

Research Note

## Rethinking Dystopia: The Influence of W. Gibson's *Neuromancer* on Japanese Cyberpunk

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In this article, we examine the development of the cyberpunk genre as a continuation of the dystopian genre, and also consider the novel by William Gibson, *Neuromancer* (1984), as a source that set a model for the development of the plot and the heroes and heroines in further works of this genre. In particular, we consider the futuristic image of Japan depicted in *Neuromancer*. Japan in the 1980s reached the level of a world economic power and thus made a huge impression on the rest of the world. We also look at how Japanese fashion influenced Gibson's perception of Japan. In addition, we analyze a new type of heroine that appears in *Neuromancer*; the creation of such an image of the heroine allows us to call Gibson a feminist author, and his heroines influenced the further development of the cyberpunk genre (in particular, Japanese cyberpunk).

**Keywords:** Dystopia, Cyberpunk, Feminism, Techno-orientalism, Japanese Studies

### Introduction

At the beginning of the twentieth century, humankind cherished great hopes: the majority of the planet had been put on maps, science was actively developing, and advanced countries entered a new socio-economic formation, capitalism. Utopian dreams of the previous centuries for a just kingdom of universal equality and brotherhood seemed about to be realized. But instead, a world war erupted in Europe and Asia, which brought the participating countries to a series of radical changes. In particular, the monarchy fell in Russia and was replaced by the Bolshevik government in 1917. The proclaimed Soviet Republic became the first socialist state in the world. Five years later, E. Zamyatin's novel, *We* (1922), one of the first classical anti-utopias, was published in English.

The novel was not published in Soviet Russia (or later in the Soviet Union). The world's first republic of a new socialist type, which, according to Marx's theory, inevitably had to replace capitalism, looked toward the future, toward the goal of all classical utopians, communism. The genre of "anti-utopia", criticizing actual attempts to achieve that goal (such as the attempts of the Soviet Union), was not popular in the young socialist state. Instead, science fiction works abounded in which writers criticized the shortcomings of the capitalist system (for example, *The Garin Death Ray* by A. Tolstoy, 1926-1927) or described the "bright future" in which progressive earthlings bring the ideas of communism and enlightenment to the masses.

At the same time, the young Soviet state itself succeeded marvelously in economic industrialization and

aroused global interest. There were cultural exchanges between Soviet citizens and, say, Americans (S. Yesenin, V. Mayakovsky, I. Ilf and E. Petrov visited the US) or the Japanese (B. Pilnyak visited Japan in 1926, 1932).

In 1932, O. Huxley published *A Brave New World*, another anti-utopia that resonated through the world, in which the writer critically described the world of capitalism and a society of mindless consumption.

After the Second World War – the bloodiest and most devastating in the history of humankind – the focus shifts. The world, frightened by the Nazi machine of total annihilation of entire nations, is beginning to fear dictatorial, totalitarian regimes. In 1945, G. Orwell wrote his satire *Animal Farm*, and four years later, the dystopia *1984*, on how any good idea, any utopia can be distorted to its complete opposite – which tallies up the first half of the twentieth century.

In 1949, the USSR acquired its own atomic bomb, and it became clear to the leaders of world countries that it would now be difficult to resolve global issues by force. They would have to look for ways of peaceful coexistence in a post-nuclear world that has survived two devastating wars, in which no ideology can become universal to bring humanity closer to the utopian communist ideal.

The Soviet Union, which created the Eastern bloc to defend its borders, lowered the “Iron Curtain” and isolated itself from the Western world, as Tokugawa Japan did in the seventeenth century (such associations were given by Russian researches of Japanese studies in 1990s<sup>1</sup>). Japan, in turn, was forced to interact closely with Western culture through the mediation of America. Japan was being rediscovered by the West: still alien, partly frightening, but at the same time exotic and alluring. A period of mutual influence of cultures (which before that also took place) began, but this time it laid the foundations for the formation of modern global mass culture. This period saw the heyday of Tezuka Osamu, influenced by the artistic techniques of W. E. Disney; a Japanese theme arose in the works of American writers of the “Golden Age of Science Fiction”, in particular, F. K. Dick, and Hollywood paid attention to it as well<sup>2</sup>. In 1954, the film *Godzilla* (remastered by the Americans in 1956) was released and became a world hit. In the 1950s, the period of the Cold War began in relations between the countries that won in World War II, while rapid economic growth began in Japan, with technology actively developing on the basis of *zaibatsu* corporations.

Japanese “techno-capitalism” of the 1980s aroused admiration and stirred horror among the Western public: it began to seem that Japan *is* the future. “Tokyo is the city of the future”<sup>3</sup>, such thoughts were common not only among Americans and Europeans, but even among the Soviet people: it was at that time that the study of Japanese became popular in the USSR<sup>4</sup>. Thanks to its economic successes, Japan demonstrated amazing vitality to the world, and hopes for the future were associated with it.

In the wake of the new orientalism emerged cyberpunk, as a challenge to the respectability of the matured “gurus” of the “golden age of fiction”, W. Gibson, one of the “fathers of cyberpunk”<sup>5</sup>, in the pages of his first novel *Neuromancer* written to a hard deadline, embodied the image of a “futuristic Japan” that existed in the minds of people in the West. Gibson had not visited Japan; as he himself admitted in an interview with Professor Tatsumi Takayuki in 1986, he did not go to Japan for fear of an “*information fly*”: there is too much

<sup>1</sup> Aleksandr Meshcheryakov, *The Emperor Meiji and His Japan*. (Moscow: Natalis, 2009), 126.

