



The Transformation of Cyberpunk From Resistant Subculture to Popular Style

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Abstract. Since the 1980s, innovations in information technology have brought unprecedented impact on human society, and the relationship between humans and artificial intelligence has been thrust into the limelight. Against this background, this study aims to explore how the symbolic meaning of the subculture represented by cyberpunk has changed under the influence of technology, society, and capital. Theoretical insights from symbolic value theory and symbolic interaction theory are synthesized in the context of cyberpunk's transformation, based on which a conceptual framework is thus proposed. In a documentary analysis, this essay divides cyberpunk's transformation process into different stages: in the growing stage, classic cyberpunk inherits the resistance of punk culture; in the changing stage, the resistance of post-cyberpunk culture reflects the cultural qualities of postmodernism; and in the merging stage, commercial cyberpunk has become a popular style, gradually losing its resistance to the mainstream culture. It is found that, during the transformation of cyberpunk, its resistance shows different characteristics in different stages, which reflects the relationship between subculture and mainstream culture from resistance to incorporation. With the findings, this study contributes to the cyberpunk culture literature by extending the application of symbolic value theory and symbolic interaction theory. Meanwhile, the findings also provide guidelines for future cyberpunk research in meaning.

Keywords: Cyberpunk · Literature studies · Symbolic value · Transformation · Resistance · Subculture

1 Introduction

In the late 1970s, as cybernetics and computer technology advanced, a group of science fiction writers began to combine computers and computer networks with biology and chemistry to create content, which formed a subtype of science fiction – cyberpunk [1]. Unlike traditional science fiction' depictions of distant outer space, cyberpunk focuses on the near-future of the next 20 or 30 years, with a strong sense of realism in reflection on contemporary technological and cultural phenomena.

Some cultural researchers use cyberpunk science fiction works as texts to study cyberculture. In 1986, Sterling published *Mirrorshades: The Cyberpunk Anthology* and illustrated the cultural phenomenon behind the cyberpunk literary movement from the

perspective of the history of science fiction [2]. Through interviews with American cyberpunk science fiction writers such as William Gibson, McCaffery pointed out that science fiction reflects the cultural logic of postmodernism [3]. Cavallaro used William Gibson's work as a research text to discuss cyberpunk fiction and its cultural phenomena according to themes such as virtual technology, gender, and city [4].

Some scholars examine the postmodernist theories through the cultural practices of cyberpunk. Bukatman concluded that the lines between postmodern theorists such as Jean Baudrillard and science fiction writers such as William Gibson are increasingly blurred [5]. Featherstone and Burrows talked about the new relationships in Cyberspace between individuals and technology, individuals and authority, etc. [6]. Person announced Notes Towards a Postcyberpunk Manifesto, which made a distinction between classic cyberpunk and post-cyberpunk [7]. Gayadri used *Neuromancer* as an example to analyse how cyberpunk became representative of postmodern fiction [8].

However, as a subculture, most academic research on cyberpunk focuses on well-known classics such as *Neuromancer* (1984) and *Ghost in the Shell* (1995), while the research on the latest works is relatively lacking. There is little exploration of cyberpunk's changes in the wave of commodification and in the processes of symbolic exchange.

Because the existing research on cyberpunk is scattered and confusing, a clear structure is needed for scholars to review. This essay takes cyberpunk as an example, aims to explore the transformation of subculture, from resisting to being commodified by the market, and explores the factors that drive this process.

To understand how the symbolic meanings of cyberpunk as a type of subculture have been changed over time by the capitalist market and interpersonal interaction, this paper uses textual analysis and divides the transformation of cyberpunk into three stages: the beginning, the transition, and the integration, and selects representative literary and film works from each stage as research materials.

Meanwhile, this paper adopts Jean Baudrillard's symbolic value theory, and Mead's symbolic interaction theory to refine, group, and analyze cyberpunk's subcultural images [9, 10]. Baudrillard discovered that the commercial goods people consume have not only use-value and exchange-value but also a symbolic value, manifested in perceived social status. Mead discovered that everything humans have interaction with has meanings, which are also initially given by humans.

