

Cyberpunk and Empire

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Sf, as a narrative mode and as a way of perceiving the world, is a genre of Empire. This is true in more ways than one. Historically, sf emerges in tandem with imperialism; the dominant sf-producing cultures are precisely the ones that were at the wavefront of technologically advanced, hegemonistic expansion: France, the UK, Germany, Russia, Japan and the US. Each of their hyper-national projects was enabled, and indeed driven, by technological momentum that gave the imperialist states enormous advantages over the subject peoples, and, feeding back into the metropole, inspired the construction of scientific arguments for national and racial supremacy.¹ The unconstrained use of technologies of force, transportation and communication, and the ideologies justifying this use, “blew back” into the national cultures and dramatically undermined national institutions enforcing regional sovereignty and traditional law.² In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, sf mediated between the now conservative cultures of the nation-state and the new vector of national cultures toward global hegemonism. In this, sf acted much as the realistic novel did in mediating between pre-modern society and the bourgeois modernism of the nation-state. Sf has generally treated nations as retrograde and transitory historical phenomena.³ Instead, it has assumed a hyper-global field of action – often projected onto the cosmos itself – between a very few superior forces competing for dominance, almost exclusively through technological means.

But sf is a genre of Empire in a broader sense as well. Imperialist ideology, although obviously inspired by extreme nationalism, also contains what we might call an ideal, universalist entelechy, a quasi-utopian *telos* : to wit, an abstract global system of governance that would ultimately dissolve – and thus transcend – the divisive politics of nations and historical cultures by establishing a salutary, and perhaps even benevolent, global regime. This is the ideal reiterated in the justifications for empire provided by all imperialist states; it is the delusory rationalization opposed by all anti-imperialists.

In the 20th century, this imperial ideal was articulated less in terms of politics and economics – the putative supremacy of one or another nation-state, “race” or cartel – than in the universal force of technological development. Technology, in this sense, transcended particular national or social justifications. It was universally accepted that power was conveyed, not merely through the barrel of a gun, but by the elaboration and intersection of technological systems throughout every aspect of social life, affecting and ensuring the global control system of de-nationalized communications. This was embodied in the simultaneous mechanical and bureaucratic *containment* of human social behavior, and the relatively *unfettered expansion* of technological innovation in the economic sphere. This was the characteristic process of technological modernization practiced by all major world players, a process that remained relatively unconscious, except to its entrenched opponents, those who resisted modernization altogether. Yet with the hindsight of postmodernism, and the instauration of the post-World War II Pax Americana, we can safely claim that the immanent goal served by hyper-nationalistic imperial projects was the establishment of a universalizing Technoscientific Empire. Sf is the literature of this world-historical fantasy of a global technological regime.

There has been a great deal of discussion about the meaning of Empire in the contemporary world. US hegemony has made the idea of empire topical, even though

most Americans resist the idea that their homespun republic has become a new Rome. Much of the discussion is fanciful, fueled by British imperial nostalgia displaced onto the American heirs, or by the neo-conservative resuscitation of the doctrine of American Manifest Destiny. But some versions – like Hardt and Negri’s *Empire* – offer serious heuristic models. For Hardt and Negri, the post-World War II world has become a de facto imperial world-system, backed by US military, economic and cultural power, but in fact an international order of institutions dedicated to the traditional goals of empire: “world peace,” law and order, the perpetual resolution of local conflicts (or “omnicrisis”), the substitution of practical problem-solving (often through violence) for universal ideals, of immanence for political transcendence, the management of and tolerance for local differences over the destabilizing violence of the dialectic. This is one side of what has been euphemistically called globalization – the intensive and expansive use of technology to transform populations into subjects (enthusiastic, at best, and pacified, at least) of a global regime. Where earlier empires like Rome and France extended the rule of law and rights of national citizenship to its imperial subjects, the postmodern global regime extends the “rights” of commodity-consumption and the participation in the circulation of technological development itself. In this sense, quantity has turned to quality: the technological unconscious of 19th century ideologies of imperialism has become manifest, and becomes the explicit goal of Empire. Politically, postmodern empire is dedicated to management, the prevention of any major disturbances of its global operation. Legitimacy is no longer a matter of putative political *subject-positions*, assent and resistance to the state, but of *subjection* to the saturation of social life by technoscientific rationalization in the service of plutocratic elites. Practically, it is dedicated to facilitating the expansion of technoscientific capitalism, the harnessing (and indeed incitement) of global flows – of populations, capital, and culture – to create material wealth. In this regime, resistance cannot (according to Hardt and Negri) issue from revolutionary classes or peripheral sectors. Utopian universalism has no ground to grow in, no relevance. Resistance comes instead from the passive non-compliance of society, a mass desertion from the very

concepts of legitimacy.