<sup>2</sup> Jane Chi Hyun Park, *Orientalism in U. S. Cyberpunk Cinema from Blade Runner to The Matrix*. Dissertation. (University of Texas at Austin, 2004), 22-57.

<sup>3</sup> Takayuki Tatsumi, “*Eye to Eye: An Interview with William Gibson*”, *Conversations with William Gibson*. 2014. Edited by Patrick A. Smith. (University Press of Mississippi Jackson, 2014), 678.

<sup>4</sup> “How Ukrainian Translation of William Gibson’s *Neuromancer* Was Created”, Mariya Pirson, Olga Lyubarskaya, Alexei Polyarinov, last modified 2020. [https://lb.ua/culture/2017/09/24/377364\\_sozdavalsya\\_ukrainskij\\_perevod.html](https://lb.ua/culture/2017/09/24/377364_sozdavalsya_ukrainskij_perevod.html)

<sup>5</sup> Jane Chi Hyun Park, *Orientalism in U. S. Cyberpunk Cinema from Blade Runner to The Matrix*. Dissertation. (University of Texas at Austin, 2004), 60.

real information that would prevent the creation of a literary image of the country<sup>6</sup>. Not being familiar with Japan “personally”, Gibson, in the best traditions of Orientalism, brought to life its “utopian” image. However, the world of cyberpunk and the “techno-capitalism” described in *Neuromancer* was harsh, gloomy, and by no means utopian.

In their book *Spaces of Identity* (1995), David Morley and Kevin Robins note that in the 1980s a new wave of anti-Asian racism arose in the West, being provoked primarily by the economic successes of Japan, its “techno-capitalism”<sup>7</sup>. In her article *Stylistic Crossings: Cyberpunk Impulses in Anime* (2005), Dr. Jane Chi Hyun Park connects the racism and fears of the Western audience with the fact that Japan acted as an unknown and dangerous “Other” to the West<sup>8</sup>, and the image of dehumanized Japanese enemies created by propaganda during the war was still alive in the consciousness of the people<sup>9</sup>. In the 1980s, when Japan’s economic success and technology “threatened” the USA’s dominant position in the global economy, the Western audience again perceived the Japanese as dangerous “aliens”, no longer half-animals, as during the war (“rats”, “monkeys”), but now “robots”, “replicants”, whose consciousness was united into a collective mind<sup>10</sup>. Futuristic and promising on the one hand, on the other Japan seemed to be a country of an unknown and mysterious utopia, devoid of its usual, classical features. In other words, Japan seemed a world of dystopia, at least in Gibson’s cyberpunk: probably, living in his world would be not so much unbearable (as it would be in a world of classical anti-utopia/dystopia where there were only two extremes – either the complete satisfaction of living in a strictly regulated society, or the complete denial of such a society, the need to escape from it, even through oblivion or death), as it would be difficult and would require a certain dexterity. The world of cyberpunk is unsafe, any person in it can be injured, modified, changed – but if they show dexterity and perseverance, they can survive in it and find their place under the sun.

Literary cyberpunk laid the foundation for on-screen cyberpunk: starting with *Blade Runner* (which anticipated by Gibson’s cyberpunk, appeared on screen almost synchronously with the novel *Neuromancer*), such films as *Johnny Mnemonic*, *The Matrix*, *Blade*, *Equilibrium*, and *Brazil* fascinated the world. In the early 1990s, cyberpunk as a literary “movement” ceased to exist (as was announced by its “fathers” B. Sterling and L. Shiner), but the Japanese picked up the baton – in particular, Oshii Mamoru, who created the cult anime *Ghost in the Shell* (1995). The animated film *Metropolis*, based on the Tezuka Osamu manga, was released: as well as *Ghost in the Shell*, and cyberpunk anime works that followed suit. These works presented a Japanese take on that dystopian future that had been forged in the West influenced by “techno-orientalism”<sup>11</sup> and in admiration of Japan’s success on the world stage. According to anime researcher Susan J. Napier, Japanese anime has proven to be an excellent medium for portraying the cyberpunk world. Firstly, this is because the *mecha* genre (robots, humanoid machines) already existed in Japanese anime. Therefore, cyberpunk (according to Napier, Gibson’s *Neuromancer* had “a major influence on Japanese science fiction in general”), “where the difference between

<sup>6</sup> Takayuki Tatsumi, “Eye to Eye: An Interview with William Gibson”, *Conversations with William Gibson*. 2014. Edited by Patrick A. Smith. (University Press of Mississippi Jackson, 2014), 501.

<sup>7</sup> David Morley, Kevin Robins. “Techno-Orientalism: Japan Panic,” in *Spaces of Identity: Global Media, Electronic Landscapes, and Cultural Boundaries*. (London: Routledge, 1995), 149.

<sup>8</sup> Jane Chi Hyun Park, *Orientalism in U. S. Cyberpunk Cinema from Blade Runner to The Matrix*. Dissertation. (University of Texas at Austin, 2004), 61.

<sup>9</sup> Charles Paulk, “Post-National Cool: William Gibson’s Japan,” *Science Fiction Studies* 38, no. 3 (November 2011): 478-500.

<sup>10</sup> David Morley, Kevin Robins. “Techno-Orientalism: Japan Panic,” in *Spaces of Identity: Global Media, Electronic Landscapes, and Cultural Boundaries*. (London: Routledge, 1995), 153.

