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Cyberpunk as a Metacultural Movement: Philosophical-Cultural Analysis

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The aim of the article is to analyse the phenomenon of modern mass culture and during this analysis find out its ontological status including scientism-technological imperatives of cyberculture and ideas of transhumanism. Results. Cyberpunk is an interesting, functional and new (in comparison with classical examples) form of mass culture, cultural-ideological movement, and sphere of translation and the intersection of protest ideas and meanings, due to its genre and sectoral pluralism (science fiction, film industry, music, design, video games, fashion, ideology, etc.), and also logics of technodeterminism, is still an important factor of transformation cultural-art space in the 21st century. *Scientific novelty.* In the article, for the first time, realised the philosophical-cultural analysis of cyberpunk including its peculiarities as a literary genre, phenomenon of mass culture and aesthetics. *Conclusions.* It is proved that cyberpunk appeared as a genre of science fiction literature in the 1960s-1970s and then later through conceptualisation of ideas in the 80s and agreeing of transcendental impulses counterculture of the 60s with computerisation and the specifics of technological evolution in the 90s, has evolved to the level of a metacultural movement. As the latter, it encompasses the literary genre, the film and fashion industry, architecture and graphic design (with a special aesthetic), technoanthropology, futurology and identity theory, and ideological discourse. It is confirmed that thanks to protest as a manifestation of freedom, the actualisation of the problem of corporeality, and dystopian high-tech projections, with the help of postmodern relativism and poststructuralist rhizomorphism, cyberpunk annihilates modern cultural narratives, thus creating many risks, including the potential formation of pathological forms of identification, declarative asociality, and cyber-prosthetics, which often develop into horrific manifestations of dehumanisation.

Keywords: cyberpunk; cyberculture; cyberpunk aesthetics; science fiction; mass culture; counterculture; dystopia; net libertarianism

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Introduction

The acceleration of technological progress and the unbridled thirst of the world's leading countries to take leading positions in the sphere of information and commu-

nication technologies and nanotechnology in the post-industrial world have led to the fact that the oriented picture of reality has virtually eliminated the human being as a carrier of certain spontaneous actions and activities that are not caused by causal or dynamic laws. This is how technoculture emerged with a new ontological level of consciousness, activity, and communication, and transhumanism as an aspiration, value, and ideology gained a “second wind” as the reality of an individual devoid of internal metaphysical motivation. The ideas of a virtual network environment and the realisation of cosmic dreams, the thirst for the transhuman (the human desire to transcend one’s own being) in contemporary mass culture were embodied in the constitution of cyberspace or in the emergence of cyberculture, of which cyberpunk is an integral part.

Recent research and publications analysis. Firstly, the term “cyberpunk” appeared as the name of the novel by the American science fiction writer Bruce Bethke, written in 1980 and published in *The Amazing Stories* in 1983 (Bethke, 1997). After that, it was picked up and popularised by the editor of Isaac Asimov’s science fiction magazine Gardner Dozois in his editorials (Cruz, 2014, p. 30, p. 32; Lavigne, 2013, p. 9). The sources of cyberpunk connect with the science fiction movement “New Wave” of the 1960s-1970s (J. G. Ballard, J. Brunner, Ph. K. Dick, H. Ellison, Ph. J. Farmer, M. Moorcock, R. Zelazny), first comics on this topic (*Judge Dredd*, published in 1977), and also with the powerful debut novel by William Gibson *Neuromancer* after appearing of which in 1984 cyberpunk was formed as a genre and in this status influenced on the early hacker culture and punk subculture (Kietzman, 2013).

Also, in this genre worked such famous authors as Frank Miller, Bruce Sterling, and Rudy Rucker. In Japan from the adaptation of the serial *Akira* and later its adaptation to anime cyberpunk by Katsuhiro Otomo in 1982, appeared as a separate subgenre of the last one. If it is speaking about famous films in the genre of cyberpunk of the 1980–1990s, it is necessary to remember films by Ridley Scott *Blade Runner*, Philip K. Dick *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?*, the first TV serial by Max Headroom in 1987 about futuristic dystopia (Hague & Lavery, 2002, p. 68), and also the film *Johnny Mnemonic* (1995), *Judge Dredd* (1995), *New Rose Hotel* (1998) and *The Matrix trilogy* (1999–2003).

