

# Visual Characteristics and Paradoxical Aesthetics of Cyberpunk films

## A Case study of *The Ghost in the Shell*

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### ABSTRACT

This essay analyzes the visual characteristics and paradoxical aesthetics of Cyberpunk films to explore the connection between visual design, reality, and technologies. Cyberpunk has played a vital role in recent years because of the rapid development of CG and visual design in the film industry. Therefore, extreme visual impact and cultural connotation are analyzed visual analysis and paradoxical aesthetics, so that it could provide a visual way to see the world through conflicts between high-tech and dystopian, mind control and electronic body, and the decline of human nature and ethics. The significance of this analysis is to find out the mutual effect between techniques and the spiritual core of cyberpunk-style films and how it develops human imagination and thinking of future culture in a cutting-edge way.

**Keywords:** *Cyberpunk, Visual, philosophy, connotation.*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Cyberpunk could be described as “high tech/ low life”—basically an advanced technology world inhabited by people who can’t afford the luxuries [1]. With the development of filmmaking technologies like CG and visual design, the Cyberpunk aesthetic has been embedded in contemporary film for the last few years. The year 2020 plays a vital role for Cyberpunk. Cyberpunk and Visual Culture provides critical analysis, close readings, and aesthetic interpretations of exactly those visual elements that define cyberpunk today [2]. As a typical cyberpunk film, *Ghost in the Shell 2: Innocence* has an overwhelming amount of visual symbolism mixed into the story in every shot, which is also one of the greatest strengths of this anime film. Besides, the director of *Innocence* made a statement by aesthetically creating various conflicts.

In this essay, this anime cyberpunk film will be analyzed from two perspectives as a typical case, including visual analysis and paradoxical aesthetics. Following analysis, we will discuss the mutual influence among people, technology, and cyberpunk film, from

the mass aesthetic to modern technology to the film industry's production.

## 2. RELATED WORK ON CYBERPUNK FILM

The film is a great avenue to show Cyberpunk perspectives. This is because special effects, CGI, animation, and talented actors can vividly present the cyberpunk world to the audiences. [3]

Compared to other strategies like fiction, photos, or music, the film reveals more details to enrich people’s imagination instead of creating space for envisioning and let them understand the expected future world deeply but not superficially.

Cyberpunk film has three subcategories: Animated Cyberpunk films like “Akira”, Terminator(Franchise)films such as “Terminate: Dark Fate”, films about virtual reality include “Hyperland”.[4]. Starting with “Neuromancer”, Cyberpunk’s science fiction branch was officially named, with the keywords “high-tech, low-life, dystopia, cyberspace, and hacking”. High-tech and dystopia, dictatorship and heroism, mind control and electronic

body, human nature decline, and ethics, everyone can find their interest points and values can be placed in cyberpunk movies.

In movies, artificial intelligence frequently appears in people's eyes. When people start to think deeply about the future technology and imagine how they will be able to facilitate themselves, there will be inevitable conflicts between people and things. The problem "who am I" is usually throughout all the movies because you cannot even prove yourself when life is mixed with robots, bionic, and cyborgs.

About the main contents of the film, computers and the degree of information technology help indicate the development of human society. Most films will first illustrate the evil concept and definition of Cyberpunk, depict the mainstream culture and the spirit of resistance contrast image style. Compared to two completely different environments, the film finally presents a diversified expression of revolt.

A lot of novel and complex techniques are needed to be used in cyberpunk movies.

First of all, the distinct color effect. In the dark shades of blue and purple, neon lights sparkle, giving people a sense of future beauty. The glitch can be found in many cyberpunk works because both cyberpunk and glitch are artistic expressions of techno. Therefore, in the works of cyberpunk, we often see image distortion, dislocation, broken and other characteristics of fault wind. So, what about dystopia? Some abnormal scenes are the expression of dystopia, such as the 180-degree reversal of buildings, the billboards hanging on the blue and purple buildings with retro style, the night sky with neon gradient, etc. These abnormal scenes are never seen in real life. Secondly, Neon and Holograms. People use neon as a light source because of the environmental damage caused by our high technology. It also shows the flourishing scene of the future human world. This is the idea of people in the 1980s, in the 21st century, AR is slowly becoming mature. In terms of vision, we use holographic projection to make light and shadow. The effect will be more brilliant than neon lights, showing a sense of future technology.