<sup>11</sup> Concept articulated by David Morley and Kevin Robins in their book *Spaces of Identity* (1995). Inspired by E. Said’s concept of “orientalism” that the Western approach to understanding and interacting with the East is preconceived and biased, Morley and Robins created an explanation of the Western (in particular, American) anxiety toward Japan as an economic adversary in the 1980s.

human and machine is increasingly amorphous”<sup>12</sup>, found fertile ground for itself in the *mecha* genre (Napier, p. 11). Secondly, there are many female characters in anime “because it is so often the female subject who most clearly emblemizes the dizzying changes occurring in modern society”<sup>13</sup> (Napier, p. 12).

The unique Japanese take (which, in turn, was influenced by close interaction with Western culture, as Tatsumi Takayuki brilliantly showed in his book *Full Metal Apache*, 2006) on cyberpunk, in turn, would go on to bring new features to the formation of the modern dystopia genre – a topic for further research.

In this article, we intend to analyze the first cyberpunk novel by W. Gibson *Neuromancer* and to trace what factors influenced its image of “futuristic” Japan, simultaneously utopian and dystopian. The cyberpunk genre would turn very popular in Japanese anime and cinema, acquiring specific Japanese features that would again enrich the genre of modern dystopia. However, the foundation for cyberpunk was laid in the West, and in this regard, Gibson’s first novel is of particular interest as a reference example of the genre, containing all its basic characteristics and potential for further development.

## 1. Cyberpunk as A Subgenre of Dystopia

In the preface to William Gibson’s novel *Burning Chrome*, Bruce Sterling writes that cyberpunk is “a combination of low life and high technology”. Describing the *Sprawl* trilogy (which includes *Burning Chrome*), Sterling says that a future in these stories “is recognizably and painstakingly drawn from the modern condition”<sup>14</sup>. All of these characteristics are key to determining the cyberpunk genre. Despite advanced technology, Gibson’s future seems bleak, dystopian. This effect is largely achieved due to the fact that the readers look at this future through the eyes of Gibson’s characters, who are not at all similar to the typical heroes of the “golden age” of SF, but are “a pirate’s crew of losers, hustlers, spin-offs, castoffs, and lunatics”<sup>15</sup>. They are largely unsuccessful because they did not fit into the harsh world of corporations and the laws of developed capitalism that determines the society of the near future in Gibson’s cyberpunk novels.

Gibson’s world of cyberpunk that he created, “captured” from the many patterns of the surrounding reality of the 1980s, has a number of typical dystopian features. British professor of History of Political Thought, Gregory Claeys in the book *Dystopia, A Natural History* (2017) writes that it is currently quite difficult to give an exhaustive definition of dystopia. The fact is that there are a huge number of dystopian species. In the broadest sense, the word “dystopia” comes from the two Greek words “dis” and “topos”, and means a “bad, unattractive place”<sup>16</sup>. Claeys suggests that this word first appears in the mid-18th century, but is not widely used until the beginning of the 20th. “In common paraphrase, the word functions as the opposite of ‘utopia’, the bad place versus what we imagine to be good place, the secular version of paradise”<sup>17</sup>. The genre of dystopia is characterized by the same set of problems that the utopians are trying to answer: the limits and control of industrialization, the spread of poverty under capitalism, the concentration of wealth and the growing desire of the masses to solve these problems in the mainstream of collectivism<sup>18</sup>.

Claeys, however, does not find this similarity of concepts convenient. “Utopianism”, he notes, referring to Lyman Tower Sargent<sup>19</sup>, “has three faces: the literary, the communal, and the ideological”<sup>20</sup>. However, there is

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<sup>12</sup> Susan J. Napier, *Anime from Akira to Howl’s Moving Castle. Experiencing Contemporary Japanese Animation*. (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 2005), 11.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.: 12.

<sup>14</sup> Bruce Sterling. “Cyberpunk in the Nineties”, *Interzone*, 48. (June 1991).

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> Gregory Claeys. *Dystopia. A Natural History*. (Oxford: University Press, 2018), 4.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.: 4.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.: 274.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.: 280.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.: 4.

no such work, doctrine or community for which the ideology of “dystopianism” would be clearly spelled out (unlike the classical utopias, which describe both society and ideology). In addition, the word “dystopia” is often used to characterize the literary genre, but the very problems that dystopia touches are often not fictitious, but quite real such as atomic weapons, ozone layer holes or the greenhouse effect<sup>21</sup>.

At the same time, almost all researchers of dystopias (negative utopias or anti-utopias) noted that the anti-utopian concept implies both satire and the inversion of an ideal, utopian society<sup>22</sup>.

Moreover, it makes sense to distinguish between anti-utopia and dystopia, because, as Claeys notes, “not all dystopias are anti-utopian as such: many anti-capitalist and ecological novels project existing trends rather than failed efforts to create utopia”<sup>23</sup>. Russian researcher A. Chameev considered negative, or satirical utopia as “a younger shoot of the same family tree as the utopia”<sup>24</sup>, which arose in the 20th century. Then a negative utopia splits into two branches, two subgenres: pseudo-utopia and dystopia. “Pseudo-utopia is ironically clothed in the form of traditional utopia in order to expose the failure of the claims of utopian ideologists; dystopia, however, is clothed in the forms of life itself in order to emphasize the threat posed by “bad utopianism” and associated with the incarnation of utopia as “the devil’s vaudeville”. In other words, “pseudo-utopia is a genre of fiction that uses the grotesque, and dystopia is a realistic genre that makes the most of the material from reality”<sup>25</sup>. According to A. Chameev, literary dystopia is directed against utopia as an ideology that claims to be a radical reorganization of the world. An example of a pseudo-utopia is the Zamyatin and Huxley novel; an example of dystopia is Orwell’s *1984*<sup>26</sup>.

