Cyberbodies in Spectacular Landscapes: Exploring the Intersection of Aesthetics, Technology, and Culture in Cyberpunk Films

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Abstract

In the process of moving from obscuration to openness, the concept of the body has evolved into subdivided fields such as Somaesthetics. In recent years, more film studies have been shown using Somaesthetics to explore science fiction films, especially Cyberpunk films, which have a direct impact on the body. However, a systematic presentation of body aesthetics in Cyberpunk films has yet to be established. This article discusses the body elements in Cyberpunk films, through Somaesthetics and the political body theories, this paper studies the Somaesthetics in Cyberpunk films from three aspects: the material body in mainstream aesthetics, the technical body in the spectacular landscape, as well as the cultural body within the meaning system. The paper demonstrates how these films explore the tension between technological progress and embodied experience. Specifically, when adapting to the rapid development of technology and culture, humans should maintain attention on the human body, otherwise, they will fall into the myth of high-tech but low life.

Keywords

Somaesthetics, Cyberpunk Films, Body, Science Fiction, Technology

1. Introduction

Richard Shusterman's introduction of the concept of Somaesthetics at the end of the 20th century has led to a surge in the study of body aesthetics. Somaesthetics refers to the critical examination and improvement of one's body as a site for sensory aesthetic appreciation (aesthesis) and creative self-formation (Shusterman, 1980). It involves the acquisition of knowledge, practice, talk, and physical training that contribute to body care or improvement. Somaesthetics has two dis-

tinct features: the broad scope of the study object and its practicality. Additionally, Shusterman's pluralist approach to Somaesthetics theory has allowed scholarly research to explore body aesthetics beyond the subversion of traditional philosophies such as "mind-body dualism". Furthermore, it serves as a guide to other human behaviors by looking back at body theory.

In recent years, the field of Somaesthetics research has witnessed a growing trend in using this concept to study various art forms. Among these art forms, the film has attracted a significant amount of attention. In China, research in this area has focused on four main areas, including imaginative body studies, spectacular body studies, masochistic body studies, and celebrity body studies (Fu, 2020). Scholars in the West have also made significant contributions to the study of body aesthetics in film. For example, Kennedy (2006) examines how film affects the audience's physical perception and emotional experience, and he explores the influence of body aesthetics on film culture. Abele (2013) analyzes the significance of body image in Westerns, arguing that the body plays an important role in Westerns as a symbol of male power and as an expression of the identity of women and marginalized groups. By analyzing body image in Westerns, Abele argues that this genre can serve as a cultural expression reflecting society's diverse views and attitudes toward body image. Miklitsch (2004) explores the relationship between the body and emotional experience in genre films from a psychoanalytic perspective. He argues that the body plays a crucial role in genre cinema, triggering emotional resonance and physical reactions in viewers through the presentation of body images and emotional experiences. Meanwhile, Bell-Metereau (1996) examines the representation of the body in horror, fantasy, and epic films, analyzing how these films evoke horror through physical, sensory, and emotional experiences.

Despite a plethora of studies on science fiction films, there has been a lack of systematic analysis of Somaesthetics in this genre. Prior research has mainly focused on gender studies, body politics, and spatial politics, neglecting the potential of Somaesthetics. While scientific film subgenres may sometimes intersect, their connotations and expressions differ significantly, making it challenging to encompass Somaesthetics in the vast universe of science fiction cinema in a single article. Therefore, this paper aims to systematically construct Somaesthetics in Cyberpunk films, one of the most popular subgenres of science fiction films in recent years. This study fills the gap in the Somaesthetics of science fiction films, reaffirms the importance of Somaesthetics in contemporary art, especially Cyberpunk films, and provides a valuable perspective for studying genre films with Somaesthetics.

Based on this, this paper aims to explore the prominent features of cyborg body aesthetics in different Cyberpunk films and how they transcend materiality and technology to become bodies within the meaning system. Furthermore, how do cyborg bodies with multiple traits differentiate themselves from humans and provide a different perspective for humans to explore the mysteries of their own bodies?

