology *The Ultimate Cyberpunk*, Pat Cadigan, one of the subgenre's first prominent female authors, points out that although elements of what we now recognize as cyberpunk have appeared in science fiction from its beginnings, the immediate catalysts for the movement as we know it were "the technological trinity […] the telephone, the television, and the personal computer. These items have since merged into one unit with three functions." The subcultures that grew out of this "technological trinity," especially hackers and gamers, not only helped to give rise to cyberpunk as a literary and multimedia phenomenon, but in some circles even became known as cyberpunks themselves.

In addition to the elements it inherited from earlier works of science fiction, cyberpunk was also influenced by hardboiled mystery and film noir. This is particularly evident in its use of lone anti-heroic protagonists, embroiled in plots involving manipulation of characters and/or settings, in foreboding and often dystopian worlds dominated by shadowy institutional structures such as governments or corporations—and often both. Such wariness of large institutions, and with it an often ambivalent relationship with mainstream popular culture, is an attitude cyberpunk shares with punk music, as are both movements' paradoxical adoption of distinctive styles combining dark motifs and neon colour schemes on the one hand, and desire to strip their respective creative genres down to their basics on the other. Indeed, the name *cyberpunk* has come to refer also to a subgenre of electronica/industrial music that grew out of synthesizer-dominated film soundtracks from the 1970s and 1980s by composers such as Vangelis, Wendy Carlos, and Brad Fiedel. Many cyberpunk works, and authors, are fascinated with the idea of artificial stimulation in all its forms, from perception-altering drugs to cybernetic implants to the addictive nature of cyberspace itself. A further influence on cyberpunk is the field of futurology, especially the works of Alvin Toffler, whose *The Third Wave* (1980) not only outlined and anticipated the information revolution that is a major theme in cyberpunk, but also encouraged the teaching of science fiction in schools to help students better acclimate to rapid technological and sociological changes.

William Gibson's first novel, *Neuromancer* (1984), a pioneering and iconic work within the field of cyberpunk, helped to popularize both the concept of cyberspace and the word itself following its introduction in his story "Burning Chrome" (1981). It also serves as a transitional point of sorts between the worlds of cyberspace and outer space, between those of old-school science fiction and cyberpunk, and even between established and emerging technologies in the actual world, given that Gibson wrote *Neuromancer* on a typewriter and did not even own a computer at the time. The novel has provided inspiration to researchers and developers in the

fields of actual-world communication and information technology, and its being set partially in Japan has also helped to codify the country and its culture as key elements in the cyberpunk aesthetic.

Despite, or maybe even because of, the efforts of creators within the genre to distinguish it from its predecessors, cyberpunk soon became established enough to make inroads into mainstream popular culture and to become the subject both of academic essays and of parody. For instance, Donna Haraway's 1985 essay "A Cyborg Manifesto" uses the cyborg, a hybrid of human and machine, as a metaphor for her approach to socialist feminism, and for hybridization of previously binary oppositions in general—not only human/machine but also human/animal, natural/artificial, physical/non-physical, male/female, black/white, rich/poor, self/other, fiction/reality, and many others. Unlike more negative fictional depictions of cyborgs such as, for example, the Cybermen in *Doctor Who* or the Borg in *Star Trek: The Next Generation*, Haraway does not see the cyborg as a foreboding of the potential loss of humanity and individuality. Instead, she regards it as a simultaneous liberating and undermining of the human, a blurring of boundaries, in which "[t]he replicant Rachael in the Ridley Scott film *Blade Runner*"—which helped to bring cyberpunk film into the mainstream, and was itself inspired by Philip K. Dick's *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?*, a forerunner of the movement—"stands as the image of a cyborg culture's fear, love, and confusion."