Chameev urges not to contrast positive utopia with negative one, and says that the term “anti-utopia” in relation to works of art is ineffectual. A negative utopia, as well as a positive one, arises from dissatisfaction with the existing order of things, as a criticism of reality. The differences between the two types of utopias are only in how they are described. Thus, a positive utopia offers “an exemplary, as viewed by the authors, model of living arrangements”, while the hero of a positive utopia describes the utopian world from the outside, from a safe distance. A negative utopia, Chameev emphasizes, “is always a form of social diagnosis”, “a signal of danger” that threatens a person or humanity. The hero of negative utopia lives inside a “newly-found paradise”, directly experiences the action of new laws and orders<sup>27</sup>.

Thus, based on the above definitions, we can say that cyberpunk is rightfully the heir and successor to the dystopian genre. The creators of cyberpunk reacted vividly to the changes that took place in real life around them, sensitively grasped a new direction in the global scientific and technological thought (as the word “cyber” in the name of the genre implies) and began to reflect plausibly on what scenario the development of a computerized society may take.

In 1991, cyberpunk writers L. Shiner and B. Sterling make it clear that the cyberpunk they invented no longer exists. They created cyberpunk as a rebellion against established dogmas, as a new wave in science fiction, but in the 1990s, cyberpunk itself became mainstream, so they became the “gurus of the genre” they originally rebelled against<sup>28</sup>. The creators of cyberpunk as a literary movement put their hands in pockets. However, the genre itself did not disappear: on the contrary, it spread widely in popular culture owing to movies such as *Blade Runner* (1981)<sup>29</sup> and, especially, *The Matrix* (1999). Asian aesthetics, the image of Japan as an advanced

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.: 5.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.: 274.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.: 284.

<sup>24</sup> Aleksandr Chameev, “Anti-utopia: On The Question of The Term and Characteristic Features of The Genre”, *Genre and literary Trend: Unity and National Originality in The World Literary Process*. 11 (Saint Petersburg, 2007): 61.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.: 62.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.: 61.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.: 63.

<sup>28</sup> Bruce Sterling, “Cyberpunk in the Nineties”, *Interzone*, 48. (June 1991).

<sup>29</sup> It is necessary to note that the movie became a cult only after years after the premiere.

country of the cyberpunk future, had become strongly associated with this genre. Cyberpunk became popular in Japan, having a new birth in the anime, thanks to the cult film *Ghost in the Shell* (1995). The Japanese rethinking of cyberpunk gave it new features and enriched the content of the “dystopia” genre in general. In this article, we will be using the example of *Neuromancer* by W. Gibson to trace how this process of mutual influence took place.

First, a few words must be said about how science fiction and dystopia relate to each other. This is important for two reasons. First, Gibson’s cyberpunk as a forerunner of the computer era deals with real-world technologies<sup>30</sup>. The scientific component, including computerization, robotization, later transhumanism and biotechnology, is an essential characteristic of this future-facing genre. Secondly, as Claeys notes, a science fiction genre that has long been mixed with other genres, “by the late 20th century (...) became so popular as to swallow up nearby genres, including by 1950 or so, both utopia and dystopia combined”<sup>31</sup>. Claeys gives the opinions of various researchers on this problem, and comes to the following conclusion: “dystopia is distinguished by the density of its socio-political narrative and its plausible relation to the period in which it appears”<sup>32</sup>. This fact makes dystopia related to cyberpunk, in which scientific assumptions can be “extrapolated from the existing order”. Claeys also notes that until the 1970s, “or in the wake of WW2, Hiroshima, or Sputnik (...) science and technology may merely decorate the narrative rather than provide its foundation”<sup>33</sup>, however, since the 1970s, the state of affairs changed significantly. The emergence of cyberpunk as the heir and successor of the traditions of science fiction and dystopia is the best proof of this.

## 2. W. Gibson and The Popularity of Japanese Fashion in the 1980s

In 1983, Bruce Bethke writes a short novel *Cyberpunk*. Then Bruce Sterling, a friend of William Gibson, publishes *Cheap Truth* and distributes this “propaganda organ” for free. The basis of his and his colleagues’ literary credo is rebellion against respectability and “gurus of the genre”. The editor of one of science fiction magazines Gardner Dozois called those writers cyberpunks. In 1984, W. Gibson received the Nebula Prize for his debut novel *Neuromancer*. Since the publication of this novel, the cyberpunk virus has infected the whole world.

“While the 1980s were an economically stagnant period for the US, and for much of the developed world, the decade marked the apex of a 40-year Japanese boom unparalleled in modern history. Kick-started by the Korean war, Japan’s GNP expanded at a staggering rate from the early 1950s through the mid-1970s, peaking at over 10% (Tsuru 67). Growth leveled off in the 1980s, but still outstripped that of the beleaguered United States”<sup>34</sup> (Paulk, p. 480).

In the 1980s, the image of Japan throughout the world was associated with high technology. In record time, Japan was able to recover from the defeat in World War II and enter the top ten developed countries of the world. At the same time, unlike the Soviet Union, which before the WWII managed to turn from a relatively backward agrarian country into a superpower in two decades, Japan did not oppose the Western world, but actively collaborated with it. In the 1980s, Japan was the focus of many hopes with its economic miracle, the development of Japanese electronics, the reliability of Japanese cars and motorcycles, and the popularity of

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<sup>30</sup> “How Ukrainian Translation of William Gibson’s *Neuromancer* Was Created”, Mariya Pirson, Olga Lyubarskaya, Alexei Polyarinov, last modified 2020.

