



## Conference Report: CyberPunk Culture Conference 2020

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Online

*Adam Edwards*

Are we living in a cyberpunk future? As the calendar ticks onwards it inevitably collides with futures imagined by science-fiction authors. With its focus specifically on the near-future, cyberpunk is the first to be encountered, and on the 9<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> of July 2020, the CyberPunk Culture Conference took place in an appropriately digital setting to discuss cyberpunk in all its forms. The event was organised by Dr Lars Schmeink (Hans-Bredow-Institut) to coincide with the larger Cyberpunk Cultures project. The idea for the conference arose from the publication of *The Routledge Companion to Cyberpunk Culture*, with the intention being to extend the conversation started by the book in active discussion about “living in cyberpunk times”.

The CPCC 2020 consisted of 32 separate talks, a keynote speech, and a roundtable discussion, hosted mainly on a dedicated Discord server, on which both Q&A and general discussion sessions took place over two full days of programming. The talks were submitted either in video format or as slides and text, and were made freely available on the conference website at the beginning of the week. Around 125 participants joined the server, creating a space where an international community of scholars and enthusiasts could meet, despite the necessities of a global pandemic. The internationality of the conference brought the challenge of bridging multiple time zones, from the West Coast of America to Moscow. The CPCC incorporated a long program that allowed all attendees to engage with talks live, and all talks remained open in the server for a week following so that participants could engage with every talk.

The keynote address, “Takeshi Was Here: Viral Revelations, Globalized Power, and Cyberpunk Myopia”, delivered by Pawel Frelik (University of Warsaw), eloquently captured the prevailing concerns about the genre’s future. Cyberpunk, he began, seems incredibly relevant today due to its aesthetics and the centrality of data-platforms, but it is on the whole politically naive. Whilst Fredric Jameson’s original claim that it is the supreme literary expression of late capitalism still resonates today, cyberpunk has consistently failed to anticipate the role neoliberal politics would come to play alongside the rise of corporatism.

Frelik identified some exceptions to this failing, using in particular Richard Morgan’s *Kovacs* novels as examples of corporate and private interests common to cyberpunk being trumped by the omnipresence of authoritarian power. Morgan treads a fine line in indulging a fascination with this power, and the keynote’s Q&A discussed how his personal beliefs complicate interpretation of the novels. Namely, his transphobic beliefs about the immutability of birth-assigned genders, which he raised on his blog, contrast starkly with the fluidity of body-swapping in his fiction, a fact which in particular surprised some participants in the discussion. Thus the degree to which his beliefs are at odds with his fiction limits the potential of his novels to contribute positively to the cyberpunk canon.

The keynote ended with apprehension about the upcoming high-profile video game *Cyberpunk 2077*, the shadow of which is impossible to escape. The fear that this text threatens to freeze the development and flexibility of cyberpunk in the wake of its release solidified the timeliness of the event itself, taking stock of the genre’s potential before its form in mass media becomes restricted by high-budget iterations.

A roundtable discussion on Zoom, in which the participants responded live to Discord questions, further explored the limitations of the genre’s past. Sherryl Vint (University of California Riverside) was the first to speak. She reflected on how the “mind-merging digitals” of cyberpunk technology (which had promised to be the genre’s most important speculation) had turned out to be much less pressing than its representations of the gig economy and platform capital that constitutes its background. She discussed how online cultures had contributed to a return of fascism and overt racist expressions that traditional cyberpunk failed to anticipate.

From there the roundtable reflected on cyberpunk’s failings to access and represent the infrastructures of its political backdrop. Anna McFarlane (University of Glasgow) discussed how cyberpunk’s emphasis on visual representation struggles to critique political and corporate infrastructures as they resist easy visual representation. Following this was Hugh O’Connell’s (University of Massachusetts Boston) “counter-Cyberpunk manifesto”, where he articulated and amplified the concerns already raised. He posited that classical Cyberpunk often bought into neoliberal ideology in the evacuation of politics within its worldbuilding, and fostered the idolisation of personal expression of free will at the expense of systemic transformation. Graham Murphy (Seneca College, Toronto) importantly offered contrast to this pessimistic perspective on classical cyberpunk, asserting that the genre was never one thing to start with; it was about permutations and mutations. This variety contributes to its relevance to a contemporary context, reflecting the variations of our relationships to technology, our bodies, and the varied culture

of a digitally connected age. The roundtable expanded on this notion, with the participants recommending alternative texts that *did* push these boundaries, such as Nalo Hopkinson's *Midnight Robber* and Tim Maughan's *Infinite Detail*. This provided a positive direction to develop cyberpunk analysis further as it broadened the previously narrow corpus with which it had been obsessed.

Expanding the scope of cyberpunk characterised the variety of papers across the two days. Larisa Mikaylova (Lomonosov Moscow State University) questioned cyberpunk's dark and gloomy expectations, exploring the potential of the bright and comedic spectacle of *Upload* as a fresh exploration of Cyberpunk's themes, a suggestion that aligned interestingly with Alexander Possingham's (Monash University) concerns that cyberpunk's aesthetics were limiting in their prescriptiveness.