If we talk about works dedicated to understanding the phenomenon of cyberpunk in culture, there are a lot of them, but special attention should be paid to the *Hacker Manifesto* by L. Blankenship (Marsh, 2013), investigations by McCaffery (1991), L. Person (1999), D. Cavallaro (2000), E. James and F. Mendlesohn (2003), C. Lavigne (2013), G. Murphy and L. Schmeink (2017), D. Harvey (2018), D. B. Shaw (2019), A. McFarlane, G. J. Murphy and L. Schmeink (2020), P. R. Allison (2020), H. Li (2022), M. Yin (2023), etc. New cyberpunk media *Dredd* (2012), *Blade Runner 2049* (2017); *Upgrade* (2018); TV series *Altered Carbon* (2018); *Alita: Battle Angel* (2019); video games *Final Fantasy VII* (2020) and *Cyberpunk 2077* (2020) and others, and their influence on the modern cultural-art practices and society today also are actively studied by the foreign researchers and media experts (Žižek, 2021; Sun & Zhou, 2021).

Unfortunately, Ukrainian authors still have not undertaken systematical research on the issue of cyberpunk and the few available research (Shcheglova, 2008; Hlinka & Havrylenko, 2016) do not provide a comprehensive picture of the cultural, artistic, and genre specifics and aesthetic foundations of cyberpunk, which makes this research relevant.

Aim of the article

The aim of this article is a profound understanding of cyberpunk as a metacultural movement, disclosure of conditions as a phenomenon of mass culture, and explication of a special cyber aesthetics connected with this occurrence on the modern stage.

Main research material

Trying to define the ethos of classic cyberpunk as a literary genre, L. Person describes its characters by pointing to their marginality and alienated solitude in a post-industrial dystopian future, where invasive body modifications and computerised information play a pivotal role (Person, 1999). Most of the plots are based on the conflict between hackers, artificial intelligence, and megacorporations in the near future Earth, where the atmosphere resembles that of noir cinema utilising techniques from the literary detective genre (Gillis, 2005, p. 75). In Nader Elhefnawy's book *After the New Wave. Science Fiction Today*, science fiction writer C.W. Jeter describes the "cyberpunk" trend as postmodern "gonzo-historical" literature (Elhefnawy, 2015).

Over time, according to some researchers (Brooks, 2014, p. 164; Murphy & Schmeink, 2017, pp. 30–31), cyberpunk, considering the limited number of authors, underwent a metamorphosis, specifically transitioning into a more general cultural formation and evolving into science fiction. Thus, in the English-language article "Cyberpunk" on Wikipedia, we find this interpretation of this phenomenon: "Cyberpunk is a subgenre of science fiction in a dystopian futuristic setting that tends to focus on a "combination of lowlife and high tech", featuring futuristic technological and scientific advances, such as artificial intelligence and cyberware, juxtaposed with societal collapse, dystopia or decay" ("Cyberpunk", 2023).

It should be pointed out that the science fiction of cyberpunk has influenced the formation of two subcultures. Firstly, the psychedelic counterculture of the Grateful Dead in the 1990s and the Cyberdelic counterculture, which appeared in close association with the Internet, reconciled the transcendental impulses of the 1960s counterculture with the information of the 1990s (Dery, 1996), and its supporters referred to themselves as "cyberpunks", consciously combining drugs, psychedelic art, and cyberculture technologies (T. Leary, M. Frauenfelder, R. U. Sirius). And, secondly, the fashion dance subculture Cybergoth which mixes cyberpunk fiction with gothic and rave. It is interesting, that for example, cyberpunk fashion denies rave influences on cybergoths are inspired by post-apocalyptic motifs tactical uniforms and high-tech sportswear. It brings to the appearance of such styles in the fashion industry as "tech wear", "goth ninja" or "tech ninja".

The focus of cyberpunk on a youth subculture with a strong oppositional protest charge, given the atmosphere of an Americanised metropolis, presents a common plot integral of cyberpunk works in a special semiotic space that includes two components: low living standards (sexual exploitation or sexual revolution, class uprising, drug use and culture, criticism against corporate corruption, slums, gang warfare, criminality, anarchy) and high technologies (transhumanism, hacker culture, artificial intelligence, hyper-futuristic cityscapes and other technological developments in for example archi-

ecture, weapons, and gadgets). Particularly noteworthy is the inconsistency between, on the one hand, the clear and strong declaration of the motives of freedom and the values of justice, and, on the other hand, their counterproductive realisation. This is because the hero of the cyberpunk novel (not a hero in the usual positive sense), with his hypertrophied individuality and antisociality, falls out of any stable cultural matrix that cultivates conventional ideal goals. In the classical sense of the word, culture is actually presented in such works as a dead space, thus giving way to technoculture that replaces the structures of subjectivity and intersubjective communication (the field of the transcendental), where the “cyber” sphere shapes an ontologically new or post-ontological state of the individual and society as a whole (Cavallaro, 2000; Mul, 2010). In this condition, the cyberpunk hero has no intention, and indeed no sense, of saving the world, restoring justice, opening people’s eyes, etc.: he simply defends his own path and choice, where he asserts the absurdity and sham of the state of affairs through protest. The declarative asociality and non-ideological nature of this science fiction, as well as such futuristic derivatives as “biopunk”, “mythpunk”, “steampunk”, “postcyberpunk” and “nanopunk”.