In light of the above, although cyberpunk was born as a subculture to reflect the reality of "high tech, low life" in the processes of symbolic commodification and interactive identity confirmation, it has been simplified into a popular style and lost the critique of hyperreality.

2 The Growing Stage of Classic Cyberpunk

Science fiction is a type of imagined fiction based on a hypothetical scientific discovery or an amazing environmental change. In the mid-1960s, influenced by the French New Wave art movement, technophobia replaced the cult of technology. Science fiction became more concerned with the impact of technological developments on individuals and society. In the 1980s, cyberpunk writers began to create dystopia novels that portrayed a world increasingly invaded by technology and explored the negative effects of technological development on humanity.

2.1 The Origins of Cyberpunk

Cyberpunk works inherited the rebellious nature of punk culture and cybernetics. Wiener defined “cybernetics” as the science of control and communication between the animal and the machine [11]. Influenced by cybernetics, classic cyberpunk embodies that the disadvantages of technological advancement are unavoidable. In *Blade Runner* (1982), which is adapted from *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep* (1986), high-tech products created by humans are out of control and damage existing ecosystems.

Classic cyberpunk works focus on human’s future cyber life and spirit, which has its dystopian subversion on issues of man-machine life [12]. The visions of utopian writers are precisely the disasters of dystopian writers, and instead of facilitating the emancipation of the human mind, highly developed technology has become a killer of the human imagination. Savino evaluated cyberpunk can be summed up by words like “technological abuse” and “environmental repression” [13]. Cyberpunk novels transfer the “utopian world” into a virtual network, where humans appear to be free, but actually become technology’s slaves.

As a subculture, the punk culture originated from working-class youth, with a natural spiritual core of resistance. Similarly, the protagonists of cyberpunk fictions are always lower-class people, who are on the fringes of society and love freedom [7]. William Gibson’s *Neuromancer* (1984) is a classic dystopian work, which formed a science fiction mode called “Neuromancer mode.” In this category of work, the multinationals have centralized control over the lower classes, maximising their profits through the production of various products, while the people have to submit to being a passive link in the commodity production line in order to make a living. Most of the protagonists in this type of novels live on the margins of society and use advanced excellent computer skills to maintain their livelihood and achieve self-worth.

2.2 The Hyperreality in Cyberspace

Neuromancer (1984) first introduced the term “cyberspace,” which is a virtual scene built from digital and code and a hyperrealist space that combines virtuality and reality. Baudrillard proposed the concept of “hyperreality,” which means that the distinction between reality and virtuality has become blurred [14]. With the emergence of information technology, simulacra are developed as facsimile simulacra of things without prototypes determined by structural value. In the third order of simulacra, simulacra create hyperreality. Pat Cadigan’s work, *Sown Crash* (1992), created the concept of “Metaverse,” which refers to a digital space that is parallel to reality and highly connected to society. Shannon developed the concept of “E-topia,” where people rely more on information and networked interconnection [15].

Cyberspace provides a stage for individuals to show their true selves. Coleman pointed out that cyberspace is a space for the objective subject to explore his or her mind [16]. In cyberspace, people can construct virtual identities and complete social interaction and self-presentation. According to Mead’s symbolic interaction theory, people interact with others by exchanging symbols. In virtual cyberspace, users represent themselves by using symbols, breaking the traditional face-to-face interaction model, and communicating through the medium. When individuals become ID symbols, they

can be anyone they want to be and are free from the confines of the real world. With the help of anonymity, people are free to choose and shape their identity, thus gaining social identity.