2. Literature Review

The term "Cyberpunk" was coined in the 1980s as a subgenre of science fiction writing. American author Bruce Bethke first used the term in the title of his novel *Cyberpunk* (1980) to attract readers, and it gained more widespread use thanks to writer and editor Gardner Dozois. However, it was William Gibson's *Neuromancer* (1984) that solidified the Cyberpunk genre and earned it critical acclaim, winning the Hugo, Nebula, and Philip K. Dick awards. Initially, it was difficult for people to identify Cyberpunk in films due to a lack of understanding of its aesthetic and thematic elements. But as special effects improved and science fiction grew in popularity, Cyberpunk films gained traction with their futuristic and philosophical characteristics. Notably, *The Matrix* (Lilly Wachowski & Lana Wachowski, 1999), *Ghost in the Shell* (Oshii Mamoru, 1995), *Minority Report* (Steven Spielberg, 2002), and *Source Code* (Duncan Jones, 2011) are among the more famous examples. Cyberpunk films typically create an anti-utopian world dominated by technology, portraying a post-modern human condition where individuals live in a digital cage as cyborgs in an era of "high technology and low life".

The relationship between the human body and society is inseparable. The body takes on various meanings depending on the context in which it is viewed. For instance, Baudrillard (2011) noted that medicine considers the body from a physical perspective, religion sees the animal as the ideal reference for the body, political and economic systems view the robot as the ideal type of body. The body can also be understood in terms of its identity and role, as it presents different identities in various social contexts and locations, with differing aesthetic standards (Baudrillard, 2011).

Yuan (2019) has argued that the body has significant symbolic value and is frequently used in sociocultural construction. It is evident that the body, as a symbol, not only carries natural characteristics but also has cultural categories and concepts that serve as a reference to identity. In Cyberpunk films, the cyborg is not typically an entity separate from society, but rather a product of human creation that exists and operates within human society, with a value system that prioritizes the truth and beauty of human society (Yang, 2007). In the context of discussing Somaesthetics among various subgroups, introducing the concept of the social body can enhance people's understanding of the plot and characters based on their social identities, thereby increasing their sense of identification and empathy with the Cyberpunk theme.

3. Three Bodies in the Cyberpunk Film

In this paper, three types of cyborgs are discussed: 1) the material body in mainstream aesthetics, 2) The technical body in the spectacle picture, and 3) the cultural body within the meaning system. Additionally, this paper examines the portrayal of cyborgs in Cyberpunk films through Ihde's (2001) Three Bodies theory. Ihde posits that the first body is the physical body, as proposed by Gustav and

Merleau-Ponty. The second body is the cultural body, a construct discussed by Foucault and other critics of phenomenology. The third body is the technical body, taking into account the influence of technology. The cyborg, possessing all three types of body features, represents both the optimistic aspirations and the unsettling realities of humanity's relationship with technology.

3.1. The Material Body in Mainstream Aesthetics

If the world of beauty is a visual feast, then the aesthetic is a fluid feast. Throughout the history of Cyberpunk films, the physical appearance of cyborgs has not remained static. Initially, cyborgs were portrayed with a cosmic, hardcore aesthetic, but in contemporary society, they are often depicted with a softer, more technological style that reflects the preferences of audiences and the mainstream aesthetics of society. This transformation of the cyborg's body reflects a deeper understanding of human aesthetic preferences.

Through the use of cinematic languages, such as close-ups and spectacle angle shots, the human body, and face are transformed into something different from their natural states. In cinema history, certain faces have been widely discussed, including Garbo's face, which Roland Barthes claimed contained an idea, and Audrey Hepburn's face, which told a story. These examples highlight the significance of actors' faces in the film. A memorable face is not just about physical appearance, but also the audience's expectation for the character they portray. In the film *Blade Runner*, Harrison Ford, best known for his portrayal of Captain Han Solo in *Star Wars* (George Lucas, 1977), portrays a character that departs from his usual roles that embody American individualism. In *Blade Runner*, Ford's melancholic temperament is perfectly inherited and performed by Ryan Gosling in the sequel *Blade Runner 2049* (Denis Villeneuve, 2017).

