

Term paper on tokyo cyberpunk

[Entertainment](#), [Movie](#)



Introduction

Cyberpunk is a form of science fiction that emerged in the latter half of the 20th Century. This genre of science fiction involves the envisioning of a near future that is characterized by scientific advancement in the form of cybernetics and information technology. This advancement is however coupled with societal order breakdown where chaos and anarchy reigns. Many of the cyberpunk narratives revolve around conflicts between technological experts like hackers or even conflicts between technological mega-corporations. A lot of cyberpunk plots are set in dystopian societies marked by massive cultural rot as well as the use of advanced technology to propel this rot, oppress others and gain control and power. The 1980's is the period that saw " cyberpunk" become a full-fledged genre of science fiction and many authors and filmmakers started writing and filming on the subject. Cyberpunk was essentially born from a new wave of science fiction literature in the 1960's and 1970's. Famous authors such as Phillip Dick, J. G Ballard and Harlan Ellison are credited as key proponents of the inception of the cyberpunk genre of science fiction. Through their works, the authors created worlds characterized by artificial lives, technological dependency and social decay. The genre that came to be officially known as ' cyberpunk' in the early eighties and was thematically characterized by comprehensive exploration of technological impact on low lives -that is people living in shabbiness and in small residences stacked on top of each other in dystopian or oppressive metropolitan cities that are dominated by highly advanced technology.

However, the evolution of cyberpunk cannot be explored without the

mention of the Japanese version of this genre. As cyberpunk was becoming a full-fledged genre of science fiction in the 1980's, underground films centered on this genre started to emerge in Japan, most of with Tokyo as the basis. This genre of cyberpunk displayed almost all the characteristic of the western version of the genre although there are some few stark differences (Welker 471). For example, differences were observed in the Japanese's cyberpunk's representation of metallic and industrial imagery as well as the presence of an incomprehensible narrative. Japanese cyberpunk also tend to be primary and raw and nature. Unlike western cyberpunk, this version is not characterized by high concept but rather by attitude. It features a collision between metal and flesh and is essentially features an explosion of violence, sex, concrete and machinery, as well as chaotic universes. Major themes include technological intervention, repression, dehumanization and sexuality.

The 1982 epic film, " Blade Runner' directed by Ridley Scott is considered to be the first film to depict cyberpunk in film perfectly. This film in all aspects captures the epitome of the cyberpunk aesthetic. It represents a juxtaposition of advanced technology and societal disorder or social decay (Yuen 14). This presents a very troubling allegory of the humanity and machines relationship. This film was loosely based on ' Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep" authored by Philip Dick.

The film features a distinctive depiction of Los Angeles as future metropolis characterized by social decay and technological advancement. The city is multi-layered and structured according to class. In fact, the depiction of Los Angeles almost resembles the cityscapes of Tokyo or Hong Kong and is

almost devoid of any American culture (Welker 472). The city is depicted as radically vibrant and diverse, but at the same time, it is isolated and gloomy. Highly advanced technology dominates the life in the city but, on the other hand, low lives and poverty dominate the city's streets (Yuen 13)

The dystopian atmosphere appears to be a direct effect of extreme capitalism. As mentioned earlier, the city is highly structured with the more wealthy occupying the upward section of the metropolis while the poor are located in the downward sections. The commercial presence of capitalism is unmistakably conspicuous as the city's streets are filled with neon's advertisements that promote "better lives" in other outside colonies (Yuen 8).

"Blade Runner" set forth the pace for the evolution of the genre of science fiction that is cyberpunk. As seen, this film essentially portrayed all the characteristics that were ascribed to the genre- a dystopian metropolis characterized by class structuralism, low life, high technological advancement and social decay and disorder. The film paved the way for the development and release of other works that fall within this genre.

It is rare to talk about Japanese or Tokyo cyberpunk without mentioning 'Akira.' This was a science fiction anime that was developed in 1988 and that revolutionized Tokyo cyberpunk by a huge margin. The influence of Akira was not only felt on the Japanese audience, but it also had a worldwide effect.

Akira almost handedly popularized manga and anime for the global audience.

Akira also propagated the ethos of the cyberpunk genre by perhaps the greatest scale ever. It combined the low living/high technology and neon-lit metropolis that had been depicted in Western works such as Neuromancer and Blade Runner with overtones of body horror. Akira indeed embodies the perfect depiction of cyberpunk in form of a futuristic Neo-Tokyo (Babcock 7). Akira is set in a destitute and overcrowded Neo Tokyo of the future (Babcock, 8). The story essentially revolves around two best friends, Tetsuo and Kaneda, who are also juvenile biker thugs. The film begins with a mysterious explosion that destroys Tokyo. This happens in the futuristic year of 1989 (Babcock, 8). The film then moves on to thirty years later where Ne-Tokyo has risen from this wreckage and is once again a fully-fledged city, albeit with much differences to the original.

