

American Studies 282
From Punk to Cyberpunk: The 1980s
MW 7:15-8:35, RAB 204
Spring 2010, March 10-May 3

Prof. Cornelius Collins
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office: RAB 017
hrs: MW 6:15-7:15, TTh by appt.

Description

In this course, we will study the shifting ideas and cultural representations of computing technology and the yet unnamed Internet during the 1980s, and we will explore how the concept of "cyberpunk" in various media was informed by, and departed from, oppositional subcultures such as punk and hacker cultures. One of our main questions will be whether these cultural forms were capable of, or even interested in, offering resistance to the ongoing development of postmodernity in American social and political life. We will also investigate the extent to which the '80s was a decade marked by growing conservatism, as is often argued. The texts we will use to pursue these themes are key works of fiction, film, and music from the '80s, but we will also consider other forms of cultural production, such as television broadcasts and advertising, as well as read critical essays.

Texts

William Gibson, *Neuromancer* (Ace Books) ISBN 9780441569595
- available at the RU Bookstore, and from many other booksellers.

All other required texts provided for download via Sakai (<https://sakai.rutgers.edu/portal>) or external links. You are required to check Sakai *and to bring each day's required texts to class*.

Requirements

	Grade %
• Informed participation in class discussion	10
• 4-pg. paper: Comparative essay on <i>Neuromancer</i> and a cyberpunk film (see attached list) due in class April 12	25
• 4-pg. paper: Analytical essay on <i>Max Headroom</i> due in class May 3	25
• Final exam May 10, 8:00-11:00 pm	40

Policies

- Attendance at all classes is expected. A sign-in sheet will be distributed at each class. Because the course has a brief format, more than 2 absences--for any reason--will lower your final grade. Consistent lateness will be noticed and count for an absence.
- You must join the course Sakai site (you should be added automatically) and follow it for announcements and updates. If you would like to receive messages from Sakai at an e-mail address other than your Rutgers account, tell me what it is.
- You are responsible for completing all reading for the class meeting when the reading is due.
- Late papers lose a full letter grade. You must discuss any special circumstances with me in advance. Papers are due in class; do not send them by e-mail unless I ask you to.
- This is a course about cyberculture, but text-messaging and other kinds of electronic distractions are still inappropriate in the classroom and not permitted. Portable computers may

be used only to access course texts. Surfing the web or being otherwise disengaged from class will get you marked absent or asked to leave.

- You must abide by the university's policy on academic integrity, found at <http://academicintegrity.rutgers.edu/integrity.shtml>. Your assignments for this course will not require secondary sources (outside reading), but if you choose to do research, you must cite all sources you consult, including those found on the Internet. If you have any questions about citation--how to do it correctly, or why--or what plagiarism is, don't hesitate to ask me.
- You must complete all assignments to pass the course.

Learning goals

In this course, you will learn about several important, related movements in the arts, culture, and technologies of the late twentieth century by reading, viewing, discussing, and writing about important texts in this field. By the end of the course, you should be able to identify major figures, formal elements, and thematic preoccupations of these cultural forms, and you should be able to make an informed assessment of their significance. More broadly, you will consider the status and methods of oppositional cultural forces in the late twentieth century, and it is hoped that you will compare these to the situation of alternative cultures and movements in our world today.

Schedule (subject to minor adjustment as our course evolves)

10 Mar

Introduction: what is cyberpunk?

View: excerpt from *Blade Runner* (1982), dir. Scott

15 & 17 Mar

SPRING BREAK

assignment: read *Neuromancer* (1984) and watch (at least) one film on the attached list; e-mail me a message with 1) your major; 2) any other relevant courses taken; 3) why you are taking this course; 4) a question about *Neuromancer* that comes from reading the first section (pp. 1-39). I will reply with the location of resources for studying the remainder of the novel.

1. Cyberpunk fictions, lineages, and variations

22 Mar

Neuromancer

24 Mar

Neuromancer

29 Mar

Read: William S. Burroughs, from *Wild Boys* (1971), pp. 44-47; James Tiptree, Jr., "The Girl Who Was Plugged In" (1973), pp. 397-434; Richard Kadrey and Larry McCaffery, "Cyberpunk 101: A Schematic Guide," pp. 17-29

31 Mar

Read: Bruce Sterling, "Preface to *Mirrorshades*" (1986), pp. 343-48; from Rudy Rucker, *Software* (1982), pp. 125-31

Listen: from Warren Zevon, *Transverse City* (1989)

2. What's the critique of cyberpunk?: Alternative visions

05 Apr

Read: Donna Haraway, "A Manifesto for Cyborgs" (1985), pp. 82-115

07 Apr

Read: from Kathy Acker, *Empire of the Senseless* (1988), pp. 33-40

3. What's "punk" about cyberpunk?: Cultures of resistance

12 Apr

Listen: punk and postpunk playlist, to be distributed

Read: Pat Cadigan, "Rock On" (1981), pp. 48-55

Paper due: Comparative essay on *Neuromancer* and a cyberpunk film

14 Apr

Listen: '80s indie playlist, to be distributed

Read: from Michael Azerrad, *Our Band Could Be Your Life*, pp. 3-60

4. What's the "cyber" in cyberpunk?: Extensions into cybercultures

19 Apr

View: *Max Headroom* (1985), dir. Morton and Jankel

Read: Selected contemporary reviews

21 Apr

Read: from *RE/Search: Industrial Culture Handbook* (1983)

View: RE/Search Publications web site: <http://researchpubs.com/Blog/>

26 Apr

Read: Andrew Ross, "Hacking Away at the Counter-Culture" (1991), pp. 254-67

28 Apr

Read: Neal Stephenson, "In the Beginning Was the Command Line" (1999)

View: "1984" (1984)--Macintosh commercial, dir. Scott

5. Conclusion: Into the Virtual Future

03 May

Read: from Jean Baudrillard, *The Gulf War Did Not Take Place* (1991), pp. 23-28, 61-87

View: CNN Gulf War footage (1991)

Paper due: Analytic essay on *Max Headroom*

10 May: Final exam, 8:00 pm

Cyberpunk-related films

Choose one of these to compare to *Neuromancer* for your first paper, due Apr. 12. Note that we might not consider all of these films to be equally "cyberpunk" in content or style, but that productive analysis can be made about all of them in connection to elements of Gibson's novel. More details on this assignment will follow.

La Jetée (1962), dir. Marker

Alien (1979), dir. Scott

Blade Runner (1982), dir. Scott

Videodrome (1983), dir. Cronenberg

WarGames (1983), dir. Badham

1984 (1984), dir. Radford

The Terminator (1984), dir. Cameron

Brazil (1985), dir. Gilliam

Robocop (1987), dir. Verhoeven

Akira (1988), dir. Otomo

Tetsuo: The Iron Man (1988), dir. Tsukamoto

Total Recall (1990), dir. Verhoeven

Twelve Monkeys (1995), dir. Gilliam