(I should note here that this model of a US-backed global imperium has been seriously rocked by the Iraq invasion, in ways that defy easy analysis. The global capitalist system had in fact been expanding formidably throughout the world, with sophisticated mechanisms of self-modification in the various treaties, international institutions, NGOs, etc. The collision with fundamentalist groups was, conceivably, quite manageable, since the primary enemies of Western liberalism are themselves heavily invested in technoscience, even if they disavowed it. With terrific irony, the American adventure in Iraq appears to have undermined much of the genius of this invisible capitalist imperium. As if Rome had set out to compete with its own Empire, the US may have catalyzed a global self-encirclement, the very (historically predictable, except for its speed) inversion of its explicitly hegemonistic goals; and has wasted its formidable powers of indirect violence by committing its forces to a unwinnable conflict, and thereby losing much of its power to threaten others. In the same move it has deprived American capitalists of the much of the military protection that they have relied on in their global expansion. (A process repeated internally through irrational and rapacious economic policies.) The Bush Administration may have fatally injured the Pax Americana not only by violating the codes of international co-existence, but by discarding the ideology of world peace itself, and opening the space for *bellum omnia contra omnes*.)

Cyberpunk's importance is intimately connected with sf's imperial character. Cyberpunk emerged in the US in the early 1980s, at the moment when post-WWII US global power was felt to be challenged for the first time by a postmodern state – Japan – whose power lay precisely not in traditional tools of hegemony, armies and bureaucracies, but the new imperial means of hyper-rationalized commodity production. At that moment, it appeared that Japan had become master of the subtle, bloodless technologies of cybernetics and robotics, and would ultimately become so in

biotech as well, and had accelerated the pace of high-technological capitalism beyond what the Western democracies could sustain. As Japanese companies were physically established in the US (an unprecedented development), Japanese corporate culture became an ambiguous model of the institutions that might dominate the future. The irony, of course, came from the fact that the hegemon that always prided itself on its energy was viewing itself as aging – (a new side to Gertrude Stein’s aphorism that “The US is the oldest country in the world, since it was the first into the 20th century”), its infrastructure, factories and cities decaying, while the new powerhouse inflicted its neo-colonial presence just as the US had for generations, without its population being conscious of it.

Several historical trends converged at this moment, with the effect on making American aware of their place in the world system – or at least that they were part of a world system. The Japanese were, strikingly, not the enemies of the US in the Cold war; they were more than allies, they were technically *creatures* of the US – politically and technologically. Americans feared not defeat by an adversary, but that they would be superseded, they would lose their place at the leading Edge (to use a phrase dear to cyberpunks). Japanese technology was also – or was perceived to be – not only extremely innovative and productive, but also inherently non-aggressive, and hence seductive.

Since Japan was forbidden by its US-imposed Constitution to develop its armed forces, Japanese industry devoted itself to producing sophisticated tools and commodities for the exploding needs of technoscientific expansion in the non-Western world and for individual consumption in Europe and the US. This technology was also the product of a social arrangement that seemed to synthesize US-style corporate capitalism, socialist state-subvention of industry, and quasi-feudal hierarchies of connection and obligation. The population of Japan, moreover, came to be seen as postmodern in its essence enthusiastic about absorbing their traditional national culture into the new

cybernetic/robotic/computer-driven regime of production and simulation. (This caricature prevented the US from perceiving the internal cultural frictions that eventually led to the debilitating stagnation of the Japanese economy.)