<sup>31</sup> Gregory Claeys. *Dystopia. A Natural History*. (Oxford: University Press, 2018), 285.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid.: 289.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid.: 289-290.

<sup>34</sup> Charles Paulk, “Post-National Cool: William Gibson’s Japan,” *Science Fiction Studies* 38, no. 3 (November 2011): 480.

Japanese fashion<sup>35</sup>.

Japanese fashion greatly influenced William Gibson, who in the 1970s had to work as “vintage picker” and seek out vintage clothing at commission and sales in order to survive<sup>36</sup>. When Japanese designers showed their collections in Paris in 1982, they became a big sensation for the Western world. Gibson collaborated with several Japanese fashion brands; once “in *Pattern Recognition* he invented for his heroine a nonexistent Buzz Rickson bomber jacket, and they began to receive orders for this jacket, although they did not have a female model. As a result, Gibson participated in the development of one of their collections. And Buzz Rickson, which is also a Japanese brand”<sup>37</sup>. Also the influence of Japanese aesthetics can be felt in the images of his heroines, for example, Molly from *Neuromancer*, a decisive robotized killer girl who, in turn, influenced the image of Trinity from *The Matrix*<sup>38</sup>.

For American science fiction writers who started after WWII in search of a new direction later to be called “cyberpunk,” Japan also turned out to be a major attraction. Philip K. Dick, an iconic figure for the global mass culture, wrote the novel *A Man in a High Castle* in 1962, where he treats the Japanese with great reverence: half of the characters are Japanese, and one of the main characters, the attaché, is trying to prevent a war.

In 1982's *Blade Runner* based on the story of P. K. Dick, the director Ridley Scott again turned to the aesthetics of the modern Asian metropolis. *Blade Runner* is a kind of visualization of cyberpunk, the atmosphere that W. Gibson described so skillfully in *Neuromancer* published in 1984 (although at the time of the release of *Blade Runner Neuromancer* was already written and was sitting at Gibson's desk). “It was the zeitgeist, the spirit of the times”, that the image of Japan was associated with the near and very realistic future – with a developed and orderly capitalism, the power of corporations and the development of high technologies, and within the framework of world history, “Pearl Harbor and the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki the [American and Japanese] cultures were closely fused”<sup>39</sup>.

Just as in the beginning of the 20th century, Japan struck foreigners with its distinctive culture, and Orientalism spawned a whole trend in art, in the 1980s Japan once again presented to the Western world its refined aesthetics, fashion, but only this time – in the best traditions of Marxist theory – this aesthetics was reinforced by economic achievements. So called “Samurai capitalism” gave rise to “techno-Orientalism”, and “the bestial caricatures” of the Japanese in WWII propaganda was no longer applied in Western (American) society. According to David Morley and Kevin Robins in their book *Spaces of Identity* (1995), American society figured out that in the light of Japanese “technocapitalistic savvy”, they “could no longer be dehumanized or condescended to in the traditional manner”<sup>40</sup> (Paulk, p. 480). On the other hand, it was precisely the technological nature of the Japanese “cultural intervention” in the world's communication space that allowed Western xenophobes to dehumanize the Japanese from “rats and monkeys of the wartime propaganda” into soulless, inhuman robots, or replicants.

Mindful of how talented Gibson is able to grab urgent patterns from everyday life, we can assume that all these moods were reflected in the image of Japan in his debut novel.

<sup>35</sup> “How Ukrainian Translation of William Gibson's *Neuromancer* Was Created”, Mariya Pirson, Olga Lyubarskaya, Alexei Polyarinov, last modified 2020. [https://lb.ua/culture/2017/09/24/377364\\_sozdavalsya\\_ukrainskiy\\_perevod.html](https://lb.ua/culture/2017/09/24/377364_sozdavalsya_ukrainskiy_perevod.html)

<sup>36</sup> David Shuck, “William Gibson Interview: His Buzz Rickson Line, Techwear, and the Limits of Authenticity,” *Hedders* (March, 2015), last modified 2020. <https://www.hedders.com/2015/03/william-gibson-interview-buzz-rickson-line-tech-wear-limits-authenticity/>

<sup>37</sup> “How Ukrainian Translation of William Gibson's *Neuromancer* Was Created”, Mariya Pirson, Olga Lyubarskaya, Alexei Polyarinov, last modified 2020. [https://lb.ua/culture/2017/09/24/377364\\_sozdavalsya\\_ukrainskiy\\_perevod.html](https://lb.ua/culture/2017/09/24/377364_sozdavalsya_ukrainskiy_perevod.html)

<sup>38</sup> Ibid.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid.

<sup>40</sup> Charles Paulk, “Post-National Cool: William Gibson's Japan,” *Science Fiction Studies* 38, no. 3 (November 2011): 480.

Gibson said in an interview for *Heddels* in March 2015: “Japan had a more radical experience of future shock than any other nation in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries. They were this feudal place, locked in the past, but then they bought the whole Industrial Revolution kit from England, blew their cultural brains out with it, became the first industrialized Asian nation, tried to take over their side of the world, got nuked by the United States for their trouble...” Further, in response to a journalist’s question why in his *Sprawl* trilogy he explores “the expanding influence of Japanese culture on the rest of the world”, Gibson discusses the mutual influence of Japan and America in the field of fashion: “When I was first writing about Japan, it was at the peak of the Bubble. Bubble popped, but they kept on going. Japanese street style feeds American iconics back into America in somewhat the way English rock once fed American blues back into America”<sup>41</sup>.

