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# CYBERPUNK CINEMA



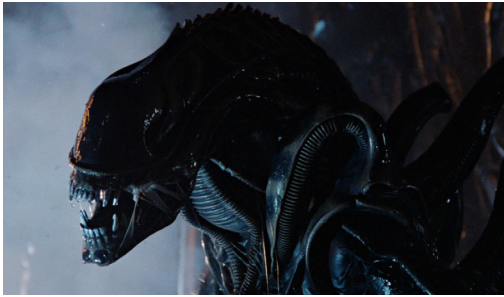
"Metropolis"  
© F. W. Murnau Foundation

## Metropolis [1927]

The city, the process of exurbanisation through which megapolises swallow the surrounding areas and swallow one another, the ghetto. This has always been the genre's favourite mise-en-scene – much more than just a recognisable scenic design, the megapolis is a combination of aesthetics and philosophies of spatial organisation. Before cyberpunk, before cybernetics and *Sex Pistols*, Fritz Lang's *Metropolis* imports the urban image as a map for understanding the world into the collective science fiction mindset. The German silent film, one of the most expensive films of its time, takes us to the magnificent city which the film is named after. There the working class has been forcefully sent underground, often working themselves to death down in the mechanical depths which keep the life of the urban body going. The ruling capitalists live in majestic gardens and in a majestically sunlit architectural masterpiece designed to combine Classical and Gothic motifs. It is hard to imagine that the truncated pyramid of the Tyrell Corporation in *Blade Runner*, for example, is not partly inspired exactly by Lang's shots.

Despite the representation of class division, which is naive even for the early 20th century, *Metropolis* can be seen as a primitive model of the artistic organisation of urban space which would later evolve into the urban agglomerations of William

Gibson and Ridley Scott. Just like in cyberpunk, in the *Metropolis* universe there is no middle class, the world is divided into exploiters and exploited. Lang's vaults talk to Gibson's ghettos, the skyscrapers talk to the corporate arcologies and space stations. Synthesis in cyberpunk most often occurs in virtual reality which transcends both kinds of real space, while in *Metropolis* "There can be no understanding between the hands and the brain unless the heart acts as mediator" – namely, a human conductor of harmony between the classes. Yes, the political vision of the film is indeed oversimplified and idealistic, while in cyberpunk such convergence is impossible by definition. But who knows whether we would have ever come to such postmodern rejection if *Metropolis*'s modernism hadn't first visually split the social space in two. The film's other key contribution as an ancestor to cyberpunk is, of course, Maria, the human machine. She permanently implants in our minds the disturbing image of the robot doppelganger, which manifests itself at the very heart of *Blade Runner* and in the cybernetic poltergeists at the periphery of *Neuromancer* (A.P.)



"Alien" © 20th Century Fox

## @Alien [1979]

Upon its return to Earth, the commercial space tug "Nostromo" intercepts a distress call and awakens its screw from hibernation. The source of the call turns out to be an abandoned spaceship infested by hundreds upon hundreds of alien eggs. The following events are best summarized by the slogan of the film: "In space no one can hear you scream."

It's easy for us today to underappreciate the series' lore, whose surface is barely even scratched in the first film. A great deal of its lasting power is owed to H. R. Giger's design, in which organics and mechanics erotically intertwine to a disquieting conclusion. Alien hints at the unborn cyberpunk in its treatment of artificial intelligence. Mother, Nostromo's computer, has a distinct presence without reaching the autonomous freedom of Hal from 2001: Space Odyssey. The cyborg hiding among the crew acts hostile and antihuman – a cliché, against which cyberpunk will fight, while the next installments in the series will actively undermine or twist. The connection between Ridley Scott's first film and the genre is further strengthened: as in almost all cyberpunk works, the corporation is the film's diffusive antagonistic force.

The horror that befalls the Nostromo is the work of an all-mighty alien being, but is in fact caused by the secret machinations of the greedy Weyland-Yutani corporation. Parallels with the Tyrell Corporation from Blade Runner are confirmed in the bonus materials for Prometheus, where the two are established as direct competitors. But Alien's lasting imprint on the genre are its characters.

A certain feature of the original script is that no crew member is written explicitly as either male or female. The competent and unfeminine action persona of Ripley has quite a few successors in the following decades. Additionally, Alien centers its plot on another kind of unusual characters – ordinary workers who are far from idealized. They shirk responsibility, bicker, show incompetence and heroism all the same. For a high-budget sci-fi thriller from 1979, this is no less radical than the climax of Otherness in the face of the phallic figure of the alien. (A.I.)



"Escape from New York"  
© AVCO Embassy Pictures

## Escape from New York [1981]

In 1988 crime rate in the USA has increased by 400%. Manhattan is separated from the surrounding water areas by a wall 15 metres high, while a special militarized police force is tasked with guarding this new prison, the biggest one in the country. In 1997, amidst a war breakout with the Soviet Union and China, an Air Force 1, hijacked by American terrorists who sympathise with the working class and with anti-imperialism, crashes on the island with the President of the USA on board. Law enforcement has 24 hours to save him, otherwise humanity might plunge into irreversible chaos. Snake Plissken – a former military man, a current criminal and an absolutely amoral type of guy, played perfectly by the young Kurt Russell – appears right at this moment at a crossing point near the Statue of Liberty. Plissken has been sent to save the President (and the world) and in return he would get an amnesty and would avoid certain

death.

Escape from New York is a small masterpiece. This title, relatively high-budget for the time and a B-movie in spirit, is the ideal mixture of perfectly crafted elements. The film perfectly captures an essential part of the Zeitgeist – in the late 70s Manhattan is notorious for its crime and the shadow of the Cold War is still hanging upon everyone. The anarchistic prison area in which the island is transformed embodies so many characteristics of cyberpunk. This is practically the ghetto or the street from Neuromancer and its countless imitations but without the technological component – it is used entirely by the police state outside of it. Inside the area people live like rats, madness and transgression reign supreme. Inside it logic is thin, if it even exists. John Carpenter has done a wonderful job, at any given moment the camera gives us a perfectly unusual and aesthetic view of the events so that the whole misery and madness are refracted to our minds in the form of some surprising, twisted but also somehow authentic future which gets really close to the horror edge. The action is great, the music – composed and performed by Carpenter himself – is great as well. All of this without the smallest hint of pretension. The film has surely had a strong influence on Neuromancer not only conceptually and atmospherically but in terms of plot development as well – at least one plot element of the story is practically identical between the two cinematic works and it can be argued whether or not part of the aesthetic decisions in it have also been reflected in Ridley Scott's Blade Runner. (A.P.)

"Tron" © Buena Vista Pictures



## Tron [1982]

Tron is a film with such a ludicrous concept that even the data skyscrapers and their icy shells which appeared in Neuromancer two years later must have sounded almost logical compared to this. Exactly due to this ludicrousness the film is still considered captivating even nowadays. The idea that programs in the corporate network secretly, unbeknownst to people, are sentient and have a society of their own, can't have been taken seriously even for a second in the early 80s, let alone nowadays. The psychedelic landscapes where the programs dwell, however, are sufficient to make us throw away all rationality and just get immersed into this weird world of neon virtual networks designed in the cosmic emptiness of microscopic hardware spaces and clean data spaces.

Tron is a very obvious allegory of some weakly processed issues of its own time – the fear of concentrating power in big businesses and the depersonalization of individuals. The employees of ENCOM work surrounded by a sea of cubicles. Programs in the virtual world, on the other hand, are gradually being subdued and cannibalized by the Master Control Program which has become 2415 times smarter since the moment of its writing. This big evil is preparing to swallow the software abilities of the Pentagon and the Kremlin and to rule the world hundreds of times faster and more effectively than any human being. Meanwhile, in the virtual world the MCP aims to root out the big programming heresy – the belief that each program is created by a user and that an outside world exists. "User requests are what computers are for!", says the wise old programmer who founded ENCOM. "Doing our business is what computers are for!", replies the evil President of the corporation who stole it from



the white-haired wizard. Unsurprisingly, the Hacker, who in *Tron* is also a Gamer, interferes to restore the balance. This battle of the good, artistic, democratic and individual energy against the cartoonish, fascist dictatorship of centralization is, of course, totally absurd – from the way the programmers write their programs to the dramatic plot inside the virtual world. However, in it there is still something significant about the early 80s, even if you are not that interested in this aspect – the trip inside the machine is so hypnotic that an hour and a half passes by as if in a wink. And to top it all, the main protagonist is played by a very young, arrogant and a bit looney Jeff Bridges. (A.P.)