Li (2022) notes that the majority of actors who play Cyborgs possess nearly flawless facial features according to popular aesthetics. This assessment is not subjective, but instead, a more scientific standard, exemplified by the conformity of Zhang Ziyi's face to the golden ratio face standard, rendering her more photogenic. In Cyberpunk films, the ideal facial features for protagonists incorporate not only aesthetic appearance but also technological and futuristic criteria since the actor's face is meant to be seen for an extended period, serving as an immersive tool for viewers akin to the addictive principles of game design and technological convenience. Dolores Abernathy, the robot receptionist in *Westworld* (HBO, 2016-2022), is often shown standing in front of a sun-drenched farmhouse, exuding the charm of a typical girl next door with her blonde hair and bright smile, captivating many human customers. In *Ghost in the Shell* (Rupert Sanders, 2017), Hideo Kuze, the crime boss, has a gentle and pale appearance, along with a slender, model-like body, deviating from the audience's expectations of an old, sinister or tough-looking individual with a scarred face. Cyborgs with perfect facial features in Cyberpunk films not only conform to technological production standards but also function as a crucial attraction for fully immers-

ing the audience.

Fashion is a powerful means of self-expression, yet cyborgs are unable to harness this ability. The protagonist of *The Island* (Michael Bay, 2005), Lincoln, questions the uniform he is required to wear and wonders about the origin of his garments. The cyborgs' lack of thinking ability, a measure implemented to protect the interests of the company, results in their neat and tidy attire, which is only a political facade (Harvey, 2018). In *Westworld*, abandoned robot receptionists are relegated to a gloomy basement, stripped of their clothing, and displayed as mere commodities, their nakedness symbolizing their worth as objects (Shaw, 2019). Similarly, in *Blade Runner 2049*, cyborgs' naked bodies are displayed among the towering skyscrapers, representing their commodification (Kerins, 2018). When these robot products are no longer in use, they are denied the right to wear clothes. Cyborg clothing style is generally monotonous and dull, *Equilibrium* (Kurt Wimmer, 2002) showcases missionaries wearing uniforms that transform from solemn religious garments to oppressive uniforms, leading to power struggles and betrayals (Sarri, 2019).

3.2. The Technical Body in the Spectacle Picture

According to Ponty's philosophy, the body is the fundamental way that humans interact with the world around them (Merleau-Ponty, 1962). However, in the modern cyber society, technology is advancing rapidly, allowing humans not only to alter their bodies but also to store their consciousness in circuits for immortality (Gibson, 1984). This increasing integration of technology and the human body has resulted in the evolution of cybernetic technology from a free state to an integrated state, ultimately leading towards complete integration (Gibson, 1984). In this new reality, the perception and understanding of the body are increasingly mediated by intelligent technologies, giving rise to the concept of the "technical body" in the spectacle picture.

The fusion of technology and the human body in the cyber society has drawn widespread attention from scholars, who have studied the philosophical, ethical, and social implications of this integration on the concept of the body. Some scholars argue that this integration challenges traditional notions of embodiment and blurs the boundaries between the physical and the virtual (Haraway, 1991). Others have examined the cultural, social, and political aspects of the technological body in the visual landscape, analyzing how technology mediates human experience and shapes our understanding of the body (Turkle, 1995). In the modern cyber society, the rapid development of technology has transformed the original characteristics of the body and presented it in a new cinematic way.

For example, in films like *Blade Runner 2049* and *Westworld*, cyborgs and robots are depicted as commodities, and their bodies are displayed naked or in monotonous and dull clothing, indicating their objectification as mere products of technology. As technology continues to shape the human body, the technical body becomes an integral part of the spectacle picture, blurring the boundaries

between human and machine.

During the early days of cyber technology, the cybernetic body was external and free. This concept has roots in ancient Chinese philosophy, with Mencius stating that a gentleman is not born to be different but is skilled at using tools and materials. As technology has evolved, humans have transitioned from simple tools like wood and stones to more sophisticated ones like steel wrenches and mechanical arms, with the use of tools gradually shifting from outside the body to inside. In the film *Avatar* (James Cameron, 2009), the protagonist Jack is able to channel his consciousness into his avatar body and experience a new sense of mobility, indicating a deep integration between technology and the human body. This theme is also common in many Cyberpunk films that showcase genetically mixed cyborgs and the blurring lines between the human and technological. Philosophers have also discussed the concept of the "separation of mind and body", which may become more prevalent in the future as technology and the body continue to evolve.

In addition, the film *Upgrade* (Leigh Whannell, 2018) portrays a man named Grey, who is implanted with a chip that enhances his physical abilities, giving him extraordinary strength and agility. However, the chip also takes over his body, causing him to lose control and become a killing machine. The integration of technology and the human body in this film raises questions about the ethical implications of such advancements.