The two boys, Tetsuo and Kaneda and their gang of bikers are randomly strolling the streets. However, they soon engage in a spat with a rival gang about territory. Tetsuo crashes but is then immediately and mysteriously taken away by scientific and military officials where he is taken to a government facility. (Babcock, 8). Kaneda in his attempt to rescue his friend manages to penetrate the facility along with a young girl named Kay who is a member of a resistance group which has its own plan of invading the facility. Once they successfully penetrate the facility where Tetsuo is being held and while there, Kaneda makes a huge discovery. The government has created a program that it is currently using to boost and develop the powers of telepathic or psychic children like Tetsuo. Tetsuo is one of the victims and while, at the facility, the government officials experiment on him infusing

him with chemicals that ultimately alters his body (Babcock, 8). He is turned into a ‘psycho-kinetic supernatural’ with incredulous and uncontrollable power. Because of his new paranormal abilities, he is able to escape the facility and goes on a violent and destructive rampage through the unsuspecting futuristic Tokyo as he seeks audience with the main protagonist, Akira who is a powerful entity who had destroyed the old city of Tokyo some years before (Babcock, 8). Akira was a boy who was similarly empowered and it was his wrath that, in fact, that resulted in the annihilation of Tokyo that was shown at the beginning of film.

For an anime feature, Akira’s cinematography is quite exemplary, and it is clear that it was a very expensive film. The film does not abide by the traditional procedures of anime making in Japan most of which preferred to take short cuts resulting to sub-quality work. Thousands of animation cells are used in order to create fluid motion in the film.

The film is filled with conspicuous cyberpunk themes that include modernity, mutation and social unrest. The theme of mutation is shown whereby humans become almost machine-like with super powers that enable them to do things that conventional humans are unable to do. Tetsuo fuses with metal, and this in the end results in the creation of horrific man-machine hybrid (Babcock, 9). Through this, he essentially becomes a master of a newly created universe. The fusion of Tetsuo with metal and his transformation into machine hybrid is reminiscent of the Japanese cyberpunk idea or notion of the human form being corrupted by technology (Babcock, 9). In this case, this takes place in a literal form- the human is literally corrupted by technology whereby his humanity is changed, and he now

almost resembles a machine.

There are other aspects that qualify Akira as a true Japanese /Tokyo cyberpunk. First, there is the element of data exchange and control by a government that is corrupt. Not surprisingly, this is accompanied by individuals or groups who are resisting this control (Babcock, 9). The resistance movement is signified by the likes of Kaneda and Kay among the other rebels. The government is corrupt in that it suppresses information from the public domain. For instance, it suppresses information regarding the real cause of the destruction of Tokyo. The resistance group or the rebels in this film “ Akira’ clearly opposes this control of society (Babcock, 9). While the rebels are directly fighting and resisting the government forces, they at the same time attempt to battle the “ information society” anonymity by fully asserting their own identities. For instance, Kaneda and his fellow bikers fulfill this by the personification of their vehicles whereby they make their bikes not only the main means of their transportation but also their personal icons.

The shadowy cityscape of Tokyo is also a perfect depiction of cyberpunk dystopia. In addition, the premise of the film is consistent with the basics of cyberpunk where the future that is explored is not that far away. For instance, the film mentions that the accident that destroyed the city actually took place in 1989, which is exactly one year after the film was released (Babcock, 9). The “ near-futurity” of the film, therefore, helps to ground it in the issues and aspects of the modern Japan.

Technology is vastly present in Akira, but it is not revealed in the conventional form. In fact, the technology comes in a disguised and unusual

form. Characters like Tetsuo have psychic powers that emanate from information contained in their genetic code. Therefore, in the film *Akira*, information technology adopts an organic form (Babcock, 9). The regulation of this technology is one of the primary themes, an aspect that is once again consistent with cyberpunk. Similar to the genre of cyberpunk, there is a suggestion in the film that although power is present everywhere and in all humans, only a few individuals can access it. This is synonymous with *Blade Runner* whereby in spite of technology being vastly available everywhere, the streets still spew poverty (Yuen 3). The experiments that are conducted by the government of Neo-Tokyo are intended to harness the power that is represented by the genetic information (Babcock, 9). This is by controlling the mechanisms in which this information is retrieved and stored, and this is children. This is perhaps synonymous with the situation that happened in Japan in the 1980's when the citizens became increasingly distrustful of the corporate access of personal dossiers via computer networks (Babcock, 9) In the same manner, the characters in the film *Akira* are forced to face the terrifying regulation of their psychic abilities via human machinery control. Another film whose role in the evolution of the Japanese cyberpunk is enormous is the 1995 classic " *Ghost in the Shell*". This film introduces aspects of cyberpunk absent in films such as *Akira* and *Blade Runner*, and this is cyborg. These are purely machine characters who have been created in such a manner that they mimic all the basic traits of humans including the ability to walk and talk (Yuen 4).