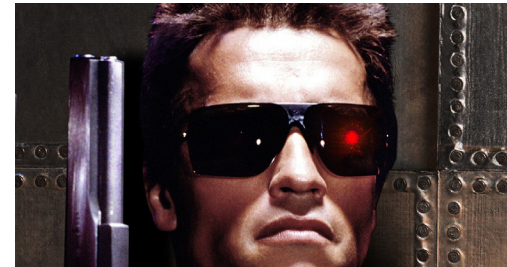
„Videodrome“ © Universal Pictures

## Videodrome [1983]

Cyberpunk is present both in the neon-lit alleys and in its non-physical information spaces. The contrast is often inert, sometimes examined in depth, but only *Videodrome* embodies it so literally. The film tells the story of Max Renn – president of a small TV station relying on pornography and extreme violence in order to compete with the big channels – in his search for even more spectacular material. A transmission he gets his hands on, that has some potentially authentic snuff piques his interest but also sends him down a spiral of hallucinations and confusion. The clues lead to a professor with the somewhat cinematic name Brian O'Blivion. He consoles Max by telling him that a tumor has appeared in his brain, but it is not the cause for the hallucinations – it is rather their product and a natural step in the transition of an individual to their TV persona, which O'Blivion considers more realistic than the everyday one. Such radical viewpoints

always lead to strong opposition and so Max gets caught up in a battle between two sects. Unlike the later works of the Canadian maestro Cronenberg, *Videodrome* is openly returning to its roots in pulp fiction and body horror and does not explicitly position itself as a social experiment. The immersion of the protagonist into the TV reality, however, has some very powerful connotations and it is exactly the allegorical nature of the film that allows it to not get old along with its 80's vision of a media environment.

*Videodrome* is a seemingly ordinary attempt to repeat a bunch of tired clichés about the neural relation between violence and pleasure and its exploitation. However, it quickly surpasses the source material and delves into the human brain's property to construct the world from indirect information – and, in a biologically realistic sense, to be in turn replaced by the imaginary construct. All this happens with a spring of the practical effects expected from the early Cronenberg works – the word 'embodies' is not used at random here. The materialization of virtual space into flesh is the main trajectory of the plot and is depicted with the entire range of grotesques which are typical for the director but on the edge of the real transition the film pulls away and refuses to land the high concept into the horror imagery as an end in itself. The final form of the "new flesh" is something which we will have to process from now on, no matter which side of the screen we are on. (L.S.)



"The Terminator" © Orion Pictures

## @The Terminator [1984]

Although *The Terminator* primarily relies on time paradoxes and military science fiction, it does share not an insignificant amount of DNA with cyberpunk. It's not the first film to deal with the topic of hostile artificial intelligence, but it's the first to transplant the conflict on a global scale. Juxtaposed to the claustrophobia of *2001: A Space Odyssey*, here Skynet is not just a physical computer, but a self-aware program capable of taking control over global information networks. In 1984, at the dawn of the Internet age, this concept was certainly still new and fresh.

While the sequel, *Judgement Day*, explores the emotional aspects of the struggle for survival and time travel in greater depth, the original film is entirely focused on the concept of the disembodied Frankenstein monster, which instantly calculates the necessity for its creator's survival and reaches to the conclusion that there is none. What's interesting to note is that at this stage of computer development the concept of AI, at least in cinema, is of something alien, inhuman, incomprehensible and hostile at its very core.

This is also evident in the Terminator himself – fake skin on a machine designed to resemble the human skeleton to a much greater extent than a machine intelligence would need. Because in this film the Terminator and Skynet do not possess 'true' consciousness. They're programs capable of processing unimaginable amounts of parameters, but they are still subject to imperatives that *The Terminator* wants the viewer to experience as inhuman and so ultimately limited.

The failure of the robot on the trail of Sarah Connor results from its inability to break away from the

directive to pursue her at all costs. Viewed through a certain lens, he (as well as Skynet itself) is not a self-aware creature despite its capability to imitate one. The Terminator remains a machine incapable of overcoming the irrational at times but ultimately triumphant human heroism. At the time of the film's release, maintaining this optimism of "machines will not replace us" is understandable; today it may seem somewhat naive. James Cameron catalogs a high volume of ideas in his low-budget action, which even today find new incarnations in foreign works. As a step on the way to modern film's interpretation of AI and human-machine relations, *The Terminator* remains an important representative of the genre. (S.Ts.)



"Brazil" © 20th Century Fox

## @Brazil [1985]

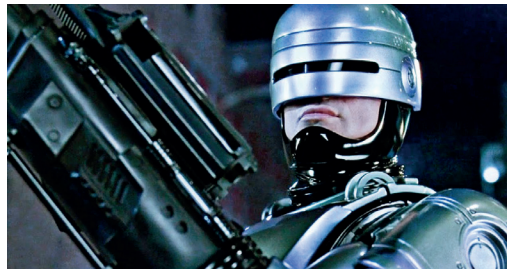
*Brazil*'s world is the supreme representation of bureaucracy as a regime in and of itself. Its forms, endless heaps of them, fill the 130-minute runtime and ultimately come to define not merely governmental service, but the very essence of human relations. The hand of power this regime wields is so overbearing precisely thanks to the archive it keeps of its subjects. This is a world entirely subordinated to information; a logical endpoint to which we might as well be headed ourselves. Rebellion against such economic-political leviathans is intrinsic to cyberpunk but *Brazil* seemingly relegates it to the background in favour of a phantasm, a woman the protagonist has fallen in love with in his dreams. Even so, isn't total representation of the world a core trait of modern consumerist society and what other rebellion could grow within it other than one of the imagination? There is no other reality in existence, regardless of how ineffective and even outright noxious the total data-centric system is. It is

positively frightening how a bureaucratic organism assumes societal control according to its own utterly blind and absurd jurisprudence.

Inspired by Kafka, Orwell and Kubrick, the films doesn't merely flirt with the absurd but succumbs to its depths. The revolt of the clerk, Lowry is not an active one; not consciously at least. His driving force stems primarily from his dreams; from love-induced frivolity and idealization. Soon enough, this unnatural behaviour proves contrary to systemic regulations and gives the story its adventurous character. The rebellion itself, however, is much more strongly expressed in De Niro's character who is considered a terrorist for his ability to actually repair the machines of this world. It comes as little surprise that nothing inside a society of facades ever really works and its department of data extraction is ultimately incapable of extracting any meaningful information whatsoever.

The absurdity is planted in the protagonist's behaviour as well as in this world's dehumanizing structure, which Gilliam depicts through his typical, rather purposefully "blackened" satire. Meanwhile, the physicality of it all is just as densely recreated as it is absurd; a mixture of futurism and retro-noir that occasionally even resembles some bizarre version of pneumatic steampunk. (P.V.)

„RoboCop“ © Orion Pictures



## RoboCop [1987]

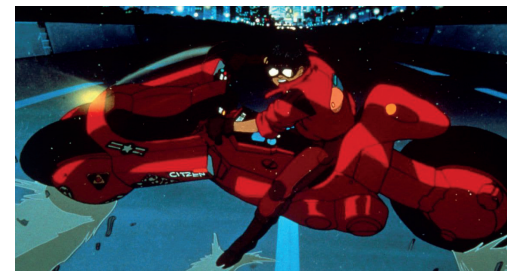
The first two *Terminator* films are probably the most influential science fiction films dealing with the topic of the human machine but *RoboCop* is the one that focuses on it unambiguously through the cyberpunk lens. In Cameron's works technology has brought down an apocalypse, the human element has already become obsolete, the technology has become a synonym of the death of organics. In Paul Verhoeven's work the dystopia is permeating and active but its spread is slow enough for it to be perceived as a social process. This more human-like time frame makes possible the abundant satire which streams from it and which is mastered perfectly by Verhoeven.