Japan became in many ways cyberpunk's model of the future, with the effect that Europe, the Soviet Union, and the US were depicted as parts of a single dying Western regime that could not successfully synthesize its humanistic ideologies and traditions with the demands of post-industrial production. Of course, there were many different cyberpunk styles, already in the first wave: Gibson's romanticism, Sterling's satirical realism, Cadigan's modernism, Shiner's pop-mysticism, Kadrey's and Jeter's gothicism, not to mention the later distinctive styles of Moebius, Enki Bilal, David Cronenberg, Mamoru Oshii, Jack Womack, Richard Calder, and the closely-related styles of *tech noir* films like *Terminator* and *Alien*, and of course the seminal *Blade Runner*. Nonetheless, I think we can safely identify certain aspects of cyberpunk's aesthetic vision common to all its examples.

1) "No Future" (the punk in cyberpunk) – the sense of a collapsed future, i.e., the replacement of progressive modernism's sense of constant material and social improvement by the sense of a failed project, leaving behind ruined infrastructures as its Ozymandian monuments;

2) the replacement of national sovereignty and class consciousness by technically sophisticated, but ethically savage, private, capitalist corporations and cartels, which dissolve social protections and rule of law, while encouraging the ruthless black-marketization of high technologies;

3) the attendant involution of all political power, and with it, the abandonment of all social centrality – hence the tolerance for poverty and decay of social institutions, law, traditional concepts of human dignity, and collective purpose;

4) the street finding its own uses for things – the proliferation of diverse fractal societies and cultures relatively free to construct their own social contracts under the radar of dominant institutions, politically powerless and hence

unconstrained by normativity, but potentially destabilizing of the infrastructure of dominance because of their various technical “hacks”;

5) posthuman evolution – the morally unfettered proliferation of technologies (especially cybernetic and biotechnical prostheses) into areas traditionally considered sacrosanct, and, as a result, the gradual transformation of all natural phenomena into artificial ones constructed by human or cybernetic agents.

These might well be considered the characteristics of postmodern Empire. In my view that sf writers have always viewed their universe of discourse in terms of the imaginary world-model of technoscientific Empire—Empire that is managed, sustained, justified, but also riven by simultaneously interlocking and competing technologies of social control and material expansion. Sf artists construct stories about why this Empire is desired, how it is achieved, how it is managed, how it corrupts (for corrupt it must), how it declines and falls, how it deals with competing claims to imperial sovereignty, or how it is resisted. The history of sf reflects the changing positions of different national audiences as they imagine themselves in a developing world-system constructed out of technology’s second nature.

This intimate link between sf and Empire has become increasingly explicit. For in some respects the conditions of techno-imperial power have been articulated better by sf than by traditional political theory. Hardt and Negri’s model of Empire, to take the best example, has a distinctly science-fictional feel to it. Polybius, Machiavelli and Spinoza may hover in the background, but the Empire of the contemporary resembles the familiar world of cyberpunk and tech noir.

Empire appears in the form of a very high-tech machine: it is virtual, built to control the marginal event, and organized to dominate and when necessary intervene in the breakdowns of the system (in line with the most advanced technologies of robotic production). (39)

The imperial order is formed not only on the basis of its powers of accumulation and global extension, but also on the basis of its capacity to develop itself more deeply, to be reborn, and to extend itself throughout the biopolitical latticework of world society. (41)

The empire's institutional structure is like a software program that carries a virus along with it, so that it is continually modulating and corrupting the institutional forms around it. (197-98)

This is the imperial Sprawl, ruled not through decrees and armies (well, mostly without armies) but managed through communications/control networks that distribute virtual power. This power is internalized by imperial citizens as surely as if they had chips embedded in their brains. In Empire, subjectivity is multicentered, produced through institutions that are terminally unstable, always breaking down. As the integrity of social institutions (such as schools, families, courts and prisons) fragments, and the once-clear subject positions associated with them weakens, the call for imperial comprehensiveness is strengthened, calling forth a comprehensive ideology, a finely distributed pragmatic myth of networked, globally interlocking power. This is the twenty- minutes into the future of Dick, Ballard, Gibson, Cadigan, and Oshii, where computerized communications operates 24/7, generating a mindscape of consuming subjects that feeds capitalist ideology directly into it. It perpetually breaks down and reconstructs human consciousness, as in a Cadigan novel, into provisional target-identities to which the nostalgic, utopian dream of wholeness can be sold and resold perpetually in variant, sometimes mutually contradictory forms, and which can be hired to convey its fictions of sovereignty ever deeper into the self that once imagined that it was itself sovereign. In this empire, there are infinite possibilities of projection, but only one reality.

