

Book Reviews

Cyberpunk: Le nouveau système totalitaire

ASMA MHALLA. *Cyberpunk: Le nouveau système totalitaire*. [Cyberpunk : The New Totalitarianism]. Seuil, 2025. 197 p.

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In her recent work on the American techno-elite, French political scientist Asma Mhalla mobilizes the concept of cyberpunk to characterize the ideological universe of figures such as Elon Musk and Peter Thiel, as well as broader neo-reactionary currents opposed to democracy and progressive liberalism. Why cyberpunk? Cyberpunk is the anxiety-laden, Frankensteinian lineage of science fiction that was anticipated by Philip K. Dick and crystallized in William Gibson's 1984 work *Neuromancer*. Films such as *Blade Runner* and *The Matrix*, along with the game *Cyberpunk 2077*, depict overcrowded futuristic cities of decaying concrete where governments have been rendered powerless by rapacious mega-corporations. In these dystopian worlds, social fragmentation, extreme inequality, and conspiracy theories define everyday life. According to Mhalla, this is precisely the future toward which contemporary techno-libertarianism is steering us.

For Mhalla, cyberpunk serves as a conceptual lens through which to understand emerging forms of neo-authoritarian politics, from accelerationism to Trumpian MAGA culture. The latter can be seen as a diluted version of the cyberpunk ethos. Although the MAGA worldview champions order and hierarchy, it simultaneously embraces private governance and seeks to dismantle public institutions. It conflates progressive liberalism with "multiculturalism" while promoting exclusionary ideas of identity and purity. In this sense, it bears a distinctly cyberpunk imprint. Mhalla's focus lies less on cyberpunk fiction itself than on the political realities of the present.

There are, undeniably, points of convergence between the neo-reactionary world of Peter Thiel and cyberpunk. In Gibson's fictional environment, dominated by *zaibatsu*—vast Japanese conglomerates—elites exist in near-total separation from the rest of society, while politics is effectively bypassed through technological systems. The post-1945 world had already evolved into a volatile, financialized, and hyper-consumerist terrain shaped by neoliberal capitalism, and the current American techno-political elite pushes this trajectory further still. It is "digesting this neoliberal order into a more overtly elitist, authoritarian, and anti-democratic form" (140). Eventually, the American ideal "is no longer freedom but efficiency" (52).

Paradoxically, when efficiency is pursued as an absolute, it tends toward a form of accelerated chaos. One reason is that speed prevents thinking, at least the thinking that Daniel Kahneman calls deliberative and logical thinking. "Speed thinking" is instinctive and emotional, and as Mhalla observes, "in a world that moves too fast, thinking becomes an

almost subversive act—a solitary act” (158). Mhalla introduces the notion of a “punk epistemology,” one that “doesn’t describe a fixed system, but the mutating dynamics of power” (128). It is an accelerated epistemology, and according to Mhalla, it is a typical U.S. phenomenon. Now the U.S. appears like it is installed on a different planet, and one wonders if the U.S. is still the West.

From there onwards, configurations turn out to be more complex. The slogan “Make America Great Again” invokes the return of a mythical Golden Age and is therefore fundamentally “retro” and not just cyberpunk-futurist. Correspondingly, Mhalla identifies a “curious retrofuturism” (26) that reaches back even to the late nineteenth century: the era of William McKinley and of powerful industrial figures such as John D. Rockefeller, J. P. Morgan, and Thomas Edison. Ultra-radical right-wing accelerationism (cyberpunk) is refracted through a strangely affirmative, even colorful reimagining of 1950s society. Is cyberpunk America thus, in Mhalla’s formulation, “schizophrenic”? In present day U.S. we have a backward-looking defense of “traditional” values that nonetheless propels itself toward ever greater technological acceleration and, ultimately, toward chaos. This socio-political mindset is highly contradictory. The conjunction of Donald Trump and Elon Musk appears incoherent. What common ground could unite a terrestrial real-estate magnate with a space-oriented industrialist?

For Mhalla, the answer lies in a shared opposition. Techno-accelerationists and retro-oriented populists (“rednecks”) converge in their rejection of liberal democracy. As she notes, “for rednecks, [liberal democracy] is cosmopolitan and out of touch. For tech bros, it’s inefficient. For neo-reactionaries, it’s decadent” (46). More precisely, Silicon Valley elites contribute the technological tools and futurist narratives; populist constituencies supply affective intensity—rage—while neo-reactionaries inject a powerful nostalgia. Mhalla characterizes this convergence as a “retrofuturistic Faustian pact”: “This amalgam of contributions presents itself as a revolutionary ideology, but it merely reenacts old forms of domination” (87).

Obviously, the redneck is not Cyberpunk—they couldn’t care less about Martian colonization or neuro-enhancement. However, despite the presence of a shared adversary, their seamless inclusion within a cyberpunk framework under the label of retrofuturism remains odd. Strictly speaking, cyberpunk and retrofuturism belong to distinct conceptual registers: retrofuturism looks back, with nostalgia, to a vision of a technologically saturated future that characterized American science fiction of the 1930s to 1950s, itself still influenced by the forward-looking enthusiasm of movements such as Russian and Italian Futurism. It gravitates toward the orderly, exploratory optimism of *Star Trek*, and here it needs to be distinguished from cyberpunk. It is even possible to divide the entire history of science fiction into two traditions: dystopian cyberpunk and utopian futurism. Retrofuturism is the reactivation of optimistic technosolutionism. Mhalla suggests that forward-looking cyberpunk and backward-looking retrofuturism come together in a MAGA sphere, where the former push for a technological future (that will eventually be dystopian), while the latter provides a yearning for a conservative past. The pattern helps explain, for instance, why—according to Mhalla—certain constituencies can be simultaneously “anti-establishment but pro-oligarchs” (119). As she writes, “while the

aesthetics aren't yet cyberpunk, its civilizational promise certainly is: the 'new frontier' is also retrofuturistic—terrestrial for the real-estate magnate, galactic for the space entrepreneur" (p. 57).