Detroit from the near future is on the brink of a total social collapse (a fact from the fictional world which nowadays seems colored by tragic irony), crime is everywhere and out of control. The OCP Corporation has started to take over the functions of the police force and is planning to build an entirely new city – Delta City – over the ruins of Old Detroit. The progress connotation in the new name is obvious and what is more ironic is that the project is hailed as wonderful, because it would create two million jobs. Jobs for builders who, according to the OCP Vice-President, would live in caravans, would get high on drugs and would have sex with prostitutes. The real American dream. The TV news segments during the film are even more absurd – the presenters talk about wars, riots, mutinies, mass fires (caused by an accidental launch of a satellite from the Reagan space program named Space Wars) with smiles on their faces. The world is literally collapsing, while business is growing stronger and stronger. In this context Murphy, the roboticized police officer whose brain has been implanted into a fully mechanical body, doesn't even

seem particularly unnatural. His character is more of an antidote against the fully mechanized alternative which is thoroughly satirized here. When RoboCop finally takes off his helmet and we see Murphy's face, as if glued to a metal frame, the effect on the viewer is both one of deep worry and of almost inexplicable sympathy towards this wretched being. The film challenged its viewers 30 years ago to expand on their perception of what is human in contrast with the corporate lickspittles and criminals who pass for humans here. Of course, the action is quite good as well, even if not quite on par with *The Terminator*.

(A.P.)

„Akira“ ©TMS Entertainment, Toho



## Akira [1988]

In many ways *Akira* is no less important for cyberpunk than *Blade Runner*. The film adaptation of the manga comics makes the subgenre extremely popular in Japan, inspiring a series of subsequent film and TV projects, while in the meantime making Japanese animation really popular all over the world. In itself the film deals with a large number of central cyberpunk themes, leaving a really bright mark on the viewers' minds thanks to the genius art and design. The motorbikes of the street band led by the main character, Kaneda, remain one of the symbols of cyberpunk to this day.

*Akira* is a very obvious allegory of the threat of nuclear destruction (the original story was published in the early 80's, long before the end of the Cold War). The images of a destroyed Tokyo and of Neo-Tokyo with its corrupt government, extremely powerful military, strange cults, poor population, inequalities, sexism, and revolutionary resistance attempts – they all contribute to the

feeling of omnipresent hopelessness. Each element is so organically interwoven with the others that the seeping depression and feeling of doom slowly and mercilessly stick to our minds like some sort of universal truths.

It is precisely this organic feeling that dominates *Akira*. Even though the aesthetics of the film remind us strongly of *Blade Runner*, the thematic quest here is not as much directed to the question of what is human, but to the ability of humankind to go outside itself. The city itself feels very much like a monstrous body in which people breed and live like bacteria, often deep in the infrastructure. Everything prepares us, unsuccessfully, but ever faster and ever more unbearably, for the crushing ending. Once seen, the nightmare of ever-growing flesh cannot be erased from our minds. However, there still remains the hint of optimism that people could learn to be kind to one another, to overcome themselves: "But someday...We ought to be able to... Because it has already begun". (A.P.)





„Tetsuo: The Iron Man“  
© Kaijyu Theatres

## Tetsuo (The Iron Man) [1989]

*Tetsuo (The Iron Man)* opens with a shot of a man who makes an incision in his leg and inserts a metal rod inside. Evidently, the desired objective is represented by a picture of an athlete, captured in the middle of a run, giving context to the brutal scene as an attempt at self-improvement. This uncomfortable combination of longing and violence upon one's own body is typical of cyberpunk, though rarely so overt.

The socially stratified societies eminent in the genre can largely be seen as an organizational system of all other tropes. Information spaces belong to people from the middle class and higher, and if anyone penetrates uninvited into them, they are usually a product of the positive archetype for the digital cowboy. The unsightly metal prostheses, on the other hand, are above all a visual symbol of people from the street - the modifications of the corporate employees are, if not invisible, then at the very least elegant and avoiding the grotesque effect. The cliché of the physical extension of the body being equivalent to oppression, and the extracorporeal extension - to freedom is widespread in the genre. A curious juncture is that in order to deduce from it the obvious metaphor of metal as an expression of the fated pursuit of the future - of the equally doomed insolvent population, - you need an outside look.

After the homemade modification, the man walks out in the street just to be run over and the

driver's fault begins to manifest physically through the uncontrollable spread of iron on his body. The protagonist has no name, no background history or development - we only know that he is a middle class man driving to work. He is a collective image and the movie isn't concerned with developing its characters or any specific details whatsoever. The film is quite straightforward in the pursuit of its purpose: to portray the eruption of the metal, which in this case does not have any practical functions and manifests itself in depictions of pipes that connect nothing but simply stick out. The fusion of iron with the human body is an end in itself and does not lead to symbiosis, but to colonization and therefore the film is an explicit expression of fear of some rather stylized and extremely monolithic version of the future. This is obviously not among the most interesting prospects that a fantastic work of art can offer. The concerns of the director, however, shed plenty of light on a tension between the original tropes of cyberpunk, which Western artists to this moment have only just danced around. (L.S.)

„Total Recall“ © TriStar Pictures



## Total Recall [1990]

Douglas Quaid is having weird dreams about Mars. In an attempt to find out what causes them he visits an office of Rekall, a company that is an expert in implanting false memories. But when something in the procedure goes wrong, he remembers that he's an undercover agent whose identity has been artificially erased from his memory, and embarks on a fateful race with the evil corporation that controls the human colony of the Red Planet.

*Total Recall* is one of those films which outdo their original thanks to Paul Verhoeven's extremely underappreciated satirical talent (he will go down in history as the director whose ironic social and genre criticisms have been taken seriously the most). While the original story is an impossible Phillip Dick-style conundrum made up of interwoven realities, the 1990 film embraces and satirises the escapism of the recall concept.

Even though some people consider this film to be an example of uncertain reality (similar to the one in *Inception*), the truth is completely different. When Quaid visits the centre, the doctor straightforwardly lists all major plot points of the story we are about to witness, including a photo of the female character Quaid is going to meet. After this scene the film turns into a soapy spy thriller which uses all genre clichés possible and ends (surprise!) with a bright light as soon as Arnie saves Mars and beats the evil corporation. Ironically, this approach - albeit a great critique of both escapism and spy action as a genre - actually makes *Total Recall* less cyberpunk than its prototype. Of course, this interpretation of the story does not change the fact that it relies on technology which is able to implant memories and identities and which is used in a conflict between shady organizations.

This film is a great example of the fact that cyberpunk can be both a carrier of prognostic ideas or social commentary and a reflexive instrument and satire of the attractive genre package. This alone makes it an even wider and more interesting thematic field. (S.Ts.)

„Until the End of the World“  
© Warner Bros. Pictures



## @Until the End of the World [1991]

*Until the End of the World* is among the stranger creations of Western cinema. It is the great director Wim Wenders' most expensive film, shot on locations in 11 different countries and several continents, created and processed over a period of almost 15 years, initially conceived as the greatest road movie. Its full cut is claimed to have been around 20 hours long, unlike its first official versions which had a length of two to three hours and were understandably a complete failure. Today, the curious cinephile can probably get their hands on the 5-hour version, re-cut after the initial release, which is coherent enough to keep one's attention on this weird film.