Classic cyberpunk works also contain concerns about the thrill of the virtual world which draws people into the simulacra of the screen. In 1982, Bruce Bethke composed *Cyberpunk*, published in *Amazing Stories*, which tells the story of the hacking experiences of a group of young people obsessed with computer networking technology. As a work of realism, it explores two issues: the moral and ethical crisis that computers bring to young people and the redistribution of social rights by computer technology [17]. *Neuromancer* (1984) includes William Gibson's concern about the addiction of young people. The protagonist, Case, who is addicted to a virtual world, is unable to use the brain-computer interface to access the global computer network in cyberspace because of the destruction of the central nervous system, which deprives him of a sense of belonging.

In the beginning stage, classic cyberpunk was in the infancy of dystopia and science fiction. Even though the works contained many technological reflections, social critiques, and reflections on human nature, they just received a small group's attention and did not form an identity within the subcultural community.

3 The Changing Stage of Post-cyberpunk

The information revolution of the 1960s led to a high level of capitalism and a "postmodern" transformation of society's cultural types. In the postmodern cultural context, literature expressed concerns about the present by describing the future. Zoe Sofia described postmodernism as "the collapsed of the future onto the present," which means humans need to pay the price for breaking the constraints of nature through technology [18]. From the late 1980s to the 1990s, cyberpunk literature embodied postmodern cultural contexts and representations, which shows a stronger sense of reality than the fantasy of earlier science fiction.

3.1 The Return of Soft Science Fiction

Person announced *Notes Towards a Postcyberpunk Manifesto* at Slashdot, which noted that science fictions entered the post-cyberpunk era in 1988 with the publication of Bruce Sterling's *Islands in the Net* [12]. This phase of post-cyberpunk fiction continued the human-machine bonding theme of earlier novels without indulging in the pessimistic dystopian atmosphere. The post-cyberpunk writers were concerned about the misuse of technology. Their fictions reduced the proportion of technology theories and revived the tradition of "soft science fictions," which focus on humanistic and social reflection.

Person revealed that while the protagonists in early cyberpunk science fictions try to overthrow the social order, post-cyberpunk protagonists help to establish a better social order [12]. For example, *Islands in the Net*'s protagonists are no longer highly skilled, struggling at the bottom of society, but middle-class people who maintain social stability. In addition, post-cyberpunk works focus on issues arising from economic globalization

and cultural pluralism. Sown Crash (Neal Stephenson, 1992) painted a picture of a society where globalization and anti-globalization, ethnic conflict and national integration coexist. People living in complex interwoven communities with different ethnic and cultural backgrounds lead to racial prejudice which becomes a central question.

3.2 The Bricolage and Homology Method of Meaning Generating

The Birmingham School argues that subcultural styles do not create meanings in anything but adapt existing objects to generate new meanings. To explain this process, the Birmingham School introduced the concept of “bricolage” and “homology.” According to Jameson, “bricolage” means reworking and rewriting old systems, which is the primary way of postmodern cultural and artistic production [19]. According to Jefferson, “homology” refers to the copying and replication of a structure [20]. The bricolage and homology of subcultures create a sense of resistance, which gives cyberpunk a critical function. As Kellner pointed out that cyberpunk mirrors the present through the imagination of the future, highlighting critical current phenomena and their possible implications [21]. On the one hand, cyberpunk works use bricolage to imagine the future based on the real world; on the other hand, cyberpunk works use homology to depict the problems brought about by technological development, such as environmental pollution and the division between the rich and the poor, suggesting the dangers of the real world.

By the end of the 1990s, cyberpunk fictions were fading, while cyberpunk films and animation produced many classics. Science fiction films presented a more visual representation of humankind’s imagination of its future form of body and existence. Haraway defined “cyborg” as a cybernetic organism, a hybrid of machine and organism, a creature of social reality, and a creature of fiction [22]. In *Ghost in the Shell* (1995), transplantation technology allows the transplantation of a human brain into a mechanical body, which makes the boundary between man and machine disappear and it turns into a complete cyborg. As this new technology advances, the physical body is no longer a necessary object for human beings, and the concept of the human self has changed.

