**////Title: Exploring Cyberpunk as a Post-Utopian Genre**

**////Standfirst:**

Cyberpunk brings to mind neon lights, artificial intelligence and mega corporations. It is a subgenre of science fiction set in a dystopian, futuristic, and oppressive setting, with advanced technology often featured alongside societal decay. Professor Elana Gomel [ee-lah-nah go-mell] in the Department of English and American Studies at Tel-Aviv University in Israel specialises in narrative theory with a particular focus on the intersection between literature and science. In her recent work focusing on the cyberpunk genre, Professor Elana Gomel argues that cyberpunk is *not* a dystopian modality of representation; rather, it is better classified as ‘post-utopian’.

**////Main text:**

Within the field of narrative theory, researchers study stories and storytelling in their many diverse forms. Narratives are everywhere in our lives, taking the forms of written text, oral language, music and even gestures. In her work on narrative theory, Professor Gomel pays particular attention to the intersection of literature and science. Much of her research explores the genre of science fiction, where the intersection of science and literature is most obvious.

In her latest essay, published in the journal *Arts*, Professor Gomel explores cyberpunk narratives. Many early examples of cyberpunk emerged in the New Wave science fiction movement of the sixties and seventies, when writers began to explore the impact of technology and drug culture. The term ‘cyberpunk’ was then coined in the early eighties, which was followed by the publication of numerous cyberpunk novels, including William Gibson’s *Neuromancer*. Published in 1984, *Neuromancer* is considered to be one of the earliest and best-known works in the cyberpunk genre. Set in the not-so-distant future, the novel follows Henry Case, a retired hacker who is hired for one last job, which leads him to meet ‘Wintermute’ – an unimaginably sophisticated artificial intelligence system.

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Since the eighties, cyberpunk has spread into mainstream popular culture, as evidenced by many Hollywood movies, including *The Matrix*, *Ex Machina* and *Blade Runner 2049*, as well as popular television series such as *Black Mirror*, and video games including *Cyberpunk 2077*.

As Professor Gomel explains, many people consider cyberpunk to be a dystopian genre. The term ‘dystopia’ is often used to describe a future where society is chaotic, dangerous and unpleasant, often after a terrible event has occurred. In contrast, the word utopia usually describes a society of equality, plenty and harmony. Utopian narratives demonstrate how our current human society can be improved by offering a vision for a better future, while dystopian stories often draw attention to the negative aspects of our current society, by imagining what might happen if our worst fears were realised.

In the case of both utopia and dystopia, the future is very different from the present day. As Professor Gomel puts it: ‘Utopia and dystopia share a dynamic future-oriented modality involving a meaningful change, whether this change is seen positively or negatively.’

However, are the futuristic worlds depicted in cyberpunk narratives sufficiently different from the present to be regarded as dystopian? This is the question that Professor Gomel posed in her recent essay. She argues that cyberpunk is not a dystopian modality. Instead, she prefers to classify the genre as post-utopian.

Post-utopia is a recently coined term which refers to our current geo-political situation, where previous 20th century utopian ideologies have fizzled out, and our current world of global capitalism does not have a conceptual rival.

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Professor Gomel analysed several movies to gain an understanding of time and space in contemporary cyberpunk. She notes that in the original *Blade Runner* movie, released in 1982, time is depicted as malleable, open-ended, and full of possibilities. However, in the 2017 sequel, *Blade Runner 2049*, time appears to be frozen and circular.

As explained by Professor Gomel, the exuberant spaces depicted in the first movie were derived from the lived experience of many Asian cities that were beginning to emerge from colonial rule, such as Hong Kong. In this way, the movie’s cityscapes represent a reinvention of history. In comparison, *Blade Runner 2049* is faded, muted and devoid of any political implications. Many consider that the film’s main appeal lies in its nostalgic charm.

In her essay, Professor Gomel explains how nostalgia is a longing for a homely ‘space of experience’; a yearning for a familiar corner in an unfamiliar and rapidly changing world. In recent cyberpunk productions, such as the latest Blade Runner movie, nostalgia takes the form of longing for a familiar time. As Professor Gomel succinctly highlights: ‘You really cannot go back home again if your home is 1982.’ It is nostalgia, she argues, that characterises post-utopia in general and the current post-utopian cyberpunk genre.

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As described by Francis Fukuyama in his influential book *The End of History* *and the Last Man*, first published in 1992, post-utopia is what comes after the end of history. Professor Gomel explains that the book has often been misunderstood as forecasting the end of the historical process.

Instead, the book was actually about the end of history as a continuous cycle of destructive and salvation events. Although such events still occur, Professor Gomel notes that there is no longer a widespread belief that these events are leading us toward a preordained goal, for example a utopian future, or a collapse of civilisation. Rather than living in fear of the future, many of us live in what Professor Gomel describes as the ‘broad present’.

The broad present is an infinite space and a playground of limitless possibilities. As Professor Gomel explains, the radical visions of civilization’s future now tend to be inserted into the ‘sameness of the broad present’, rather than manifesting into a utopia or dystopia. In this way, cyberpunk represents a post-utopian genre.

In our broad present, the role of cyberpunk is different to what it was in the last century. As Professor Gomel explains, ‘Just like the consumer bounty of neo-liberal capitalism is never enough to stifle utopian dreams and aspirations, endless spaces of cyberpunk only mask but never really fill, the gap left by the end of history.’

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This SciPod is a summary of the paper ‘Recycled Dystopias: Cyberpunk and the end of history’, from *Arts.* [doi.org/10.3390/arts7030031](about:blank)

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