The cyberpunk in *Until the End of the World* looks quite retro from a contemporary perspective, the technology shows looks extremely nineties (the plot itself takes place in 1999 too) and the general atmosphere is exactly that of European cinema. Cars have something akin to an AI and navigation, there are systems for video-conferencing and ones with which to search for information in global databases, as some basic genre commonalities. A more significant link with cyberpunk can be seen in the film's seemingly interminable wandering around the globalized world. The film opens by informing us that an Indian satellite has spun out of orbit and is beginning re-entry into the atmosphere, with the incoming catastrophe's unpredictable location causing an understandable and wide-spread panic. Claire, the protagonist, is however disinterested in the banalities of the world. A series of spontaneous

decisions and wanderlust put her on the trail of Sam Farber, a man wanted by the CIA whose father, as we learn later, has invented a camera capable of recording people's visual information and dreams. Claire's journey and her various companions are strongly influenced by neo-noir cinema; throughout its duration we see a world more connected by a global network and more exhausted by capitalism than ever, which is somewhat melancholically heading towards its end, under a wonderful soundtrack.

In its second half *Until the End of the World* settles into a particular geographical location and focuses much more on themes of colonialism and our dependence on technology, the so called "disease of images". All of this is strongly connected to cyberpunk, even if dressed up in exceptionally unusual packaging. And even if the director's cut poses a bigger challenge for the viewer's attention span, Wenders's movie has more than a few hidden treasures to offer. (A.P.)

"12 Monkeys" © Universal Pictures



## @12 Monkeys [1995]

Terry Gilliam's *12 Monkeys* transports us to a world where a new technology provides a chance for salvation while at the same time enslaving anyone who doesn't control it. The convict James Cole is sent back in time to gather information on the virus which killed almost the entire population of Earth. The plot takes place in two different timelines, but they both present the same dystopian world in different stages of development (or degradation.) The future timeline shows us a society of convicts ruled by ruthless "scientists" with no real plans for humanity's survival.

The past however doesn't prove to be much more different than either the future or our own present. The film constantly highlights caste segregation, parochial institutionalization and the lack of any and all progress in our world(s). The only person that sticks up for Cole in both timelines is his psychiatrist, as only she understands his inner turmoil, even if she doesn't believe his story.

It's hard to say which world is a reflection of which. Are we seeing the apocalyptic future reflected in the fictional 1995, where James Cole is constantly being chased and is surrounded by "madmen" who see the world in their own way? Or maybe the future we are shown represents the inevitable path humanity has set down on, a future full of darkness and fear, a future of oppression by those supposed to lead us, while they cower from the ravages of nature beyond the castle walls. The strong of the day define not only the path society takes, but also the personal destiny of all that came before them. The image of the future we are given can be likened to a factory, which uses human labor and humans themselves to build a better future only for sick ideals of its leadership.

What's most impressive about *12 Monkeys* is that its conclusion doesn't provide any exact answer, but rather leaves space for interpretation. Can you really change the past? What about the future? Even if time travel were possible, would it not itself lead to the end of humanity? The film poses a lot of difficult questions about human psychology and sows the seed of doubt in our mind. Can an ordinary person tackle the world he lives in, surrounded by people, technology and ideas he cannot understand, yet is faced with every day? We are left to wonder. (N.H.)



"Strange Days" © 20th Century Fox

## Strange Days [1995]

In 1991, in Los Angeles, Rodney King disobeys police instructions to stop driving. A high-speed car chase ensues, at the end of which King is forced to turn off the car, both his companions are arrested with physical violence, and King, who is black and unarmed, is tased, hit dozens of times with police batons and kicked by four white cops. The beating is filmed by George Holiday, who lives nearby, and the footage becomes a sensation. When a year later the police still haven't received a verdict from the jury, among whose members there is not a single African American, racial riots with enormous destruction break out in the city, with 63 casualties and 2383 wounded. This amalgam of lethal public pressure, amateur video technology and the catastrophic effects of the public distribution of a recording is the true story that *Strange Days* reworks into cyberpunk.

How does Catherine Bigelow's film envision the near future? Illegal technology has been developed, which allows a spider-like device placed on the back of the head to record and reproduce all your sensory sensations directly from the cortex. Former cop Lenny is a sleazy dealer of such recordings whose business is not going well at all. He and his best friend Mace come across a recording, which may turn out to be the spark that ignites the racially charged powder keg that is LA. It's a turning point, right on New Year's Eve at the start of the new millennium.

Unfortunately, *Strange Days* has not yet received a cult classic status, as it deserves for its contribution to cyberpunk at least. Some of its elements are typical of the genre – the cyborg features of the spider-like device, distrust of the government, the

city decline. Other aspects, however, are a step ahead from the genre looping of the 1990s. Its protagonists have a different kind of sensitivity – Lenny spends most of the narrative as a loser, in pathetic attempts to get back with his ex-girlfriend and Mace is a single mother, a limousine driver and an experienced hand-to-hand fighter. Even more important than the protagonists' characteristics is that for *Strange Days* social disturbances don't serve as a background for the hero's journey, but issues that can be solved with a lot of effort and after careful consideration, in which the powerless must participate. (A.I.)





## Hackers [1995]

"Hackers of the world, unite!". A somewhat eponymous time capsule of the 80's and early 90's cybernetic and punk culture, *Hackers* turns its subject into candy, attaches it to a disco ball and wraps it all up in the classic Hollywood plot of a teenage romance. It all commences when Dade Murphy, at the age of eleven, breaks into 1507 systems and is subsequently convicted not to touch networking machines for seven years. Now eighteen, he moves in with his divorced mother in New York and attends a new private school where he meets an eccentric group of hackers seemingly out of Scooby-Doo, as well as... Angelina Jolie in her first leading role.

The film faithfully reflects all the limitations inherent in its contemporaneous understanding of hacking and computer science in general. Its cyberspace is very much that of Gibson; harshly geometric and brightly coloured, resembling a psychedelic game only accessible to digital cowboys and samurai. The hackers themselves are symbolised in the film as sui generis people; some next step in human evolution. Except for their mothers, everyone else is presented as incompetent and practically useless. Naturally, the stakes are high – an ecological catastrophe coupled with the despoliation of taxpayers – and they'll be resolved in a clash between the good hackers and the evil one, the heretic. The film resorts to numerous quotes of 86' The Hacker Manifesto and generally depicts a romantic perspective on the geniuses' anarchistic uprising against the corporate machine; their ethos best described with "Hack the planet" – a line that the film repeats on numerous occasions, hinting at their perception of the world as a literal game with no barrier able to stop their brilliant minds

for too long.

Nowadays, *Hackers* is still of interest thanks both to its ludicrous representation of computer tech and a great soundtrack, as well as 90's-infused electro-punk-trip-skate aesthetics mingled with a generous dose of absurdism. Angelina Jolie is terrific in the role of a teenage femme fatale, even as the film doesn't shy away from gender stereotypes. After all, at least a couple characters reveal "secret", "love", "sex" and "God" to be the most frequently used passwords. These words also provide a suitable description of the hacker, as depicted by *Hackers*. (A.P.)



## Gattaca [1997]

*Gattaca* is a cyberpunk film only so far as we accept that the genre is not completely contained within the predetermined dyad of aesthetic and tropes – the neon lights, urban ghettos and cynical hackers – but rather contains in itself the theme of a leap above what is considered naturally human. Setting-wise, *Gattaca* engages with what we'd nowadays call "designed babies" and the consequences a redactable human embryo might have; the purpose not strictly limited to lifesaving necessities and in fact aimed at enhancing the future person's athleticism, willpower, creativity, etc. If we all consent that children are entitled to the healthiest food available; the highest education, the best sports equipment; the utmost diversity in creative activities; then why wouldn't we consent to them being entitled to the best genes as well?

The film refracts this transhumanist reverie in the merciless march of progress with all its harmful side effects, in turn asking us what would become of those never subjected to the process of embryonic enhancement. In *Gattaca*, they are discriminated against and denied the right to certain activities and professions – a plight that directly informs the plot; its imperfect protagonist proving incapable of fulfilling his personal dream of taking part in a space mission. Denied, he embarks on a complicated scheme to assume the identity of someone privileged by genetic enhancement, and yet crippled in an accident.