Several cyberpunk cities are also essential to the development of this genre. Cyberpunk is inspired by the Kowloon Walled Village in Hong Kong, with its crowded residential buildings, dirty environment, and the sky full of red and blue-purple signs, run-down streets. The scene makes a great comparison with the bustling Victoria Harbour. Japan was ascendant when Cyberpunk was first coming out, and it is of great importance in the real of Cyberpunk. Japan is full of cyberpunk elements: Modern artifacts, multicolored neon light, complex streets, crowded throng, impenetrable community... William Gibson said,

"Japan was already in cyberpunk and live in the future".[5]

In fact, in many cyberpunk movies, what they most envision as human beings are the dark side of technology. Blade Runner, for example, is full of huge symbolic towers, reproductive replicants. As human beings continue to develop technology but forget basic ethics, a sense of being in control of what they have created can be involuntarily generated.

### **3. CASE STUDY - GHOST IN THE SHELL 2: INNOCENCE**

The Ghost in the Shell 2: Innocence is an anime cyberpunk film written and directed by Mamoru Oshii, released in Japan in 2004. The story of Innocence takes place in 2032 when the city is full of the dwindling races of humans, purely mechanical androids, and cyborgs who still have a ghost (this could refer to the human spirit) but are vulnerable to hacking. In this era, the boundary between countries around the world is blurred, resulting in a high degree of cultural integration. The case study will be conducted from perspectives of visual characteristics and paradoxical aesthetics.

#### **3.1. Visual analysis**

In this part, a range of visual elements and design principles will be focused on, which will be demonstrated by analyzing several selected frames as examples.

As showed below, the strong contrast is created by light and dark. The bright and lifelike light with golden crumbs falls on the parade boat and tall buildings. However, the crowded people around them are hiding in the shadows. Those contrast could draw the audience's attention to this grand religious ceremony, especially emphasize a sense of holiness and the desire for things out of reach. In the context of the anime film, this desire could be a belief or humanity.



**Figure 1.** The image comes from a selected video

Additionally, sound and lighting can serve several purposes that are either important on the emotional side

of the movie or enhance the storytelling. Creating atmosphere and portraying emotions are two main functions of music and lighting in film, which can make the audience get into the emotions and set the tone of the films. Speaking of the film, different feelings and moods, enhanced by bright color, background music with mysterious style, and carnival-like ritual dance, also create a dramatic contrast. To be more specific, the bright color coming from natural sunlight in the following frame could demonstrate feelings of happiness and positivity. Contrary, the music “Making of Cyborg” creates a mysterious and weird atmosphere.

The important movement that is emphasized in one clip of the film is sacrifice paradise. The whole procedure, including what happens in different areas on the street, is mostly presented with different film language in terms of cinematography. For example, the sacrificial god and temples, a sacred symbol of the human spirit, are shown by close-up shots and low angles. This could be considered as reverence for the gods. Besides, a pack of characters watching the ceremony and the whole sacrifice scene are shot at a high angle. This shows the whole picture of this event—the sacrificial ceremony.



Figure 2. The image comes from selected video



Figure 3. The image comes from a selected video



Figure 4. The image comes from a selected video

### 3.2. Paradoxical Aesthetics

With the rapid development of technology like artificial intelligence and network, the city landscape has been changed in various ways. As a life-imitating-art cyberpunk story, *Ghost in the Shell 2* shows an artistic expression of the multidimensional conflict between cyberspace and reality, as well as humanity and AI.