" *Ghost in the Shell*" depicts a futuristic dystopian society where the boundary between the real and the virtual world is very blurred

(Cubukcuoglu n. p). Influences from the “ Blade Runner” are however conspicuous in this film. The setting of the film is in the mid-21sts Century where cyber technology has saturated almost every element of everyday life. Nearly every character has a cyber-brain that has the ability to store memories and at the same time, this brain can acts as type of a direct interface with the “ Net” which is most likely the internet of this time (Yuen 5). However, as with every other society, there exists criminals, who in the film are in the form of hackers who usually engage in mind to mind cyber-attacks with the intention of stealing information, spying and even in some occasions taking complete control of other people making them to become their puppets.

The main character. Major Motoko Kusanagi has been artificially created in a laboratory, but the finished product looks nothing less human. Kusanagi is the most competent officer in counter fighting cybercrimes in the future Neo Tokyo city’s department of defense. She leads a team of officers under a platoon named ‘ Section 9” which has been given the task of arresting “ The Puppet Master”, who is master hacker of some of the city’s cyber brains and is thus the puppeteer of several person in the narrative (Cubukcuoglu n. p). Throughout the film, Kusanagi experiences personal conflict in regards to her identity. She doubts her humanness and therefore laments this identity crisis throughout the film. In spite of the fact that she is not the only cyborg, other cyborgs have no such doubts about their identity and in fact act totally human including eating human food in spite of the fact that they do not really need this food.

There is one major deviation in this film from many cyberpunk film.

Traditionally, female bodies for cyborgs or female human-machine crosses were often used as tools for seduction which accompanied the sinister and ruthless plans of the mind of the cyborg body. This is not the case with Kusanagi (Cubukcuoglu n. p). She is fully in control of her own body and is also, in fact, in charge of all the abilities that her body has. However, it is in the most important part of her body-her mind- that she searches for her essence. Therefore, when at end it becomes clear that the Puppet Master was simply a computer program created by the central government for diplomatic hacking of minds and which had in the course of this process became aware of its individual existence because of travelling and coming across a surfeit of consciousnesses, Kusanagi suffers greatly as a result of confusion about what exactly qualifies one to be a subject, a life-form and most importantly, a human (Cubukcuoglu n. p).

One obvious aspect of cyberpunk that is present is disciplinary surveillance in a dystopian city. In the Ghost of the Shell, the government enacts a new order in the society and maintains it by intensive surveillance of all cyber activity through various means and regulations (Yuen, 11).

As in other cyberpunk films, technology is present everywhere in Ghost of the Shell, but individuals do not have the power or authority to use it as they like, and this is a classic element of cyberpunk. Individuals are regulated because of the understanding that with such a vast presence of technology, there are tremendous possibilities that could be achieved (Cubukcuoglu n. p). As is common with this science fiction genre that is cyberpunk, the central government or authority is portrayed as being at its most oppressive stage where it keeps the normal citizens under its tight control and any form

of deviance is crushed immediately so as not to inspire others to deviate (Cubukcuoglu n. p).

This dystopian society is characterized by several elements of advanced technology that in the long run only further accentuate the oppression advanced towards the average population. Some of these technological elements include; robots that have been technologically advanced and that have been specially created to serve the government, AI computers and sentient cyberborgs that hugely outpace humans in almost every capacity (Cubukcuoglu n. p). Perhaps the most interesting aspect of this cyberpunk is the existence of cyborgs that become jealous of humans for their vulnerable and delicate mode of life and existence.

Conclusion

It is fairly safe to conclude that cyberpunk has become a dominant genre of science fiction especially in film. As discussed, this genre of science fiction involves the envisioning of a near future that is characterized by scientific advancement in form of cybernetics and information technology and is coupled with societal order breakdown where chaos and anarchy reigns. Many of the cyberpunk narratives revolve around conflicts between technological experts like hackers or even conflicts between technological mega-corporations. This is the case in the three films discussed in the essay, that is, the Blade Runner (which paved the way for the other cyberpunk films), Akira and Ghost in the Shell. In all these films, the plot is set in dystopian societies marked by massive cultural rot and the use of advanced technology to propel this rot, oppress others and gain control and power. This is indeed the perfect exemplification of cyberpunk, and the latter two

films (Akira and Ghost in the Shell), are a reflection of the enormous role played by Japanese cyberpunk in the general cyberpunk movement.

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