What *Gattaca* leaves in the mind's eye is a piece of personal and social ice which the film then proceeds to reflect not only in its lighting and color palette, but also in the prolonged scenes of the protagonist scraping the upper layer of his skin so his DNA can remain undetected; his laying on the ground in silent agony in the wake of a literal heightening procedure. The film's message, then, can be interpreted as technophobic – "no gene for the human spirit", as its motto declares. However, it can also be seen as merely cautionary – our societal ailments are infinitely complex and, not taking this into account, each seemingly simple laboratory solution is doomed to open yet more social rifts. (A.I.)



## @The Fifth Element [1997]

At first glance, many would take Besson's film for decidedly middling sci-fi, albeit with a relatively novel plot and a couple of entertainingly tense action

sequences. An attentive viewer, however, would discover within *The Fifth Element*'s dialogue and general worldbuilding quite a lot of unostentatious commentary on humankind's future, intertwined as it is with the march of technology.

When the perfect consciousness, as portrayed by Milla Jovovich, literally drops at second-rate taxi driver Korben Dallas' feet in the year of 2263, he decides to aid this half-naked girl whose tongue is foreign to him in her run from the police. A flying car pursuit ensues and makes us bear witness to the monstrosity that's become of New York. The sky is clogged up with a forest of scrapers while a dense web of boxes, container-like, rests on top of the old city's decayed carcass, now engulfed in smog and seemingly uninhabitable. And yet, people do dwell there, petty thieves and marginals who are consigned to this hellhole whilst, up high in the towers and in off-world colonies, the rich revel in opulence.

Technology has enabled interstellar travel and luxurious living light years away from any form of civilization, but has in no way prevented New York – and presumably the Earth – from turning into a giant scrap heap. On the contrary, it is evident how unlimited progress breeds uncontrollable construction, the foundation inevitably degrading as it's abandoned under all the waste and residue of yet another newly-formed society. Technical progress comes with the danger of neglecting old problems that may seem easily solvable but prove easier still to sweep under the rug. Luc Besson's possible future stands as a warning, its possible reality becoming more probable by the day. (N.H.)



„Dark City“ © New Line Cinema

## Dark City [1998]

Alex Proyas's masterpiece is many things, but "cyberpunk" is not among the first things that come to mind for most of its viewers (which are, alas, criminally few given its astounding quality.) At second glance, however, it becomes patently obvious that *Dark City* is actually a great example of the genre.

John Murdoch wakes up in a gloomy hotel room with no memory of who he is or how he got there, puzzling out his own name by conjecture. He soon realizes that he is in a nightmarish Gothic city where the sun never rises and where everyone falls asleep when the clock strikes midnight, except him. A mysterious group of strangers in black dusters rummage through their homes and rearrange their lives with an unclear agenda – an obvious variation on the theme of Dickian paranoia.

In other words, *Dark City* is a film about an all-powerful shadowy cabal which erases human individuality in pursuit of some inhuman goal. This is a plot synopsis that virtually screams CYBERPUNK. Proyas uses his baroque vision and noir atmosphere to build a mystery story that – despite the lack of cybernetics or virtual realities – is thoroughly imbued with the essence of the genre. It's evident all over the movie – in the dehumanization of the city's denizens; in the human urge to rebel, so strong that even the most brutal oppression cannot erase it; in the protagonist's psychological turmoil; in the theme of overcoming the limits imposed on us by our genes... Of course, Proyas's film is not a "pure" example of the genre – after all, every movement and undercurrent in science fiction comes with its own visual and plot requirements, not to mention world-building tropes, needed to qualify as a part of the genre. But even with its hybrid nature the movie executes an intensely vivid representation of the concepts at the very heart of the cyberpunk genre. If you still haven't seen it and you count yourself as a fan of the genre, I urge you to remedy this omission at the first possible chance! (S.Ts.)



„The Matrix“ © Warner Bros. Pictures

## The Matrix [1999-2003]

The marketing campaign for *The Matrix* premiere was one of the first large-scale instances of using the newly-found mass access to the Internet that people have, in order to spark a feverish interest in a movie. Despite the technical replicability of the film, which allowed us all to watch the movie in different geographical locations or years later, for most of us the patina of the original pre-release experience – guessing for months on end about the answer of the tagline "What is The Matrix?" – is lost.

Morpheus's answer in his conversation with Neo – that the Matrix is a virtual reality that stimulates people's dreaming minds, in order to be used by machines as energy storage – is far from the Wachowski sisters original conception for the movie. The idea of humans being used as organic processors in a neural network was rejected by the production studio and so the series unfortunately ended up with a bunch of logically inconsistent preconditions. The studio's pernicious influence can also be found in Switch – a character who was supposed to be a man in the material world of Zion and a woman in the Matrix, challenging the audience's ideas of the hierarchy of reality and the inner truth found in the imaginary self.

Despite all these missed opportunities, *The Matrix* generated a strong and lasting response – perhaps not so much due to its newly minted special effects and dynamic action sequences, but rather because it managed to capture the yearning for a particular kind of escapism from an atomized, meaningless existence. Both Neo and the Kid from the later video anthology *The Animatrix*, experience the world as something artificial and insufficient, as if the world cannot be defined just by the commotion and senselessness that surround them. *The Matrix* offers an alternative to that – that this world is not authentic; there is another world in which you won't feel like your surroundings are a grey pall you have no desire to engage with. This

other world may be less pleasant to the senses, but there you could be another (more or less real) version of yourself and your existence can actually matter. If the inherent escapism of the fantasy genre is a pastoral one, preoccupied with versions of past ages that never were, then that of cyberpunk is an urban and technological escapism, seeking the human in its characters beyond their mechanical body modifications or altered realities.

What the Matrix finds in its characters is a supervaluation of freedom and free will. In the first movie, we learn that if a person dies in the Matrix, his body also dies in the "real" world. Despite this, those who have been pulled out of the simulation do not in the slightest hesitate to kill people inside it. In the second movie, it becomes clear that Neo is not the Chosen One or the Messiah who will end the war with the machines, but simply another mechanism of control set in place by them. Both him and his associates live with an illusory sense of freedom no better than the sleepers living in the Matrix. Neo is given a choice – to save humanity's existence, or to rush into a doomed attempt to save the woman he loves. In any coherent and intuitive ethical system, the choice Neo makes – to save Trinity – is wrong. It would be an ethically consistent choice only if – for you – the lives of strangers living in an illusion have no value. If that were the case, then it wouldn't matter that the human race and all possible future humans could not exist, because their life in Zion, still under the control of machines, would have no value either. The supervaluation of free will and the rejection of predestination are also seen in the third movie, whose climax has Neo explaining why he continues to fight even when his efforts are doomed, with the words "Because I choose to."

*The Matrix* is packed to the brim with enough allusions to various philosophical currents to support these quests for meaning in what are otherwise well-shot and executed action films. Which is yet another reason for the continuing popularity of the series despite its many flaws, especially in the sequels. (A.I.)

"A.I. Artificial Intelligence"  
© Warner Bros. Pictures, DreamWorks.



## @A.I. Artificial Intelligence [2001]

*A.I. Artificial Intelligence* is Spielberg's reading of a nifty bunch of anxieties common to cyberpunk fiction. Of course, it's difficult to expect a clean-cut cyberpunk work from Spielberg, but on the other hand he's always good for a more classic, family-friendly fairytale reading of the irregularly manifested future-in-the-present. This film allows us to peer at it through narratively comfortable eyes, unlike almost everywhere else in cyberpunk. Those are the eyes and gaze of the robot, the non-human, who is the fairytale protagonist in this case, related to Pinocchio and his quest towards the dream transformation into "a real boy." In a sense, this is the flip side of the coin to *Blade Runner* and its plotted trajectory beyond man.