Moreover, in *Ghost in the Shell*, the protagonist Major Motoko Kusanagi is a cyborg who has undergone numerous body modifications, including a full cybernetic replacement of her original body. Her appearance is strikingly beautiful, yet her body is also weaponized, highlighting the aesthetics of violence. The film raises philosophical questions about identity, consciousness, and the nature of humanity in a world where technology has blurred the lines between the organic and the synthetic.

According to Zhai's (2012) poem, the "non-human" body has moved beyond the confines of the traditional human form. In this vision of the future, physical bodies have been transformed into databases that exist in a state of weightlessness, while life is presented in a non-linear fashion, with the world moving from node to terminal, and everything taking on the qualities of fiction. In this world, scientists have replaced God, and individuals exist as chips, able to recognize one another instantaneously despite being distant opposites.

In the future, I cannot write to you like this, our physical bodies have become databases, floating in space. In the future, life is no longer presented linearly, the world goes from node to terminal, everything becomes fiction. In the future, scientists replace God. Me and you, two distantly opposite chips, recognize each other in a flash.

The concept of the human brain transforming into a database may seem like a futuristic idea found only in science fiction, however, in today's society, individuals can assume multiple identities on the internet and easily switch between their virtual and physical personas. This phenomenon reflects Cyberpunk world

where people can learn, work, and entertain themselves through digital platforms. In The Matrix, the protagonist Neo embodies a dual identity that parallels the modern-day experience of online gaming. The internet provides individuals with the freedom to experiment with different aspects of their identities, granting them a platform to construct themselves according to their desires. In *Ready Player One* (Steven Spielberg, 2018), protagonist Wade chooses to reinvent himself as a geek within the game, finding success and even gaining an E-girlfriend. While non-human cyborgs are not explicitly present in these examples, their very existence is dependent on others. The fact that cyborgs can separate their mind from their physical body and even store their consciousness in different spaces implies a shift away from the traditional human-machine relationship where the machine is dominated by the human. This trend towards an increasingly complex relationship between humans and technology pushes people to reconsider the traditional paradigm and adopt the cyborg concept as a methodology to guide the harmonious integration of humans and technology.

3.3. The Cultural Body within the Meaning System

According to Maurice Merleau-Ponty, the world is boundless and meaning is continuously generated, and an individual should have a personal system of meaning that does not require articulation to be useful (Toadvine, 2019). If cyborgs were just machines made of steel, they would have no significance to humans except as moving machinery. However, in Cyberpunk films, cyborgs emerge to fulfill human needs. For instance, child cyborgs are created to compensate for the loss of a parent, while nanny cyborgs help humans in their daily lives. These cyborgs embody certain identities that society has attributed to them, contributing to the complex cultural body of cyborgs. This section will examine the cultural body of cyborgs with regard to subjectivity, social identity, and political formations.

Jacques Lacan's research revealed that infants undergo a "mirror stage" around the age of one, during which they laugh at themselves in the mirror. The infant's smile is not coincidental but a form of identification that triggers narcissistic emotions and pleasure. Narcissism is one of the basic human instincts, as evidenced by the story of Narcissus in Greek mythology. The subjective consciousness of cyborgs mostly manifests itself when they fall in love with themselves. Cyborgs do not worry about cleanliness or aging as humans do since these aspects can be replaced. The Vaporwave art craze of recent times also showcases the art of cyborgs selecting and displaying their bodies.

The close association between the body and society has been recognized since the 1970s when Mary Douglas posited the inseparable link between the two in her seminal work *Natural Symbols* (1970). Michel Foucault later extended the study of the body to encompass the political dimension, introducing the concept of power and laying the theoretical foundation for future body politics research. The body is a highly symbolic entity, embodying not only natural traits in the various contexts of social and cultural constructions, but also carrying cultural sig-

nificance as a category and concept, serving as a reference to identity. Although the human body comprises an undeniable natural substrate, its appearance, condition, and activities are all shaped by cultural influences, permeated with the potential for acquired socio-cultural nourishment, which manifests as its social properties. Therefore, the body in society encompasses not only physical attributes of physical activity, but also assumes the cultural function of identity (Douglas, 1970; Foucault, 1977).