### 3. The image of Japan in *Neuromancer* by W. Gibson

As Charles Paulk noted in his *Post-National Cool: William Gibson’s Japan* (2011), “Gibson’s (...) debut novel *Neuromancer* (...) hardly wants for analysis. His bleak-chic images of cybernetic bodies, simulated realities, virtual subjectivity, and urban sprawl have been, and continue to be, painstakingly unpacked. And yet the presence of Japan (...) has less often been subject to serious scrutiny. The prevailing critical gloss is that Gibson’s Japan, a product of the 1980s, reflects that era’s anxieties about the nation’s coming-of-age as an economic superpower”<sup>42</sup>. Anxieties mentioned here means American paranoia towards Japan’s increasing prosperity in the 1980s. However, in this regard, it should be noted that even if Gibson unknowingly expressed similar sentiments in his debut novel, however, in many ways he was more Canadian than American and could personally take a pro-Japanese position. His fascination with Japan, the fact that for three decades he tirelessly emphasized its prospects and aspiration for the future (even after the bubble economy burst), may testify in favor of his good attitude towards Japan.

The novel *Neuromancer* begins in a futuristic Japan. Gibson had not yet been to Japan at the time of writing the novel, but he listened attentively to the stories of Japanese tourists who came to Canada. In the first chapter of the novel readers can enjoy his traditional Japanese flavor: yakitori shops; the yakuza who “keep” the semi-criminal Ninsei street, “preserving” it as a “historical park”; sararimans who spend all their lives working at the same corporation; division into gaijin-foreigners and local-Japanese; Shiga street, in the very name of which there is a hint of spies, intrigues and secret murders (Shiga prefecture is a historical area where ninjas lived and trained in medieval Japan)<sup>43</sup>.

With the traditional key signs, there is a modern symbolic series: instead of Mount Fuji itself, its holography is mentioned, invisible, like the original mountain, due to the radiance of the television sky (in real Japan, in a fine weather day Mount Fuji can be seen from some points in Tokyo, but fog often interferes with the view), neon lights that illuminate narrow streets; noise and music from countless slot machines; The *Sprawl*, where expats mostly live, is located on the Chiba Peninsula, opposite the capital, a kind of settlement for foreigners, exactly as, say, Yokohama was in the 19th century; cheap capsule hotels – “coffins”<sup>44</sup>, which were exotic for the West at that time.

From the first sentence, “the sky above the port was the color of television, tuned to a dead channel”<sup>45</sup>, the readers find themselves in the futuristic landscape of technogenic Japan at the end of the Showa era (1926-

<sup>41</sup> David Shuck, “William Gibson Interview: His Buzz Rickson Line, Techwear, and the Limits of Authenticity,” *Heddels* (March, 2015), last modified June 2020. <https://www.heddels.com/2015/03/william-gibson-interview-buzz-rickson-line-tech-wear-limits-authenticity/>

<sup>42</sup> Charles Paulk, “Post-National Cool: William Gibson’s Japan,” *Science Fiction Studies* 38, no. 3 (November 2011): 479.

<sup>43</sup> William Gibson. *Neuromancer*. New York: Ace, 1984, 4-6.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*: 4-7.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*: 3.



1989).

#### 4. W. Gibson as a feminist writer

Gibson has a bachelor's degree in English literature, which means that he does not have a special technical education. He does not have a direct relationship to programming, but still managed to become the founder of the genre, which is directly related to cyber technology. Moreover, he was actually one of the first among science fiction writers (especially of those writing about hacking and cyber technology) to make women the lead characters.

It should be noted that in such a conservative genre as science fiction (to which cyberpunk belongs), female characters usually played secondary roles. The main character has always been a man (there were rare exceptions, for example, R. Heinlein often portrayed bright main female characters in his novels, but this is what made him stand out among his fellow writers), who played his typical role of a researcher, conqueror of the surrounding matter. The hero protected heroines in trouble, female characters encouraged him to perform certain actions, and he could solve problems with women or move towards a goal in a team with them. And yet he himself was indispensable for the development of the plot, and, accordingly, invulnerable: if the hero's life ended, then the narrative stopped, while female characters appeared only at certain points in the development of the plot, or served as a help to the hero. This is not to say that Gibson radically changes this tradition in *Neuromancer*, but Molly, his heroine in this novel, is an independent, self-sufficient woman who can handle herself.

"The protagonist of *Neuromancer* seems to be Case, but most of the time he looks at the world through Molly's eyes. He is trying to understand what is happening in her head, but since Molly does not let him into her soul, Gibson does not allow Case mansplain Molly, no matter how close their partnership is"<sup>46</sup>.

Nevertheless, Molly has a sexual relationship with Case and subsequently tells him about her traumatic experience working in a brothel. In this regard, it is necessary to mention the feminist analysis of works in the cyberpunk genre. Researcher Chi Hyun Park refers to Nicola Nixon and Sharon Stockton who noted, "the often male cyberpunk hero's interactions with his environment are gendered and sexualized: he "jacks into" cyberspace or the matrix, in much the same way that he enters the bodies of the cyborgian females with whom he is coupled"<sup>47</sup>. Mentioned here "cyborgian females" recalls "Donna Haraway's swift analogy between the female cyborg and working-class Asian women", which returns us to "David Morley and Kevin Robins's notion of "techno-orientalism" to show how both cyberspace and the "Orient" function as feminized constructs to be penetrated and contained by the Western male subject"<sup>48</sup>.