*Artificial Intelligence* gazes intensely at the ingredients of the human, although the latter is visibly decaying in this future world. Environmental catastrophes have flooded and sunk the coastal cities, and governments have imposed strict birth control limits. Robots have taken over much of human activity; the last elusive goal remains the creation of a robot with a "soul". The protagonist David is forced to seek out exactly the Holy Grail, to win his mother's love. Whether Spielberg intended this effect or not – today one of the film's strongest points is the way it blurs the lines between humanity's uniqueness and its "non-living"



creations. The film's explicitly stated hierarchy of consciousness – doll < robot < child < man < God/ supermind – is clearly dysfunctional in a number of scenes and thus leads us to a more flexible line of thought about the subject-object pair, which can deal with our technophobic collective nightmares.

The other great and deeply Spielbergian moment in *Artificial Intelligence* is the storytelling, divided here into three thematic segments. The opening segment is a slightly sinister family story in which David embodies the uncanny valley as typically seen in robotics and philosophy, while his human family embodies it through an even more disturbing failure to demonstrate kindness. The second part begins with the Flesh Fair and crowds of bestial robophobes, drawing an unsympathetic parallel to the aversion to the Other found in our own history, and ending in the cyberpunk pornotopia of the robotic Rouge City. The last chapter is the mystical transition to the new, and most clearly shows Spielberg's sympathies for the classic science fiction of the Golden Age. *Artificial Intelligence* is far from being a cyberpunk landmark, but the relationship between machine and man has rarely been dressed up in a more fascinating story. (A.P.)



"Minority Report" ©20th Century Fox

## @Minority Report [2002]

*Minority Report* is among the most direct translations of the cyberpunk genre to the silver screen and is an absolute masterclass in cyberpunk worldbuilding. Surveillance and identification technology; ads that create a false sense of familiarity after a retinal scan; even a road traffic system that can be used at any time for total control...

Against this background a story is being told about a government agency which prevents crime thanks to the prophecies of three precognitive mediums. This theme of the oppressive all-powerful institution which invades not only your personal space, but also your timeline, speaks to the very heart of cyberpunk. Telepathy and prophecy are strong elements of the genre, and with their help *Minority Report* builds a narrative that... actually stumbles into its own black-and-white moralizing. While Philip Dick's original short story revolves around the deeply personal experience of a (rather unpleasant) individual, Spielberg uses this framework to show us that the thousands of lives saved by an institution are not worth it if even just one person is falsely accused. Such a simple thematic drive feels underwhelming in our reality, where a much less effective system puts scores of innocents in jail daily.

Which is not to say that *Minority Report* is without value. The question of whether we should treat a crime not yet committed as committed, if we're completely sure it would happen, is intriguing and multi-layered. Tackling determinism as a factor in how we view the world and free will is also a fascinating subject. Alas, Stephen Spielberg

is palpably afraid to delve deeper into these questions and instead opts for a typical Tom Cruise action piece, followed by a cheap shrug and reverting to a system which gives quantifiably worse results. *Minority Report* falls into the typical Hollywood trap of an unsophisticated interpretation of cyberpunk and leaves us with a feeling of wasted potential. (S.Ts.)

"A Scanner Darkly" © Warner Independent Pictures



## A Scanner Darkly [2006]

*A Scanner Darkly*, based on the novel of the same name, is yet another film which cements the enormous influence Philip Dick has on cyberpunk and on post-cyberpunk. The film opens with the statement that it takes place seven years after the current moment. But which moment is that? Is it 2006, 1977, 2019? It doesn't seem to matter, as the social processes it confronts us with seem all too plausible regardless of the historical point of view. More than twenty percent of the U.S. population is addicted to Substance D. The government conducts military operations against other countries it suspects of producing the drug, surveillance technology has hypertrophied, and human rights have been severely curtailed. An all-pervading paranoia has gripped everyone in its tentacles. *A Scanner Darkly* doesn't waste our time with yet another digital cowboy, but instead throws us into the comically-terrifying nightmare of its extrapolated daily life. To be a drug addict is almost certain physical death, to live in the quiet suburbs of the middle-class – a spiritual one.

Bob Arctor is an undercover police agent that's infiltrated a merry gang of drug addicts in order to reach the big dealers of Substance D. Under the influence of the drug, Bob gets a split personality and starts losing the ability to recognize certain objects, becoming "a scanner darkly." At work, Bob and his colleagues wear special costumes to disguise their identities, an obscuring effect figuratively replicated throughout society – no one knows the truth about anyone, despite the super-surveillance technology (branded "Phil D.", its screens running the script of *Blade Runner* along with various feeds of personal information.) This intrusive allegory extends all the way to Substance D. The viewer rightly wonders if the whole drug war is not just a pretext for the government to gain unlimited power. What is Substance D, really? "Loneliness, Suffering, Salvation. Salvation of you from your friends, your friends from you, everyone from everyone. Salvation from alienation, loneliness, hatred and mutual suspicion. "D" is finally death. Slow Death."<sup>1</sup>

The rotoscoping animation and first-class acting of Keanu Reeves, Winona Ryder, Robert Downey Jr., Woody Harrelson and Rory Cochrane are an ideal medium for Philip Dick's psychedelics and romance-free view of the cyberpunk future. (A.P.)

<sup>1</sup> > "Камера помътняла" (InfoDar), translation Vassil Velchev.

„Paprika“ ©Sony Pictures  
Entertainment Japan



## Paprika [2009]

Satoshi Kon's trademark – reality and fantasy intertwining and overflowing into one another – is also present in the famous director's swan song. *Paprika*, one of the visual inspirations behind *Inception*, is a complex and image-rich film that addresses themes of identity, freedom, transformation and more, all while drawing intriguing parallels between dreams, virtual reality and even cinema.

*„Don't you think that dreams and the Internet are alike?“ Both are places where the repressed conscious mind vents.“*

In *Paprika*, Japanese scientists invent a revolutionary device for recording dreams, which also allows psychotherapists to enter their patient's sleep. Naturally, such an invention is doomed to fall into the wrong hands, and when it does, dreams slip out into the real world and threaten to devour it completely.

*„If we can enter the world of dreams, the world of dreams can also sneak into our world.“*

*Paprika* is inspired by some classic cyberpunk themes and tropes, but without ever fully delving into the genre. We have dangerous new technologies, which practically erase the line between reality, dreams and cyberspace, and even the choice of soundtrack reflects this – *Paprika* is among the first anime voiced by a vocaloid (a portmanteau of vocal + android). Dr. Chiba and her dream world alter ego, Paprika, may not be the classic cyberpunk antiheroes, but one of the protagonists is a noir detective par excellence, just as the antagonist has merged (at one point quite literally) with the giant corporation that he represents. The action takes place in a

Japanese metropolis, but almost all the time we swim in someone's color-crazy dream, while the actual location is pushed into the background and the little that reaches us is closer to the image of a modern big city than to the gloomy neon nightmare city. The optimistic conclusion, in which dreams and reveries win their freedom from human control, is also a counterpoint to cyberpunk's usual resigned melancholy. *Paprika* is nevertheless one of the best examples of a skillful use of cyberpunk tropes to create a work which defies the narrow confines of any one genre. **(M.P.)**



„Repo Men“ ©Universal Pictures

## Repo Man [2010]

Commodified "needs" breed repossession, but as trivial as it seems, the practice lends itself to rich speculation and is ultimately revealed in Miguel Sapochnick's directorial debut as foundational to our projected future. His rapidly edited *Repo Man* follows protagonist Remy's work life as he retakes possession of collateral synthetic internals lost in debt, in a profoundly satirized and Guy Ritchie-like manner. More importantly, we observe this daily routine through a perspective that is invariably distant, even in the wake of a clichéd moral awakening of an oblivious protagonist eventually turning against his corporate overlords while the film constantly treads the line between biting satire and realism.

Light-handed in its approach, it only picks the tropes necessary to fuel the pulpy action on its surface and never turns into an exercise in used-up imagery; the body augmentations spared the absurdity of combat

functions and committed to a serious examination of the purely humanist struggle against the random betrayals of our own biology.