The cyberpunk cinema of this period presented a reflection on human subjectivity. The affirmative side argues that although technological development has created many problems. It is clear that human beings can still reinvent their subjectivity, and the blending of man and machine would break down the construction of gender, race, and class; the pessimistic side argues that the centrality and subjectivity of human beings will be difficult to regain and that they will eventually be reduced to objects controlled by technology. The relationship between body and mind is a central theme of *Ghost in the Shell* (1995), which is the positive representation. Since most bodies in fiction’s future world are at least partly artificial, people locate their identities in their minds, which also can be hacked. How do humans identify themselves when memory, identity, and humanity are doubted? Whether a fully “cyborgised” human being can still be called human? As a representative of anthropocentrism, the answer to this film is that humanity is the highest reality in a world where everything can be virtual and modified. *The Matrix* (1999) represents the negative tendency. The humans in the film are bound in vessels that become the energy source to keep *The Matrix* running.

Under the influence of postmodernism, the post-cyberpunk of the turning stage took on remarkable resistance. Cyberpunk literature and films dealt with realistic landscapes

in the bricolage and homology ways and used them to depict the prospect of future worlds to express a critique of real problems.

4 The Merging Stage of Commercial Cyberpunk

In the 1980s, there were some traces of “resistance” in cyberpunk science fictions. At the end of the 1990s, capital involvement weakened cyberpunk stylization. Two factors drove this change. The first factor is that cyberpunk films’ visual spectacle brought lucrative profits to the associated cultural industries, while cyberpunk was trapped in the dilemma of popular culture. The second factor is that, in the context of globalization, cyberpunk culture was spreading rapidly as a consumer product. However, audiences of diverse cultural backgrounds did not fully understand its resistance. During the merging stage, cyberpunk was incorporation of capital. The relationship between cyberpunk and mainstream culture changed, showing a less resistive and commercial trend.

It is a different cultural context for cyberpunk from the early 21st century. On the one hand, deeper knowledge of computer technology which led to the mystique of the “virtual” was gone. People enjoyed the convenience of technological development, while the tragic imagination of cyberpunk did not happen; on the other hand, cyberpunk’s subculture followers consisted mainly of novel readers and film and anime viewers, who mostly saw cyberpunk as an aesthetic style. As Timothy Leary said, “the more people appropriated cyberpunk to their uses, the fuzzier it became” [23].

4.1 The Dissipation of Cyberpunk’s Symbolism of Resistance

In the 21st century, the relationship between cyberpunk and mainstream culture is transformed into “symbolic consumption.” Baudrillard discovered that the commercial goods people consume have both use-value, exchange-value, and symbolic value, manifested in perceived social status [9]. It is perpetuated in the capitalist production of packaging and publicity. As he stated, “sign value shapes expressions of style, power, and prestige in the age of consumer society.” The capitalist consumer market has dominated the narrative of giving symbolic meanings to subcultural products. However, when they are reproduced, subculture symbols are appropriated into mass-produced items. Under the influence of the commercialization process, cyberpunk becomes a collection of commercial signs appropriated by capitalist logic to reproduce the relationship between the signifiers and the signified, rather than by individual users for their use values.

In the process of commercial reproduction, the resistance meaning of cyberpunk has gradually dispersed and cyberpunk has become a cultural commodity with an entertaining meaning. The commercial value of cyberpunk culture is exploited in the dissemination process through films and other media. A large number of audiences from different cultures and backgrounds cannot understand the impact of the Cold War and the dystopia metaphors contained in cyberpunk. As a result, cyberpunk’s resistant symbolic meaning was purged, and only its distinctive visual art elements were reserved. The cyberpunk elements, such as rainy nights, neon light billboards, dilapidated alleys, and intense fall, formed the cyberpunk style, which lost its original critical nature and became a collection of commercial signs appropriated by capitalist logic.