Where Haraway's "Cyborg Manifesto" brought cyberpunk into the more 'serious' environment of academia, Neal Stephenson's 1992 novel *Snow Crash* took a more light-hearted approach, essentially becoming to cyberpunk what Douglas Adams' *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy* (1979) had been to old-school and New Wave science fiction—an affectionate parody that stands as a first-rate work in its own right. Stephenson imagines a comically exaggerated anarchocapitalist society in which inflation runs rampant and everything is privatized and for-profit, to the point that organized crime has become legitimized and corporations have replaced governments. However, he has claimed that the society depicted in his novel is meant less as a social commentary than as "a thought experiment […] as funny and outrageous and graphic novel-like as I could make it." But what *Snow Crash* is perhaps best known for is its envisioning of cyberspace, which Stephenson calls the Metaverse, as a fully-immersive virtual-reality environment that allows users to interact from anywhere and reinvent themselves in any way they want, limited only by imagination and bandwidth. Though Stephenson himself has acknowledged that in many ways, the virtual world of *Snow Crash* "turned out to be a failed prediction […] it worked better as a novel than as a prognostication," it became a formative influence on the development of multiplayer online gaming, particularly platforms such as *Second Life* and *Active Worlds*. Furthermore, much as the term *cyberspace* came to us through William Gibson's fiction, Stephenson popularized (but did not invent) the term *avatar*, originally derived from Hindu mythology, for a user's online representation.

Cyberpunk has endured and thrived in the early decades of the twenty-first century, even as the possible futures depicted in the classic cyberpunk works of the 1980s and 1990s have given way to the present—and in many cases have now become alternative presents and/or recent pasts. Turn-of-the-millennium and twenty-first-century cyberpunk, exemplified in works such as Lana and Lilly Wachowski's *Matrix* film tetralogy (1999, 2003, 2021), Richard K. Morgan's 2002 novel *Altered Carbon* and its 2018-20 web-series adaptation, and Denis Villeneuve's 2017 film *Blade Runner 2049*—released two years before the time in which Scott's original film, and four years before the time in which Dick's novel that inspired both films, was set—are continuing the genre's explorations and questioning of the human/technology relationship, the meaning(s) of being human, and the nature of reality itself. Designers and directors of modern and postmodern adaptations of 'canonical' literary works have even occasionally used the cyberpunk aesthetic in their approaches to these works, both to appeal to new generations of readers/viewers and to bring together the classical and the (post)modern in a characteristically cyberpunkesque manner. Emma Vieceli and Richard Appignanesi's 2007 graphic novel *Manga Shakespeare: Hamlet* is a case in point. Their collaboration transposes the iconic play and its characters into a future world devastated by climate change and living in constant threat of war, visually influenced by the style of Japanese cyberpunk manga but written in English and illustrated by a British artist. As the centrepiece of their adaptation, Vieceli and Appignanesi set the most famous passage in *Hamlet*, the

"To be or not to be" soliloquy, in a virtual-reality room, as a particularly vivid illustration of a theme common to both Shakespeare and cyberpunk: the questioning of reality.

Pat Cadigan opens the introduction to *The Ultimate Cyberpunk* with the question "Is cyberpunk dead?" and her answer, "If it were, you wouldn't be asking me that question." Though in many ways a specific product of the literary/artistic and sociopolitical milieux of the early 1980s, cyberpunk in the decades since it was first named has evolved, and been constantly reinvented, as humanity continues not only to develop new technologies but also to adjust, come to terms, grapple with its implications for our relationships with ourselves, each other, scientific and creative endeavours, and even the planet itself. It may be said that the continuing popularity of cyberpunk, in all its forms and with all its subgroups, can be summarized on the one hand by Paul Valéry's famous remark in *Reflections on the World Today*, "The future, like everything else, is no longer quite what it used to be," and on the other by a statement commonly attributed to William Gibson, "The future is already here; it's just not evenly distributed." Though the often-dystopian fictional worlds of cyberpunk serve as warnings to readers in the actual world of the potential negative consequences of technological advancement and socioeconomic inequality, they are also worlds full of possibility, reminders that even in societies dominated by unfeeling machines and indifferent institutions, it is the human, the individual, that will always find a way forward.