Though, as we go out of measures of science fiction in the wider cultural field not everything is so clear in terms of non-ideology, as evidenced by the famous “A Declaration of the Independence of Cyberspace” (1996) by John Perry Barlow. It keeps the items of the ideology of network libertarianism, where the key idea is to limit state interference in the circulation of information flows to the maximum extent possible. The Declaration was a protest reaction to the adoption of the Telecommunications Act (1996 Act) in the United States, which imposed responsibility for incorrect and indecent statements on the Internet. It marked the first attempt by the government to take control of the Internet, aiming to curb anarchy and arbitrariness in the cyberspace. The key ideas and principles of network libertarianism include individualism, which positions the individual as an intangible object; support for freedom of speech and information; rejection of intellectual property rights; techno-determinism; and self-governance based on ethical norms rather than legal ones (Barlow, 1996). In general, there are various comments on this issue: some authors note the influence of cyber-libertarianism on the nature, dynamics, and features of ideological construction in the context of the structural transformation of the modern world and the intensification of global political underground activities, while others believe that being inspired by poststructuralist rhizomorphism and postmodern relativism, this kind of libertarianism transforms into a trap of total devaluation and, as a consequence, lays the foundation for the potential emergence of pathological forms of identification (Morrison, 2009; Tomain, 2022).

Paragraph 16 of *A Cyberpunk Manifesto* states the following: “The Cyberpunk is no literature genre anymore, not even an ordinary subculture. The Cyberpunk is a stand-alone new culture, offspring of the new age. A culture that unites our common interests and views...” (Kirtchev, 1997). For the authors of this manifesto, it was important to note that this is not a subculture, but a separate self-sufficient culture, where one of the key issues is the problem of corporeality. Ensuring the effect of reality (if a person can perceive a non-physical environment) in the context of the functioning of the virtual reality system entails changes in existential and ontological structures. Since the highest intellectual and spiritual activity is phenomenologically reduced to lower forms of perception that function in a complex way, the constitution of bodily experience should become part of the projective space of imagination. This leads to the extremely

fantastic conclusion that the line between imagination and reality is blurred, as actuality (situationality and corporeality) becomes a project in the virtual reality system. Cyberpunk focuses on the creation of means for cyber prosthetics of human abilities, emotions, and actions within the general continuum of symbolisation of the technosphere and mass culture, relying on the achievements of digital technologies and expressing a marginal protest against the domination of the technosphere in its alienated form.

Including this, what can we say about cyberpunk aesthetics? Thinking over this question, without doubt, the first that comes to mind is Berlin Sony Centre (from March 2023 the official name is Centre am Potsdamer Platz) is the famous group of buildings on Potsdam square in Berlin district of Tiergarten which was designed by the architect Helmut Jahn. In general, cyberpunk aesthetics has been formed by the audio-visual industry (films, serials, video games, etc.) and today it inspires architects, visual creators and modern designers (such as Shutterstock and Behance to supervise the collections of cyberpunk). As you can see, the entire structure of the Berlin Sony Centre is “imbued” with the aesthetics of cyberpunk, where the most striking component is neon lights (Breitfeld, 2021), and the complex itself was once called “a vision of a cyberpunk, corporate urban future” (Suzuki & Dressel, 2003, p. 332). The city of Kowloon in Hong Kong, destroyed in 1994, is often cited as an example of a cyberpunk/dystopian slum (Mead, 2014).

By the way, the most popular colours of cyberpunk include neon green, electric blue, and bright pink. They easily can be involved in photo sessions, and also can be used in clothes and requisites. Colour gels are often used to make the atmosphere and also change the photos’ colours with the help of Photoshop or another program for editing. If there is an issue with selecting a palette, the young creators usually draw inspiration from films or illustrations (Mireles, 2021).

Wendy Zhou (2022), while studying the features of cyberpunk aesthetics highlights the following components: colour palette, environment, fashion, clothing, and graphical interface. In her opinion, if one pays attention to the philosophical aspects and concept of worldview, then its cyberpunk aesthetics can connect with the aesthetics of neo-noir. We try to show these peculiarities in the given below table (see Table 1):

Table 1

Elements of cyberpunk aesthetics

Environmental	Megacities and skyscrapers
Setting	Crowds with lots of people
	Sexually-explicit elements (sex-workers and sex-related advertisements)
	Huge holograms projected in the air; Lots of lit-up advertisement
	Slums and homes made of containers
	Used and dirty-looking small apartments or luxury minimalistic interiors
	Night and evening time
	Rain
	Fog or mist
	Lots of telephone lines or wires hanging haphazardly Industrial settings and wastelands
	Buildings under construction