Since contemporary imperial power does not emanate from one center, but rather the

cyberspatial ganglia of postmodern metropoli, resistance manifests itself in the “the multitude’s” daily refusal to follow commands. For Hardt and Negri revolution is neither possible nor desirable, since no class can act as the self-conscious agent of history.

Freedom rests, as in Gibson’s world, in finding one’s own uses for things. In contrast with *sabotage*, the resistance strategy of national modernism, resistance under Empire consists of withdrawing consent, *desertion* (212) Even the greatest rebels are refuseniks, choosing to withdraw, leaving behind them, like the fused AIs in *Neuromancer* (1984), a world in which “things are things” (270).

From this contemporary perspective, cyberpunk’s cultural-historical role seems not to have diminished, but gained in stature. In its two major moments – the moment of its art in the early 80s, and the moment of its cultural diffusion in the late 80s and early 90s – cyberpunk mediated between the late modernist, highly ideological world view of the Cold War competition for hegemony and the subsequent so-called “End of History,” the intense campaign to saturate every aspect of social life with high-technologies of seduction and surveillance that characterized “victorious” capitalist globalization.

Cyberpunk writer were the first to imagine life inside these wired technoscientific metropolises, and the possibility that the humanistic verities for which so many imperialist wars had been putatively fought, would vanish into thin air as human being crossed into a world entirely of their own making, where even the condition of being human would be considered a debility, and ultimately “fixable.” Cyberpunk writers were among the first to see that the diasporas, the pervasiveness of consumer technologies, computers’ seemingly infinite ability to manipulate matter and perception, would dissolve traditional loyalties and historical affinities. That the struggle for freedom would have to be defined all over again, in the face of the most

subtle, global, and indeed self-chosen forms of control.

They were often criticized: by cultural conservatives for their apparent delight in dissolution, and by progressives for their retrograde adherence to gender and racial stereotypes. I should know, since I criticized them, too – for their ambivalence and fatalism in the face of the technological juggernaut.

Now, however, I view them less as failed critics (which they never claimed to be), and more as the artists that they always did claim to be. Cyberpunk was an emphatically literary moment of mediation. While cyberpunks observed the powers of technology to transform everything, they remained stubbornly humanistic. Not, of course, in the sense of the bourgeois humanism so viscerally despised as the origin and motive of every logocentric, patriarchal and imperialistic project forced on the world by the modern West. But rather in the almost quaint insistence on the personhood of all the players in the Empire. It did not matter whether they were artificial or natural, organic or inorganic, in default mode or prosthetically enhanced, the cyberpunk writers refused to transform the problem of technological empire (they never did phrase it in these terms, in any case) into an abstract “system” versus the individual. The dominant forces and the individual actors interpenetrated each other in an intensely existentialist vision of cyborg reality. In a sense, each character, no matter how strange or stupid, had some responsibility for the way things were, some shared genetic or cybernetic material with the new governors.

Even AIs and ROM-constructs exist in social worlds, with stakes in political, religious, and economic contests. In a sense, cyberpunk – at its best – merely depicted the expansion of the dilemmas of personhood dealing with contingency, mortality and agency, into new worlds.