However, in the *Neuromancer* no one is protected from penetration and "hacking": neither female characters nor male ones. *Neuromancer* is an atlas of post-traumatic disorders"<sup>49</sup>. "None of the characters in the book are protected, anyone can be hacked," which creates additional tension in the already dynamic plot. For example, readers encounter an amputee right away, on the first page of the novel, it is Ratz, a bartender; later readers find out that Case is injured; Armitage, his boss, is practically destroyed, both mentally and physically. "Case is neurologically crippled, unable to hack anything, zaibatsu or otherwise. His central nervous system has been

<sup>46</sup> "How Ukrainian Translation of William Gibson's *Neuromancer* Was Created", Mariya Pirson, Olga Lyubarskaya, Alexei Polyarinov, last modified 2020. [https://lb.ua/culture/2017/09/24/377364\\_sozdavalsya\\_ukrainskiy\\_perevod.html](https://lb.ua/culture/2017/09/24/377364_sozdavalsya_ukrainskiy_perevod.html)

<sup>47</sup> Jane Chi Hyun Park, *Orientalism in U. S. Cyberpunk Cinema from Blade Runner to The Matrix*. Dissertation. (University of Texas at Austin, 2004), 62.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid.: 62.

<sup>49</sup> "How Ukrainian Translation of William Gibson's *Neuromancer* Was Created", Mariya Pirson, Olga Lyubarskaya, Alexei Polyarinov, last modified 2020. [https://lb.ua/culture/2017/09/24/377364\\_sozdavalsya\\_ukrainskiy\\_perevod.html](https://lb.ua/culture/2017/09/24/377364_sozdavalsya_ukrainskiy_perevod.html)

sabotaged, preventing him from entering cyberspace”<sup>50</sup>.

Paulk mentions a number of authors who are trying to analyze Gibson’s cyberpunk, and in particular, his *Neuromancer*, in the context of the “techno-orientalism” concept formulated by David Morley and Kevin Robins, “riffing on Edward Said”<sup>51</sup>. These authors see in the main male character the novel as a typical white European who is struggling with the “threat” of Japanese capitalism and is trying to seize (including sexually), subjugate the submissive – Eastern – cyberspace. Paulk criticizes these authors for their “critical tunnel vision”: “I do not mean entirely to dismiss techno-orientalism as a concept, or even its bearing on Gibson’s work. Undoubtedly, the author is guilty of stereotyping and exoticism in his use of Japanese imagery, and a more restrained look at the techno-orientalist aspects of *Neuromancer* could be both productive and appropriate. (...) Though *Neuromancer* cannot be divorced altogether from the political climate of the 1980s, neither should that be the solitary lens through which its treatment of Japan is viewed”<sup>52</sup>.

We cannot disagree with his remarks, since the main characters of *Neuromancer* look like Europeans, and even Molly is not mentioned anywhere to be Asian.

But perhaps the story of Molly’s life is most shocking, without which, perhaps, she could have seemed to readers a rude and insensitive killer, not even a samurai (who, by virtue of origin and upbringing, should still have a noble spirit) but a ninja – a robot, killing machine. She has a modified, artificial body, but her traumatic past is an essential component of her image. Molly “talks rather coldly about it, all this happens to her behind the scenes. And when she talks about it, Gibson does not tell us what her pulse is, what Case, who is almost always connected to Molly’s senses, feels. It is just a hellish introduction to Molly’s life, we do not know about it right away, and when we find out, it is just a dry fact”<sup>53</sup>.

All this recalls, firstly, Major Kusanagi from *Ghost in the Shell*, who lost almost her entire body as a result of an accident. Secondly, such an image of Molly suggests the dehumanization of the Japanese to the level of androids that are not capable of experiencing human emotions.

The image of Molly is essential for the development of cyberpunk. Not only because it is one of the memorable and strong female heroines rare for the SF, but also because, according to Olga Lyubarskaya, who translated Gibson into Ukrainian, Molly’s image and appearance had a great influence on Major Kusanagi from *Ghost in the Shell*, and on Trinity from *The Matrix*. Imperturbable, robotized, with black glasses, in a tight-fitting suit – this image of the heroine of the genre has become very recognizable as cyberpunk made it to the “big screen”. In turn, the translator Olga Lyubarskaya believes that “Molly could look like Rei Kawakubo”, since she also wears sunglasses, and “it is no coincidence that I say so much, she [R. Kawakubo] began by making “clothes for women who do not care what their husbands think”. Molly is exactly this type of woman, she is a very emancipated character, and we can learn a lot from her”<sup>54</sup>.

Gibson’s merit to feminism can be considered that, firstly, along with the traditional female image of “damsel in distress” (Linda) in *Neuromancer*, he portrayed a new type of strong and independent heroine, who at the same time still needs the protection of a hero (close, loved one), and also, secondly, that he showed the inequality of both sexes in the face of a soulless corporation, the laws of business, the established world order. In this sense, it seems legitimate to call Gibson a feminist writer, since he not only tried to look at the world through the eyes of a female character, but also depicted the imperfection of the existing system of relations in society, within which no one can be safe, neither man nor woman.

<sup>50</sup> Charles Paulk, “Post-National Cool: William Gibson’s Japan,” *Science Fiction Studies* 38, No. 3 (November 2011): 483.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid.: 480

<sup>52</sup> Ibid.: 484.

<sup>53</sup> “How Ukrainian Translation of William Gibson’s *Neuromancer* Was Created”, Mariya Pirson, Olga Lyubarskaya, Alexei Polyarinov, last modified 2020. [https://lb.ua/culture/2017/09/24/377364\\_sozdavalsya\\_ukrainskiy\\_perevod.html](https://lb.ua/culture/2017/09/24/377364_sozdavalsya_ukrainskiy_perevod.html)

<sup>54</sup> Ibid.