Figure 5. The image comes from a selected video

Firstly, scenes from this film insinuate the mainstream culture and the spirit of resistance contrast. They could show us a future world where humans, purely mechanical androids, and cyborgs live. What should be noticed is that humanity may vanish because of the advancement of technology. However, some cyborgs made and even controlled by technology are still pursuing humanity. For example, a clip from this film reflects the technical impact on ceremony, the conflict between humanity and AI, the blurring of cultural boundaries by playing a scene where people are staring at burning cyborgs in the fire without any emotion.

Cyberspace is a mixture of the social “real” landscape that we see and computerized images [2]. When it comes to the imaginary world and reality, the plot of this cyberpunk film could be regarded as a prediction of technological influence in 2032 from the perspective of 2004. In the meantime, the CG technique improved the visual effect of this cyberpunk anime film two decades ago. As a result, this could provoke the audience’s deep thinking on the interplay between the change of society and the development of advanced

technologies and how changes will be shown in visual media.



Figure 6. The image comes from a selected video



Figure 7. The image comes from a selected video

#### 4. DISCUSSION

The visual features of cyberpunk movies will bring unprecedented unique and huge appeal to people. At the same time, it will also bring great influence for ordinary people, from the mass aesthetic to modern technology to the film industry's production. Technology permeates everyday life. Because of the pessimistic and system-critical world view, the films can be called Dystopias. Although they serve as mass entertainment, they are based on philosophical key questions -- What makes us human? What are the limits of humanity? [7] As we all know, cyberpunk was born in the 1980s and evolved from an unpopular quirky genre to a mainstream genre of fantasy technology. Of course, this includes the change of the public's concept of cyberpunk. However, how did the public gradually accept the cyberpunk style and be influenced by it?

The public seems to be born with imagination and a longing for the future. Since the last century, various fantasy works about the future world have emerged endlessly, including visual media in the style of cyberpunk. However, there have been similar books before that. "1984" and "Brave New World" are two popular works in the famous trilogy of dystopian literature. The ideas of the two novels are completely different. Still, they also depict a kind of future social situation, that is, the order of human society will change greatly under the highly developed science and

technology world. The content of "1984" is always shrouded in a pessimistic color, whether the soul of freedom or independence will become a luxury; Brave New World, by contrast, portrays a future that is fertile ground for pleasure. People enjoy all the conveniences brought by science and technology, but they lose themselves and humanity in the process of drifting.

With the emergence of these two literary works, more and more people began to express different views on the future social environment, which greatly promoted the birth of the cyberpunk style in the last century. Cyberpunk is considered to be a pessimistic fantasy for the future of human beings, but also because of the artificial intelligence, hacking, body modification, and a series of elements that it has a unique charm, the color of some dystopian will highly impact on visual effect. So, the original cyberpunk has harvested a large number of loyal fans. When it was shown on the big screen, more and more people were attracted by the surreal tone of the work, and the audience gradually turned from small audiences to the masses. By this point, the mainstream film media had acknowledged the enormous influence that cyberpunk could bring.

Cyberpunk, which simply means surreal technology, has permeated virtually every aspect of our lives. Raf Simons 2018 SS is a new clothing line launched by Raf Simons in 2018. Its design was inspired by the 1982 Ridley Scott film Blade Runner, a typical cyberpunk style film. As soon as the costume was born, it quickly gained attention and affirms most fashion circles and netizens. In addition, the show of Raf Simons 2018 SS was located in the center of the retro Chinatown. The huge contrast between the technology, fashion, and retro living background was completely in line with the core concept of cyberpunk. This is a great attempt because it demonstrates the power of cyberpunk and shows that people are becoming more and more comfortable with it.

In addition to our daily lives and aesthetics being transformed by cyberpunk, more importantly, the style has been connected to the rest of our real society. The 2004 Ghost in the Shell animated film is an early work of the cyberpunk genre. Although it is only an animated film, the genre has gone some way to influencing the future of modern cinema, technology, and reality.

