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Updating the Future to the Present: The Reboot of Cyberpunk as Social Criticism

As a genre concerned with the possibilities and dangers of technology and its impact on the human mind, cyberpunk has been characterized by gloomy visions of societies on the brink of collapse. Having come into existence in the 1980s at the onset of the electronic age, it has given expression to psycho-cultural fears of a future of mind-invasion, genetic engineering, rapacious consumerism, and disintegrating identities.

But while cyberpunk tropes are more relevant than ever when it comes to exploring the unprecedented impact of technology on our lives, lately the genre has been diagnosed with a creative crisis. Various critics have declared it to have been superseded by reality – and therefore rendered obsolete. In a time of omnipresent advertising, data collection and increasing virtuality, the dystopian cyberpunk forecasts have arguably become a collectively embraced reality. In fact, productions such as *Ghost in the Shell* (2017) or *Altered Carbon* (2018) seem to be less about warning against the detrimental effects of hyper-capitalism than about celebrating the allure and glamour of the pulsating cityscape. It thus appears as if cyberpunk has become complicit in promoting the neoliberal information economy it had originally set out to subvert.

However, a more recent crop of literary and cinematic works has provided fresh impulses by introducing new themes, perspectives, and imagery. Sam Esmail's *Mr. Robot* (2015–19), Malka Older's *Centenal Cycle* trilogy (2016–18) and Denis Villeneuve's *Blade Runner 2049* (2017) keep interrogating our relationship with technology while at the same time shifting the focus to present-day concerns such as climate change, racism, mental health, and the impact of social media on political mentalities. In this class, we will look at contemporary tendencies in the cyberpunk genre as it is in the process of reinventing itself as relevant social criticism.