As a popular style for consumption, the creation of cyberpunk fiction has been stereotyped. In order to cater to young audiences, producers of cyberpunk content will amplify the more popular symbolic meanings based on audiences' audience feedback while filtering out the parts which are hard to understand. Furthermore, cyberpunk's symbolic meanings can be reinterpreted depending on the cultural scenarios. Cyberpunk does not come from images of first-hand experience but is implanted in humans' brains by a constant flow of mass information [24].

4.2 Mainstream Culture's Commercial Incorporation of Cyberpunk Culture

Through the commercial operation, cyberpunk works, which have lost their confrontational characteristics, began to move closer to mainstream culture. Hebdige outlined two forms of incorporation: the conversion of subcultural signs into mass-produced objects; and the "labeling" and re-definition of deviant behavior by dominant groups [25]. Cyberpunk's sense of resistance has been deliberately distorted or erased as it has been integrated and exploited by capital markets. Commercial incorporation transformed cyberpunk culture from a rebellious subculture to a consumer style. Bourdieu proposed the concept of "cultural capital" which means any tangible and intangible assets relating to culture and cultural activities [26]. In the commercialization process, cyberpunk gains more public attention and more social and commercial value, ensuring its survival and popularity.

As a part of the cultural industry, cyberpunk has been transformed by the popular culture's consumers, who focus more on the visual effects of cyberpunk works and use cyberpunk as a symbolic resource for them to build their social identity. Generation Z who is keen on cyberpunk not only has the anxiety of technology dominating their personal space but also imagines themselves as technology geeks by participating in this frontier technology. Meanwhile, cyberpunk serves to construct a collective identity. Maffesoli proposed the concept of "neo-tribes," which can be used to describe subculture groups who express a collective identity based on a wide range of common interests and consumption patterns [27]. This shows that cyberpunk is both a cultural resource for youth self-definition and a hobby for group bonding, and its meaning is also rewritten in the process of communicating and interacting with the individuals involved.

In an era of consumer supremacy, cyberpunk lost its earlier maverick style and was gradually merged into the tide of marketization, involuntarily integrating into the mainstream capitalist culture – commercial culture.

5 Conclusion

This article compares the characteristics of cyberpunk in its different phases from a historical perspective. The transformation of cyberpunk was driven by a combination of technological developments, postmodern society, and capital markets. In the growing stage, the rapid development of computer technology provided the contextual basis for the emergence of cyberpunk. In the turning stage, the postmodern turn of society allowed the resistance of cyberpunk to shine through. In the merge stage, with the involvement of capital, cyberpunk gave up its resistance to integrating into mainstream culture. It is

possible to conclude that although cyberpunk originated as a subculture to reflect the reality of “high tech, low life,” it has since been condensed into a popular style and lost its critique of the abuse of technology.

The confirmatory contribution of this paper is a synthesis of two theories. The analysis of symbolic value theory reveals the social interaction and self-representation in cyberspace; the analysis of cyberpunk based on symbolic consumption theory shows the inevitable dissolution of meaning in the process of mining its commercial value. Through the application of the above theories to the field of cyberpunk research, this paper proposes a more complete analytical framework for the transformation of cyberpunk culture.

However, this article still has some limitations. First, this review is based on the author’s analysis and summary of the literature, which is relatively subjective. Secondly, the references in this review focus on classic works from 1970 to 2010, with less attention paid to the non-mainstream literature.

Furthermore, this review reveals that the development of cyberpunk emerges in unforeseen turns, and the theoretical models proposed by earlier scholars are no longer applicable to contemporary cyberpunk. Compared to past studies of cyberpunk classics, fewer studies are grounded in the current place and representation of cyberpunk in the cultural ecosystem. Future researchers need to keep up with the time to refine and add to the theoretical studies of cyberpunk culture. In addition, cyberpunk research is mainly based on analytical summaries by the researcher and lacks specific arguments about the object of study. This means that in the future, empirical studies on specific research subjects could be conducted to verify the validity of the relevant inferences.

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