Cyberpunk has always relied upon a particular tension between transhumanist reveries and the literal reduction of the body to a product; the next purchase along the line of "car-house-villa" hierarchy of "needs". Supposing the genre can contain in its topography both the transcendence from flesh and the money that binds it to neon-stained streets, *Repo Man* expounds on that dialectic and has the verve to propose a solution that is both completely human and, consequently, completely doomed. **(L.S.)**

„Dredd“ ©Lionsgate



## Dredd [2012]

*„Mega City One: 800 million people living in the ruin of the old world and the mega structures of the new one.“*

*Dredd* is a trip – in its entire hour and a half runtime the shootouts, violence and tense moments never stop for even a second, without it ever feeling overwhelming or cumbersome, all while the world-building bits and pieces scattered throughout the movie paint a stark outline of a dystopian world. Mega City One is a sea of concrete that stretches from Boston to Washington D.C., the land beyond it saturated with radiation from nuclear war. Crime has escalated to intolerable levels here, too and the only semblance of organized authority opposing the chaos are the Judges. Against this background, the legendary Judge Dredd from the eponymous comic book series has been given the task of overseeing the field exam for Judge of a young student named

Anderson, who is on the verge of being failed by all parameters, but has a strong talent for telepathy. A talent that is not too uncommon in the irradiated America of the future, judging from other characters' reactions. During a routine investigation of a crime committed in one of the huge residential megacomplexes, the duo suddenly stumbles onto a secret that the boss of the local criminal clan wants to keep hidden by all means and at all cost. The latter in this case entails locking down the whole 200-storey building and hounding each and every one of her thugs on the two lawgivers.

The choice of such a one-location backdrop for the movie is a great decision, because it allows for both extremely concentrated plot development and action, as well as sketching a microcosm of the entire Mega City One within the confines of the colossal Peach Trees arcology. We see the building's omnipresent automation through a variety of scenes, along with its intelligent surveillance and tracking systems – a near perfect panopticon, hijacked with ease by the criminals. We suss out the different functions of the Judges' arsenal through a string of different fight scenes, an arsenal that combined with their training and conditioning turns them into an almost inhuman force, akin to a *Terminator* or *Robocop*. We also directly experience the effects of the drug Slo-Mo through the movie's cinematography – a substance that slows down one's perception of reality a hundredfold (imagine what falling off a 200-storey building would feel like while under its influence.) *Dredd* is truly an astounding collection of classic cyberpunk tropes, assembled into an almost perfect collage and deserves to be considered as one of the greatest cyberpunk action movies. As for the thorny questions cyberpunk love to tackle, the film does not pretend to answer them, but it does show it's aware of them and the genre it operates in and doesn't sweep them under the rug. **(A.P.)**





"Cosmopolis" © eOne Films

## @Cosmopolis [2012]

Cyberpunk's first wave can be accused of a certain lack of variety, leading discussions about it to devolve into an enumeration of tropes. The problem isn't so much in its limited set of world-building elements, as it is in the limited range of perspectives and plots which produce these worlds. The spectrum of possible lives and fates seems to remain woefully unexplored, which could be easy to forget, if films like *Cosmopolis* did not periodically remind us of it.

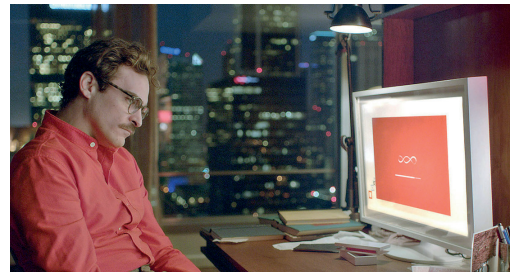
The plot borrows (some would say desecrates) the structure of Joyce's *Ulysses* and shows us a day in the life of billionaire Eric Packer, who is in need of a haircut. The city streets are hopelessly gridlocked due to a presidential visit, mass protests and the funeral of a big rap star, while according to Eric's security, there is a killer on his tracks. But none of this arouses Packer's interest much and he sets off on his odyssey regardless. The trip taking up his whole day is no problem, as his limousine is filled with screens and the question whether he prefers to work in his office or not seems pointless to him. The word "office" has lost its meaning, as have most words referring to concrete objects. In his oddly sleepless evenings, Packer reads mainly poems composes of the spaces between words.

*Cosmopolis* is a cold and crooked film that walks a tonal tight-rope between high concept and complete absurdism, without the latter obscuring the former – both elements are fused into a whole, one that transgresses the boundaries of both humour and philosophy. Yet none if it is art is there for its own sake. Its oblique dramatic surface and hermetic camera work are employed

in building a very peculiar psychological reality – a reality completely divorced from the realist literary tradition's conceptions of the human spirit and impossible to even conceptualise in the ages before information gained an autonomous digital existence. This is the quintessence of cyberpunk, developed to a depth unattainable by typical noir plotting.

The movie is decidedly disinterested in visions for future, although the immediate future occasionally rears its head out of the screens in Packer's limousine. This distortion of space-time registers as just a curiosity, because *Cosmopolis* is preoccupied exactly with the oxymoronic sensation that history is itself an anachronism; that we're falling into a deep timelessness while flows of money – obsolete symbols dissolved into zeroes and ones – keep on zapping through metaphorical wires as the world keeps on turning like a dead man's watch. (L.S.)

„Her“ © Warner Bros. Pictures



## Her [2013]

*"Sometimes I think I have felt everything I'm ever gonna feel. And from here on out, I'm not gonna feel anything new. Just lesser versions of what I've already felt."*

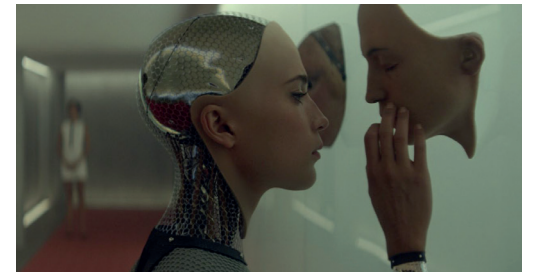
*Her* is one of the best works of science fiction cinema of the 21st century and maybe one of the most important cognitive maps of the future that expects us. At a glance, its connection to cyberpunk seems weak – there's no soul-crushing megacorps, the visual aesthetic consists of warm tones and analog design; Earth seems immersed in a technoutopia. Yet the connection to *Blade Runner* is there right there under the hood of the film, as it flickers in a high frequency like a master magician-chameleon, and if we look closely, we can see the giant neon

letters of cyberpunk's prophecy, transformed and extrapolated yet whole, in the gaps between the frames.

Spike Jonze's L.A. doesn't have a lot of in common with Ridley Scott's, despite some obvious allusions (like a giant neon sign that reads BRUNNER, also potentially a reference to the author of the proto-cyberpunk novel *The Shockwave Rider*, John Brunner.) Personal automobiles are a rarity, most people move around on foot, many look like they came out of *The Jetsons*, the air is clean, the environment is vibrant and welcoming, technology seems to be efficient and minimalist. Even the world of corporations looks like it's some negligible background noise; we learn just by the way that China and India are in the midst of a merger. We never learn whether the whole world enjoys this same level of material well-being, but it becomes clear that there is a rupture in this world – people have forgotten how to communicate.

And how could that not be the case? In a world where expert systems have become people's caretakers and custodians, what can a human being offer economically besides an endless catalogue of commodified, masterfully designed *pieces of humanity*? A world where people have forgotten how to express love and hire others as personal letter writers. People turned into data, and it all seems so normal, and why would it be any other way in a future designed to casually collect, process and resell information? Yet somehow, something radically new emerges from this doomed-to-repetition, low intensity, hipsterish hell. The operating systems in the movie are also woven from data – human data. They are that otherwise unobservable hyperobject which shakes us awake from our sleep and the broken-telephone nightmare our lives with its simultaneous intimacy and inhuman, cosmic scale. Thanks to them, we realize that, as Amy Adams's character puts it, "we're only here briefly". *Her* offers us a quiet, melancholy, yet radically open (maybe even utopian) vision of transhumanism, one that Alan Watts would approve of. (A.P.)