## 5. Characteristics of Cyberpunk

Fascinated by Japanese fashion, W. Gibson became the creator of cyberpunk, and he formulated its main features in his first program novel *Neuromancer*. Although the heroes of his novel are flesh from the flesh of the gloomy world of techno-corporations, but they exist on its periphery, they are outsiders. The hero of the classical dystopia (we are talking about the Zamyatin-Huxley-Orwell triad) at the beginning of the story is built into the system and is its obedient dog, and only later he realizes the mechanism and inhumanity of the existing order, as a result of the appearance of a mysterious woman in his life and the unusual events provoked by her.

Instead, the hero or the heroine of cyberpunk are not surprised by the cruel laws of the world in which they live, but neither do they try to rebel against the system. They exist in it as “pirates”. Unlike the heroes of classical dystopias, the heroes of the cyberpunk world have nowhere to run, they have no alternative to the gloomy world in which they are forced to survive. Therefore, the heroes do not fight the system, they are not horrified by its inhumanity; they are built into this system and do not know any alternative. Often, those heroes are literally embedded, that is, they are half people, half cyborgs. They do not entertain groundless hopes for a humane society that may exist outside the limits of a totalitarian society, which the hero of classical dystopia would begin to realize as oppressive. The heroes of cyberpunk are more pragmatic and devoid of illusions, they know that they cannot escape from the system. And they are looking for ways to exist within it, to coexist with it. They find their place in it as “hackers”, and not respectable people, since for Gibson the word “punk” in the name of the genre just as important as the word “cyber”.

But in the early 1990s, according to the creators of the genre, cyberpunk dies and is reborn as an essential part of a global popular culture. It is noteworthy that the most precise embodiment of Gibson's cyberpunk was found on Japanese soil. Despite the fact that, for example, in the image of Trinity from *The Matrix*, we can find the features of W. Gibson's Molly, *The Matrix* itself has more features of the classical utopia, using cyberpunk and Asian aesthetics mostly as an entourage. As in the classical dystopia, in *The Matrix* we can find the idea of rebellion against the system, the idea of escaping beyond it, into a more just society. The role of the protagonist in *The Matrix* clearly belongs to the male character, who, as a classical hero of dystopia, awakens from the illusion of a mechanical existence, inspired by the appearance of a woman. The film *Nirvana* can be called as another exemplary indicator of the genre, but its hero is also a male character who goes through his male quest (to set free, i.e. to let escape outside the “totalitarian system”, the alternative hero, Solo, who is a character in a computer game).

Japanese anime becomes a rightful successor of W. Gibson's cyberpunk. It is about cyberpunk as a genre created by a group of writers who have challenged respectable society. In particular, about Gibson's cyberpunk, who gave us not only all the clichés of the genre (a clever marginal hacker, the dark “noir” atmosphere of the world, violent corporations, the use of heroes as tools, etc.), but also a feminine look, unusual for the science genre fiction, on the events taking place in the world of cyberpunk. In Japanese anime, in general, there were already independent and full-fledged female heroines (for example, the female characters of Miyazaki Hayao), and Japanese cyberpunk became one of the most fertile grounds for them.

One example is *Gunnm (Battle Angel Alita)*, 1993), an anime about cyborgs and a dystopian society in which total brainwashing is practiced. It was not popular outside of Japan until 2019, when a movie based on the manga and the anime was made in Hollywood, which brought worldwide popularity to the original work. An interesting fact is that the novelization of the movie for an English-speaking audience (2018, 2019) was undertaken by the writer Pat Cadigan, the author of a number of cyberpunk novels. In her cyberpunk works, female characters act as the main characters – they are hackers who conquer and study cyberspace. Thus, we can say that cyberpunk continued to exist and develop in literature, but it was no longer a rebellion against respectability, it turned into a study of human interaction with cyberspace.

In 1995, Oshii Mamoru released *Ghost in the Shell*, inspired by *Blade Runner* and Gibson's Molly. Thanks to

this animation, Japanese cyberpunk generated buzz around the world. In 2001, the film *Avalon* directed by Oshii Mamoru is released. In the movie, the cool cyberpunk heroine acts in virtual reality and strives to go through the most difficult level of the computer game in which she lives. This is not about a deliberate escape from the limits of a repressive system: what we see here is only an organic development within the reality proposed for existence.

## Conclusion

Modern dystopia represented by cyberpunk has dropped the concept of the individualistic struggle against one's environment. The heroes and heroines of cyberpunk no longer rebel against the system, but seek ways to exist in it. Moreover – and this, perhaps, is the most significant contribution of cyberpunk to the development of the dystopian genre – cyberpunk introduced the image of a strong, independent heroine. Cyberpunk women are cyborgized, strong, and balanced. They are perfectly adapted to survive in the gloomy world of the future, dominated by global corporations and technologies. Gibson's cyberpunk set a tendency to look at the world through the eyes of a heroine; later, Japanese cyberpunk makes the most of this in its best anime and films. Inspired by the futuristic image of Japan – first of all, by its fashion and the women who created this fashion – Gibson was the one who laid the foundation for a unique, pro-feminist trend in science fiction and dystopia, Japanese cyberpunk. While in the West, the classic dystopian scheme, in which the action unfolds around a male character, is still in demand and is reproduced in a large number of works (for example, *The Matrix*), in Japanese cyberpunk we can find stories in which the central and leading role is played by a female character, and the viewer looks at the world of cyberpunk through the prism of female perception.

In this sense, it would be fair to say that Gibson was one of the first cyberpunk authors to use this technique and that by doing so, he is the progenitor of Japanese cyberpunk, characterized by strong and independent heroines.

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