Pushing not just the visuals of the genre but the medium of its texts, Julia Gaterman (University of Hamburg) celebrated the work of Viktoria Modesta, a singer-songwriter and model who uses cyberpunk visuals along with the physical difference of her prosthetic limb to question the physicality of beauty in the musical sphere. Her paper discussed Modesta's evocation of traditional cyberpunk aesthetics in its call-backs to *Blade Runner* and clean, empty digital spaces, asserting that the use of cyberpunk to signify futurity and weaponise it to suggest normative embodiment is a thing of the past. In the Q&A following this talk, the discussion turned to the potential problems of the fetishisation of Modesta's disability. In exploring this, the traditional understanding of fetishisation in psychoanalytic theory, as applied by the male gaze upon her, Gaterman expanded on her analysis; she described how Modesta controls the gaze of the viewer to resignify her disability to empower rather than victimise herself. In this manner Modesta can control the representation of her body to subvert traditional conceptions of beauty.

With a similar focus on aesthetics and taking control of one's representation, Esko Suoranta (University of Helsinki) and Stina Attebery (University of California, Riverside) focused on the world of cyberpunk fashion; specifically, how it can become a speculative practice about the future of social expression and posthuman embodiment, and how cyberpunk itself consistently informs counter-cultural performativity, albeit through a shifting political lens.

Discussion of non-western Cyberpunk texts offered particular insights, diversifying a genre otherwise marked by its Western and Japanese origins. Sumeyra Buran (Istanbul Medeniyet University) and Muhammad Aurangzeb Ahmad (University of Washington) drew attention to Turkish, Middle Eastern, and Islamic-world fiction. Ahmad took a broader approach to Islamicate Cyberpunk, introducing and unpicking many aspects of an under-represented area. Buran focused on the depiction of queer representation and how the speculative futurity of this genre accepts gender identities outside the binary; a key element of a more accepting, diverse world.

Diversity was a topic that recurred in other papers, such as Anna Oleszczuk's (Maria Curie-Sklodowska University Lublin) analysis of the comic book series *ODY-C*, and Agata Waszkiewicz's (Maria Curie-Sklodowska University Lublin) discussion of the inclusivity cyberpunk video games in the independent industry. Oleszczuk's paper in particular was an important addition to this topic, as in her analysis of *ODY-C* she highlighted how the way this text broke gender binarity with the "extermination of men" and creation of a third gender led to the re-establishment of the subjugation of queer identities

in a new context. The binary opposition was preserved in *ODY-C*, albeit between different groups; however, this very opposition highlighted heteronormative structures and brought queer and otherwise fluid gender identities into new contexts through the futurity of its setting.

When more traditional texts were addressed, they were expanded in fresh directions, realigning the focus of their analysis for a contemporary context, just as the roundtable had raised. Carmen Mendez Garcia (Complutense University, Madrid) and Steven Shaviro (Wayne State University) looked at foundational cyberpunk authors William Gibson and Pat Cadigan, but focused on their more recent texts, offering insight into changing perspectives and the development of the genre's originators.

Taking a different approach to longer-standing cyberpunk works, Josh Pearson (California State University, Los Angeles) focused instead on the less-studied iterations of cyberpunk, such as tabletop roleplaying games, and in particular on how *Cyberpunk 2020* could be a useful classroom tool to help students understand the "weaponisation": of style, which is a potential barrier to readers of classic cyberpunk texts. His focus on character generation within the game mirrored the focus of my own paper, as both our talks approached the centrality of precarity and trauma in cyberpunk texts. Whilst I focused on the games in practice, exploring cyberpunk stories through participation, Pearson explored how the act of creating characters within this system in a teaching environment introduces and internalises the idea of identity as a stylised surface that hides past trauma. Similarly, Evan Torner (University of Cincinnati) discussed *Cyberpunk 2020* with a focus on its author, Mike Pondsmith. His paper reflected on the genre's position within a developing cyberpunk canon and within game genealogy, including analogue and digital developments. These three papers thus assessed the content, application, and influence of tabletop roleplaying games in the greater context of cyberpunk works.

The success of this event was not only in the enthusiasm that resulted from connecting such a spectrum of attendees in a time of few opportunities for research connection, but also in the possibilities enabled by its digital format. A particularly successful decision was to make the papers available days before the event themselves. Being able to peruse and digest them and formulate questions in response to them at one's own pace allowed more attendees to participate, unhindered by note-taking or processing the details of a paper whilst the opportunity to ask questions was taking place. This was a particular boon for any early-career attendees, or those inexperienced in conferences – a facet worth supporting in future events.

The format did not come without limitations, however, and the conference itself made for a fairly intense two days. The timetable was lengthy in order to include the number of papers and to encourage accessibility of live Q&A discussions across time zones; this was supplemented by parallel discussions across the Discord channels as enthusiasm for each talk sparked separate conversations. This led to a tiring pace for the event. Scheduled breaks would have brought welcome respite and encouraged use of the voice channels for relaxed conversation, as this feature of Discord was unfortunately underused due to the heavy scheduling.

With this being said, the event itself was an incredible success, and demonstrated the strength of an online event that relied on a mostly text-based,

yet synchronous format. The length of the schedule, coupled with the decision to leave the Discord live for a week afterwards, created a highly accessible event, and an effective structure for future online conferences to follow.

Another development to emerge from the CPCC is the Cyberpunk Research Network. This is a loose connection of scholars (many of whom took part in the inaugural conference) intending to maintain an accessible space for collaborative work, the sharing of resources, and joint discussion of the field of research. Details for joining the network can be found on the website (<http://cyberpunkculture.com/>), along with papers and Q&A discussions from this event, demonstrating the success of the community the CPCC gathered.

*Biography:* Adam Edwards is a researcher in English Literature and Digital Cultures at the University of Birmingham. His research focuses on the growing popularity of the cyberpunk genre of science fiction, and is currently tracking its development from its origins to the present day. He is particularly interested in supporting academic research into video and tabletop gaming as rising forms of individual, artistic expression.