In this light, cyberpunk was one of the first artistic movements to define

technoscientific empire as the condition of social being, an empire without fixed ideologies and politics, but also without a fixed fate. My favorite example of this one of Bruce Sterling's best sketches, the rarely discussed "The Compassionate, the Digital."⁴ It is narrated as if it were redaction of speeches given in 2113, celebrating the first successful journey through "digital Ur-space" by an artificial intelligence construct. But this is not the only novum. The AI is actually a "Programmed Believer" created in the future Global Umma of a Shiite world-government on the model of Khomeini's Revolutionary Islamic Republic, and Sterling brilliantly captures the formulas and cadences of the ritual speech of the Iranian government, as it appears in English translations. The story is an example of the cyberpunks' commitment to depicting totalized futures imagined from diverse subject positions; in this case, on a Khomeini Continuum. There is powerful tension in this vision. Appearing in 1985, while the hostility between Khomeini's Iran and the US was at its height, the notion of a world-dominating Shiite empire with trans-dimensional technological capabilities seemed both impossibly fanciful (and hence quasi-satirical) and more subversive even than the vision of Soviet world-domination. "The Compassionate, the Digital" is, from one perspective, a work of extreme orientalism – few things can be seen as more exotic, and more threatening to liberal Westerners, than a technologically superior and hegemonic theocratic Islam. At the same time, it is a work of great sympathy – for Sterling imagines that the drive for technoscience, the desire to expand the limits of the human condition, will not be suppressed by dogma, and will be driven by transcendental desires, no matter how they are expressed. The future will be a technological empire, even if its capital is Mecca. The heroic Digital Believer is no less heroic for being programmed to believe; and he and his kind are accorded equal status with human believers, and so the human faithful bask in the AIs' reflected glory. The penetration of "ur-Space" is a fusion of science and mysticism, of human technology and admiration for divine creation. The story can be read in many ways: sarcastically, reverently, as a neutral science-fictional thought experiment, as a provocation, as a statement of tolerance, an estrangement of liberal technoscience, and so on. Two elements are firm:

there is a technoscientific empire (even if it is a most unlikely one), and there is an expansion of personhood.

It is safe to say, I believe, that cyberpunk could not have survived into the 90s, to a great extent because of its own success in mediating the leap from late modernism to postmodernism. The more inexorable and diffused the cyberneticization of social life appeared, the less need there was for the anchor, the home base, of humanistic nostalgia or tolerance for transcendental desire. The 90s returned the US to global leadership, as Japan sank into a relentless recession, the Soviet empire collapsed, and multinational capitalism expanded throughout the world, through communications and transportation technologies that drive finance capital and human beings through its networks at unprecedented speed. The bubble of IT, which gave the US the appearance of unchallengeable wealth, inspired a confidence and (false) sense of security that restored the future – now not a distant goal for progress, but the infinite extension of present success. In this period, the technological empire seemed actually a benevolent entity, endlessly and mechanically creating wealth, energy, and “liberty.” It followed “laws” highly favorable to “human” development – the ineluctable increase of bandwidth, of carrying-capacity, of memory, of processing speed. The West – especially the US – became identified (in its own mind, at least) with progress once again. But now, having fended off socialism and quasi-Confucian corporate feudalism, with a sense of freedom, even ecstasy, that did not foster punk insouciance, let alone visions of collapsed futures.

It is telling that, with the collapse of this bubble, so efficiently aided by the atavistically nationalist-imperialist overreach of the Bush regime and technologically sophisticated Islamic radicals, there has been a reinvocation of cyberpunk in films like *The Matrix*. Now, however, after waking up from the sleep of the 1990s, the Empire is seen as almost irresistibly dominant, oppressive, stymied. It is very difficult to imagine how the third film, *Matrix Revolutions*, can resolve the questions the two earlier films have

posed, without either artificially romanticizing the allegedly human Zionites, or converting the entire struggle into the dialectical self-construction of the world machine, in which human agents have no significant part. If for the cyberpunks the struggle was always to find the personhood shared by human and program, and thus to leave room for the humanity of the posthuman, the Matrix tantalizes us with the possibility that there is nothing left for the human. After the Matrix...and after Iraq...we must see what empires sf describes for us.

NOTES

1. The main thesis of this introductory argument is elaborated in my "SF and Empire," *Science Fiction Studies* 30:2 (July 2002), 231-245. See also Michael Adas, *Machines as the Measure of Men: Science, Technology, and Ideologies of Western Dominance*. Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1989.

2. Hannah Arendt. *The Origins of Totalitarianism*. NY: Meridian, 1951. 136-38.

3. Cf. my "Dis-Imagined Communities: Science Fiction and the Future of Nations." *Edging into the Future. Science Fiction and Contemporary Cultural Transformation*. Veronica Hollinger and Joan Gordon, eds. Philadelphia: U Pennsylvania Press, 2002. 217-237.

4. "The Compassionate, the Digital" included in Bruce Sterling, *Globalhead*. NY: Bantam, 1994. [originally published in 1985]. 65-72.