I agree with Mhalla's diagnosis, but I would map the terrain somewhat differently. To begin with, one may question whether cyberpunk truly represents the unambiguously dystopian configuration that Mhalla takes it to be. Cyberpunk should not be reduced to a repertoire of dystopian imagery. It also embodies a critical stance, enacted through irony and estrangement at both the aesthetic and the philosophical levels. Punk is not synonymous with accelerationism, and the slogan "No Future" is itself deeply ironic. Cyberpunk is not an ideology prescribing a political program; rather, it operates according to a "show, don't tell" logic. In literature, this slogan suggests avoiding mere descriptions and summarizations and engaging in the "showing" of actions, thoughts, and feelings that allow the reader to experience the story. While "classic" SF typically *tells* stories about spectacular interactions with robots and spaceships and new territories that need to be conquered, Cyberpunk *shows* how people interact with robots, spaceships, futurist clothes, or furniture. Cyberpunk does not necessarily endorse the dystopian worlds it depicts, but on the contrary, its project can be read as a critique of precisely those failed economic and aesthetic paradigms that today's optimistic techno-futurisms seek to revive.

For that reason, I would place Elon Musk on the continent of retrofuturism rather than on that of the fragmented urban landscapes imagined by William Gibson. Figures such as Musk—a self-professed admirer of *Deus Ex* who even sought a cameo in *Cyberpunk 2077*—or Peter Thiel, with his celebration of private sovereignty and corporate power, may at first glance appear to embody cyberpunk. Yet they are, in fact, retrofuturists, much like MAGA America. Their horizon is one of the "Bright Future," not the punk insistence on "No Future." The archetypal cyberpunk protagonist is an earthbound antihero navigating the ruins of late capitalism, not an optimistic visionary determined to establish colonies on Mars. Musk's imagination is ultimately heroic and expansionist, whereas cyberpunk remains resolutely skeptical of precisely such futurist promises. As Mhalla observes, "Musk's obsession with Mars is a recurring theme, much as the Moon once was for John F. Kennedy" (55). In this sense, ventures such as "SpaceX or Neuralink can be understood as contemporary extensions of the frontier myth" (62–63). Just for that reason, Musk appears less as a cyberpunk figure than as a retrofuturist.

When it comes to Planet Earth, Musk is fascinated by cyberpunk but misses out on the irony. He seems to think these novels and games are blueprints for what should be, and not cautionary tales of what is to be avoided. *Deus Ex* creator Austin Grossman calls his game a "social satire" about control and transhumanism and once pointed out that for Musk it is precisely not a satire: "It is the thing that Elon Musk likes, creepily. It is creepily in Elon Musk's worldview" (Brown 2025). During the Covid-19 lockdowns, Musk posted tweets in which he drew connections between a pandemic launched by a billionaire to advance a political power, exactly like in *Deus Ex* and the real pandemic.

It remains to be said that politically, it is a peculiar form of retrofuturism. The futurism of the mid-twentieth century, embodied in the aesthetics of the Atomic Age and the Space Age, reflected an era in which liberal democracies placed profound faith in state-

led scientific progress, public infrastructure, and long-term planning. Technological innovation was widely assumed to underpin stable, prosperous, and expanding democratic societies. In this sense, the futurism of the 1950s was not only technologically optimistic but also broadly aligned with the social-democratic aspirations of the post-war state. True, an earlier genealogy complicates this picture. Italian Futurism had already fused technological enthusiasm with an aesthetic and political commitment to fascism and authoritarianism. It appears that contemporary techno-oligarchs draw on this more reactionary lineage of retrofuturism. Yet they are not cyberpunk. Cyberpunk is too ironic, too self-reflexive, and too critical to serve as their ideological home. Its dystopian worlds expose the failures of techno-utopian promises rather than affirm them. Unfortunately, Musk, Thiel and their followers fail to realize, or accept, these obvious conclusions put forth in the science fiction they valorize.

There are great insights in the book, for example that “MAGA echoes, not without irony, Xi Jinping’s 2013 project, the ‘Great Renaissance of the Chinese Nation.’ [...] Beijing is playing the long game, focusing on density. Washington responds with shock, fragmentation, and the tightening [of resources]” (53). China is building a coherent nation state with investments in health and education. Somehow they do what the U.S. was doing at the Space Age: having faith in state-led scientific progress and long-term planning. Against this, today’s America fosters a supranational economy in which leaders aren’t accountable for anything and in which the state disappears. The critique of this merging together of “reality and virtuality, chaining together podcasts, meetings, and performances” (99) is brilliant, too. In the end, Mhalla speaks of “we”: we, the non-cyberpunks and non-retrofuturists, who are “the moderates, [that] have lost all democratic political representation” (165). Or we, the thinkers who have been replaced by engineers and who want decelerationism and slow politics.

Thorsten Botz-Bornstein

Nanzan University, Center for Religion and Culture

botz@nanzan-u.ac.jp



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