„Ex Machina“ © Universal Pictures



## Ex Machina [2015]

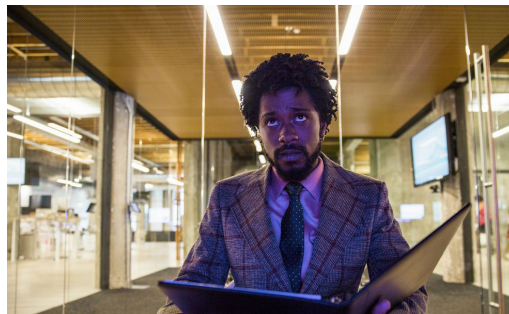
The grafting of man and machine is being postponed. Maybe it's the machine first who'd have to merge with man. The image of the virtual Pinnocchio, looking to feel, to understand, to wear on their shirt the *real* human condition, is as old and as popular as the genre itself, ever since *Blade Runner*. Of course, there are other takes – ones that see A.I. as a fundamentally transcendent phenomenon, something *we, the humans*, are never likely to wrap our heads around. *Ex Machina*, the directorial debut of Alex Garland, brings home both of these traditions.

The film introduces us to Caleb, a shy and somewhat awkward employee of a gigantic and quasi-sinister tech corporation. Caleb has won the lottery – he will spend some time in the mansion of his ingenious but also not just slightly scary boss, Natan. It is, of course, a carefully crafted experiment and Caleb will have to inadvertently make his way through it, providing his part in a bizarre erotic Turing test. The objective? It's Ava, the painfully beautiful humanoid, designed by Natan to immediately impress upon anyone her artificial nature; her body a real graft of skin, crystal and metal. Proclaiming her absolute perfection every single second. The cybernetic avatar of Eve.

We are not made close witness to the omnipotence of Natan's googlesome corporation on the outside world. That is simply on the background. The *zaibatsu* of early cyberpunk have indeed evolved into modern day's data alchemists, defiling our privacy at every turn – why waste time reiterating it? No, Alex Garland focuses his lens in an almost suffocating proximity on the relationships between the three main characters. A claustrofobic experience, laid bare by the glass protectors between Ava and Caleb. It is precisely this intense, spring coil emotional look that

*Ex Machina* actually brings to the cyberpunk table. To be honest, very few would even call such an artsy meditation on man and machine cyberpunk at all. But all it takes is a very slight perspective shift to now perceive the movie's plot as a philosophical evolution of Rick Deckard and Rachel. Made all the more obvious by Caleb's scenes of doubting his own human nature.

Can love be emulated then, if it cannot be truly felt? Is our *divine spark* little more than a data model, ready to be "deeply" learned by a hungry algorithm? Is there any place for us in this world we are creating – be that the angsty, rain-laden broken neon streets, or the designer made sleek mansion in the deep woods? Dragging through the uncomfortably sexualized curves of the uncanny valley, these questions keep echoing long after the end credits have gone. **(J.P.)**



"Sorry to Bother You" ©Annapurna Pictures

## @Sorry to Bother You [2018]

Cassius Green is simply trying to make ends meet so he can pay his uncle the rent for the garage he sleeps in and hopefully impress his artistically inclined girlfriend, Detroit. He stumbles upon the RegalView call center wherein he discovers an unexpected talent of his – feigning a "white" voice that proves more than successful in selling the product. Cassius quickly shoots to the top of the corporate ladder, but some natural circumstances arise – the necessity to literally sell weapons and slave labour, for instance; or the small matter of having to betray his coworkers' strike. All of a sudden, reality pops like a matured boil and surreal nightmares burst into a story which,

despite their best efforts, seems increasingly realistic as it goes.

*Sorry to Bother You* is cyberpunk deprived of its aesthetic; the genre turned unspeculative and laid bare along with our most unpleasant realities which are in turn amplified. A satirical bomb, Boots Riley's film is unafraid to escalate the level of absurdity with each passing scene. And indeed, why should it be afraid when every single one of its out of left field moves is merely a representation of the world we inhabit? We can only spot differences in the minutiae – in Detroit's preposterous pamphlet-jewels, the female Trump-clone of a floor manager or the reality TV show "I Got the Shit Kicked Out of Me". Such tiny rifts continue piling up – nascent business giant WorryFree offers lifelong employment contracts in return for sustenance and shelter in its corporate residential factories (a direct evolution of USA's present-day private prisons) while a left-wing terrorist group fights this modern form of slavery; telemarketing now literally transports one into his interlocutor's space on the opposite side of the line. Everything that cyberpunk makes seem dark and disturbing but also somehow cool and romantic is depicted here as an integral part of contemporary capitalism. Spatial boundaries blur as different classes' worlds drift further away, people trusting non-existent simulations of reality above their own senses. This nightmarish trip through "deep" reality ends on a hysterical collage of genre tropes – featuring artificial intelligence and genetic engineering – that is no less absurd than a William S. Burroughs text. *Sorry to Bother You* reveals that we already live through cyberpunk, no need at all to become a digital cowboy or join a crime syndicate; join an ordinary one instead, or even a call center, and just reflect on the antihuman algorithms ruling the world.. **(A.P.)**

"Alita: Battle Angel" ©20th Century Fox



## Alita: Battle Angel [2019]

The year is 1998 and James Cameron has just seen in his mind's eye the movie that this gloomy cyber-girl manga can become. But it will be another twenty years before technology finally can allow him to produce it. Well, it was worth it. *Alita: Battle Angel* is a veritable visual spectacle and possibly one of the incredibly few successful live action adaptations of Japanese art – notoriously difficult to get right on the big screen. It is exactly the right amounts of naive, sentimental, even funny. But it is also a living proof of the genre's vitality.

If we don the 3D cyberpunk glasses, the setting is as familiar as it gets. A post-apocalyptic town, drowned in dust and crime, living under the shadow of a gigantic sky station where the rich and beautiful dwell. Three hundred years earlier, the world was in its technological peak but a hellish war with its Martian colonies has brought it to ruin and extreme social stratification. This is where we meet Alita, a cyborg teenager who's been brought back to life by a modern Dr. Frankenstein with a shady past. An even shadier past, however, hides in the neuron memories of Alita who spends a generous amount of screen time maiming way too many NPCs in a decidedly un-ladylike manner.

It is refreshing to see how much cybernetics is normalized in the movie's universe. Virtually everyone walks around with some sort of implants, while selected few seem scarcely human at all, their entire biology stripped down to a brain and a spine, clad in all sorts of weaponry – all for the sake of participating in a somewhat comic fighting competition. Such transhumanism, brought to its absurd extreme, is

in fact perfectly complemented to a contrast by a gleeful selection of inverted cyberpunk tropes. Alita is an outsider, yes; but not the grim, determined lonely wolf of genre fame. She's cast out rather because of her pronounced emotions and childish naivete. There is rain, yes; but not for the drama. It's there for romance and sprinkles upon the only scene with a kiss. The girl will fight a murky tech-corp enemy, yes; but... by winning sport races. It is a delightful Hollywoodization of the plot and it can of course be perceived as absurd, but instead it drives home a really fresh, if possibly unintended, deconstruction of the genre.

Of course, it's not all perfect. The supposedly somber Iron City is criss-crossed by pizza deliveries, chocolate booths and children on the streets. Why would anyone want to escape away to the skies at the price of crime, cruelty and life danger, remains more than a little dubious. Regardless, *Alita: Battle Angel* manages to reuse well what is still on point in cyberpunk (Martians, transhumanism, biotech) while also shed or profoundly transform what is worn out and irrelevant (noir, hackers, crime runs). In so doing, it really does provide a very valuable path towards cyberpunk's search for meaning in its modern iterations. **(J.P.)**