The emergence of cyberpunk films actually indicates that people are becoming more and more receptive to this form of film full of visual features. With such influences and changes, many people have come to believe that elements of cyberpunk films are related to the future development of the world. In cyberpunk's worldview, the future is heavily polluted, technology has been developed to the extreme, capital and the best belong to the rich and capitalists, and the poor are under tremendous pressure. The background is not without foundation, and many people think the world is likely to become what it looks like in the movie. But many others

said the vision of cyberpunk was too dark and decadent to be the future presented in the film. Just like our chosen case: *Ghost in the Shell*, everyone in the audience had different opinions and comments when it was released. The concept of cyberpunk was new more than a decade ago, so it immediately caught the public's attention. Due to the high level of discussion, this kind of film is watched by more and more people and has gradually become the source of inspiration for many films and media. Many people think that cyberpunk films will continue in the future because, from the visual impact point of view, cyberpunk films will give the audience a stronger visual impact. Robots, special effects, technical warfare, and so on are some of the most exciting visual elements in commercial films. They are bound to occupy a relatively high position in future films.

Dr. Chougule wrote in his paper "Technophobia or Technophilia? "Discusses how humans use machines and technology. At the same time, it also explains that the derivative works of cyberpunk can reflect the influence of technology and media on human beings [8]. I agree with this point to some extent because there is a two-way connection between culture and cultural products. Endless cultural products will promote the diversification of cultural structure in reality. At the same time, culture is also the foundation of all kinds of cultural products.

Therefore, the media, including cyberpunk, is bound to have an impact on reality [9], which is reflected in the connection between cyberpunk and technological culture. Just like cyberpunks are set in the future, most of them are set in an era of advanced technology, So many media workers will add a lot of science fiction elements, including the biological simulation technology in "*blade runner*" and "*the matrix*" in the network and hackers, "*Ready Player One*" in virtual reality, and in "*ghost in the shell*" AI robots, etc.

In general, the genre of cyberpunk is quite diverse. In the final chapter of *How to See the World, Visual Activism*, there is a line that says we can actively use visual culture to create new self-images, new ways of seeing and being seen, and new ways of seeing the world [10]. We found that the popularity of such films often makes people think about future technology, such as: Is the technology in the movies even possible? Or can people really enter a completely virtual world? The answer may be yes. Today's technology is advancing rapidly, such as VR, simulation games, and even artificial intelligence robots and drones are becoming common. Although cyberpunk films are tinged with magical realism, the concepts related to technology are not completely unrealistic and can even construct a whole future technological world. To some extent, this is also the film's imagination and guidance for future technology. We need to know that as a mass mainstream

medium, the film actually reaches audiences around the world. Therefore, the film has a huge impact on people, and the unique theme film of cyberpunk is bound to expand the acceptance of the public and bring them a lot of new thinking about technology and technology.

## 5. CONCLUSION

This paper analyzes the visual style and paradox aesthetics of cyberpunk style. We take *Ghost in the Shell 2: Innocence* as a case study to explore the influence of cyberpunk films on people from visual analysis, background culture, and philosophical connotation. We found that the cyberpunk style films, often through extreme visual impact and cultural connotation, express the idea of a cutting edge, such as high-tech and dystopian, dictatorship and heroism, mind control and electronic body, and the decline of human nature and ethics. So, everyone can find his interest in cyberpunk film and values. This paper basically summarizes the core and expression techniques of cyberpunk culture. Especially from the perspective of visual effect, the visual characteristics and cultural connotation contained in cyberpunk style is a cutting-edge embodiment of modern cultural style, which will affect people's aesthetic appreciation and thinking mode in the future, and this influence will continue. The significance of this analysis lies in the specific exploration of the expression techniques and spiritual core of cyberpunk style films and how it develops human imagination and thinking of future culture in a cutting-edge way. Today, we can actively use visual culture to create new self-images, new ways of seeing and being seen, and new ways of seeing the world. Therefore, the definition of the world and things is not fixed, and everyone's way of looking at the world is different and subjective. That's why cyberpunk movies can be so popular.

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