Visual Colour Palette	<p>Neon lights in bright blue, pink, purple, yellow, and green</p> <p>Gradients of blue to punk, red to green, red to blue and similar ones</p> <p>A dark background</p> <p>A very minimalistic light background</p>
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Clothing & Fashion / Look	<p>Cybernetic implats and prosthetics</p> <p>Neutral and often dark-coloured clothing. Monochromatic.</p> <p>Wearables (high-fidelity and high-tech headphones, glasses, shoes, and protective gear)</p> <p>Embedded technology in clothing pieces</p> <p>Bright-coloured hair (red, blue, pink, green)</p> <p>Women who dress in sexually-explicit ways</p> <p>Men with military/authoritarian clothing pieces</p> <p>Punk fashion</p> <p>Leather, denim, biker, flight jackets</p> <p>Long coats</p> <p>Welding goggles, aviator sunglasses</p> <p>Combat boots</p>
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Conclusions

Thus, cyberpunk is an interesting, functional, and new (compared to classical examples) form of mass culture, a metacultural movement and a sphere of transmission and intersection of protest ideas and meanings, which, despite its genre and branch pluralism (science fiction, film industry, music, design, video games, fashion, ideology, etc.) attracts more and more attention of scientists, whereas the question of the degree of its further influence and implementation in masses remains open. Numerous researchers and experts agree that it is impossible to imagine cyberculture without cyberpunk with its meaningful and valuable content, which leaves an imprint on the consciousness and behaviour of modern people. Moreover, modern China is to some extent the first state in the world, a vivid example of the realisation of cyberpunk, which shows the reality of the dystopian ideas of Asian fiction writers. Cyberpunk is a completely controversial, non-systemic, as well as influential phenomenon in modern mass culture, which played its role (thanks to protest, actualisation of corporeality problem, and dystopian high-tech projections) during the transition from traditional communities based on territorial proximity of individuals and collectivism to network individualism, formulated on the basis of interests closeness and activity goals.

Among the promising directions of further research, it is worth emphasising the importance of a more in-depth and comprehensive study of the cyberpunk impact in certain creative industries (architecture, fashion industry, graphic design, music, etc.) and subcultures (countercultures), revealing its cultural potential, as well as its significance for such spheres of culture as economy and politics at the modern stage. The issue of the cyberpunk novel and its linguistic and stylistic features remains poorly

disclosed in the Ukrainian literary discourse, actually the same as the aesthetics of cyberpunk await a thorough philosophical and cultural comprehension.

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Кіберпанк як метакультурний рух: філософсько-культурологічний аналіз

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Мета статті — проаналізувати кіберпанк як феномен сучасної масової культури, з'ясувати його онтологічний статус, враховуючи сциєнтично-технологічні імперативи кіберкультури та ідеї трансгуманізму. *Результати дослідження.* Кіберпанк — цікава, функціональна та нова (у порівнянні з класичними зразками) форма масової культури, культурно-ідеологічний рух і сфера трансляції та перетину протестних ідей та сенсів, що, зважаючи на свій жанровий та галузевий плюралізм (наукова фантастика, кіноіндустрія, музика, дизайн, відеоігри, мода, ідеологія та ін.), а також логіку технотермінізму, залишається важливим чинником трансформації культурно-мистецького простору в XXI ст. *Наукова новизна.* У статті вперше здійснено філософсько-культурологічний аналіз кіберпанку з урахуванням його особливостей як літературного жанру, феномену масової культури й естетики. *Висновки.* Доведено, що кіберпанк виник як жанр фантастичної літератури в 60–70-х рр. XX ст., а згодом, через концептуалізацію ідеї у 80-х рр. та узгодження трансцендентальних поривів контркультури 60-х з комп'ютеризацією й специфікою техноеволюції у 90-х рр., еволюціонував до рівня метакультурного руху. Він охоплює літературний жанр, кіно- та фешн-індустрію, архітектуру та графічний дизайн (з особливою естетикою), техноантропологію, футурологію та теорію ідентичності, ідеологічний дискурс. Стверджується, що завдяки протесту як маніфестації свободи, актуалізації проблеми тілесності та антиутопічним високотехнологічним проєкціям, не без допомоги постмодерністського релятивізму та постструктуралістського ризоморфізму, кіберпанк анігує модерні культурні наративи, створюючи у такий спосіб чимало ризиків, серед яких потенційне формування патологічних форм ідентифікації, декларативна асоціальність і кіберпротезування, які часто переростають у жахливі прояви дегуманізації.

Ключові слова: кіберпанк; кіберкультура; естетика кіберпанку; наукова фантастика; масова культура; контркультура; антиутопія; мережеве лібертаріанство