In the Cyberpunk world, the proliferation of the Internet and new media has elevated the identity of cyborgs to that of electronic citizens, affording them the ability to alter their identities. For instance, in the movie *Her* (Spike Jonze, 2013), Samantha serves as Theodore's virtual OS girlfriend. However, Samantha is simultaneously conversing with 8316 individuals and is romantically involved with 614 of them. The cyborgs' capacity for identity expansion is intriguing and raises important questions, as the movie underscores the emotional toll of Theodore discovering Samantha's love for multiple individuals. Identity refers to the consistency of a person object sect across time and space, the condition or fact that a person or object is itself rather than something else (Zhang, 2015). However, from the perspective of cyborgs, which are machine-born, identity transformation is a defining feature of the Cyberpunk body.

The intersection between cyborgs and politics has piqued the interest of scholars, given the fact that cyborgs embody both technological and political properties. They were born in a world marked by political tension and conflict, and their origins can be traced back to the Cold War era. In 1960, American aerospace scientists Manfred E. Clynes and Nathan S. Kline introduced the term "cyborgs" in their article "Cyborg and Space", which discussed the potential for enhancing human bodies to survive in space. This idea reflected the imperial colonial nature of early arms races against Russia, highlighting the political dimension of cyborgs from their very inception.

Blade Runner 2049, a film that delves into the relationship between humans and cyborgs, captures the confrontation within the ruling elite of global capitalism between the state and top corporations that strive for progress to the point of self-destruction. Žižek (2020) argues that this political formation is an illustration of Foucault's concept of the "disciplinary society", in which large groups of forces infiltrate institutions such as hospitals, schools, and prisons to discipline citizens physically and mentally. In this context, many cyborgs play the role of instruments for these institutions and heads, becoming enforcers of discipline. Examples of cyborgs fulfilling such roles include John in the film *Equilibrium* and K in *Blade Runner*. The political nature of cyborgs raises crucial questions about the relationship between technology, power, and society, as their existence blurs the lines between human and machine, and challenges people's understanding of identity, autonomy, and agency in a rapidly changing world.

In today's digital society, the integration of technology and the body has deepened, profoundly impacting human conceptions and systems of meaning regard-

ing the body. As a complex concept, cyborgs possess characteristics of material bodies, technological bodies, and cultural bodies, sparking discussions and reflections on the boundaries of technology and the body, body and self-identity, and the relationship between technology and society.

However, the portrayal of cyborgs also presents challenges in terms of human relationships with nature, body and mind, ethics, and values. With the continuous development of technology, humans need to carefully reflect and explore their interactions with cyborgs to ensure that the relationship between technology and the body aligns with human values and ethical principles.

4. Conclusion

To further the understanding of the body's significance in the construction of Cyberpunk worlds, it is necessary to analyze the performance of bodies in these movies. The body is often utilized as a tool for exerting and expressing power, and it is crucial to remain vigilant of its susceptibility to regulation and manipulation. Future research can explore how the concept of "three bodies" is reflected in Cyberpunk films and investigate the relationship between somatic aesthetics and other body theories in these movies. Additionally, future studies could examine the cultural anxiety and attitudes towards technology, body, and power that are reflected in Cyberpunk cinema. Overall, this paper argues that the portrayal of high technology and low life in Cyberpunk films serves as a warning to prioritize human rights and dignity in the face of rapid technological and cultural advancement. By prioritizing these values, we can attain true freedom and autonomy in the human body, ultimately leading to a brighter future.

The path to philosophical truth for many has become too narrow, confined to theoretical realms centered on concepts and categories, while neglecting the art of living that focuses on bodily practices and experiences. When examining bodily aesthetics from the perspective of cyberpunk films, the portrayal of technological bodies, cultural bodies, and political bodies in cyberpunk movies calls for viewers to introspect and reflect on themselves through the spectacle of embodiment, thus gaining the initial experience of movies as an art of living can bring. Cyberpunk films visually showcase human or cyborg bodies in unprecedented ways, and the physical and mental experiences undergone by characters in these films highlight the embodied aesthetics that Shusterman advocates, with the training of the body at its core. The "counter-cultural" style of cyberpunk films sets them apart from space epics or other genres of science fiction. Instead of depicting grand and fantastical universes, cyberpunk films focus more on narrating the vast world through microcosmic characters, reflecting the philosophical significance of bodily aesthetics through the lens of the small and mundane. It is this attention to the body and mind that makes the cyberpunk world rich in aesthetic colors.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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